

Analysis of the policy context addressing 25+ NEETs

COUNTRY REPORT – SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Slovak Business Agency

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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 and follow our [social media](#).

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Implemented by:



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1. Introduction

The Slovak Republic's economy is one of the most developed among EU member transition countries. On the other hand, Slovakia has the second highest regional disparities among 33 OECD countries (OECD, 2018). While Bratislava region has been among the top 10 wealthiest European regions for years (EU-SPI, 2019), the eastern regions of Slovakia have been lagging behind in many aspects.

The extent of regional disparities can be illustrated, among other things, by the registered unemployment rate. While the registered unemployment rate at the end of 2022 was – according to the official statistics – as high as 4.38%, in the poorest regions it reached as high as 10.75% (ÚPSVaR, 2022).

It can be argued that the reduction of regional disparities is one of the main topics of political debate and electoral agendas. However, the role of regions in the process of regional policy-making and specifically targeted regional programmes is minimal. The most important role in public policy-making is played by the central level, and the implementation of the most significant support programmes is carried out centrally.

Key policies aimed at supporting young people, whether in the field of employment, social policy, social inclusion or education, are no exception. The reasons for centralization can be found in the size of the country as well as in the organisation of public administration and the distribution of competences between the different levels of government.

In 2014, the Slovak Republic proceeded to the implementation of the Youth Guarantee policy and in the same year, it adopted the National Employment Strategy 2020. These have become the main framework for promoting youth employment by 2020. A number of key legislative norms have been adopted under the National Youth Guarantee Plan, including, for example, a separate act on dual education or the approval of an allowance for the first paid employment under active labour market policy.

2. Overall policy context

In Slovakia, there are two relevant and strategic documents on the topic of youth employment at the national level: 'Youth Guarantee in Slovakia' and 'National Employment Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2020'.

In 2014, the Government of the Slovak Republic adopted the National Implementation Plan of the Guarantee for Young People in the Slovak Republic (MPSVaR, 2014), thus officially signing up to the European legislation aimed at supporting young people and their entry and retention in the labour market. The Youth Guarantees were adopted in the Slovak Republic as part of the 2014 National Reform

Plan, preceded by a long-standing poor employment situation of young people, which has long been among the most alarming in EU countries. The adoption of the Youth Guarantee was part of a broader package of reforms aimed at improving labour market performance in Slovakia. Thanks to the adoption of the Youth Guarantee, young people have long been among the priority target groups of active labour market policy. The age limit for the target group of the Youth Guarantee programme in the Slovak Republic is set at 29 years of age, while in the context of the group aged 25-29 years, the programme applies primarily to the long-term unemployed or job seekers who have been registered for at least 6 months, while NEETs are one of the priority target groups of the Youth Guarantee programme in the Slovak Republic.

The responsibility for the implementation of Youth Guarantees Plan individual measures is divided between the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic and the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic has the role of coordinating body and contact point. However, a number of tasks arising from the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Action Plan are also the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. The most of the Preventative Programmes are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport and focus primarily on formal preparation for employment and the acquisition of qualifications. Intervening programmes are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and focus more on activities related to securing sustainable employment for unemployed young people. The design of individual measures is ensured at the central level, local or regional level is only minimally involved, mainly in the position of the implementer of individual measures. Given the fact that the most of measures have been implemented under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic in the field of active labour market policy, the main executive body can be considered to be the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic through the network of its local branches, of which there are 46 in Slovakia.

In the field, it was possible to identify a small number of projects initiated and implemented on the local level, that sought to create local cross-sectoral networks through which the youth guarantees would be implemented, involving local actors such as local government or local NGOs (e.g., the case of Zvolen). However, these initiatives have not been sustained in the most of the cases.

The adopted plan for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in the Slovak Republic focuses on the adoption of legislative reforms and initiatives, which mainly concern two areas: early intervention and activation, and support measures for labour market integration.

The adopted strategy sets out the following list of strategic objectives:

- increasing the labour market participation of young people;
- reducing youth unemployment;
- better targeting of young people not in employment, education or training;
- closing the skills mismatch between young people and the skills needs of labour demand;
- preventing early school leaving and social exclusion of young people.

The objectives have been achieved by focusing on five key areas:

- promoting the employment and employability of young people;
- regional education (formal education up to ISCED level 3);
- lifelong learning;
- social policy;
- youth work.

A significant part of the funding comes from the European structural and investment funds. The problem arises in connection with the activities implemented in the Bratislava region, as it does not belong to the list of priority regions of the EU cohesion policy due to its economic performance. The activities implemented in the Bratislava region were financed from the state budget, which in practice means that they were often significantly underfinanced. The adoption of the Youth Guarantee National Plan also meant in practice the extension of the Operational Programme Human Resources for the Programming period of 2014 - 2020 with a new priority axis called 'Youth Employment Initiative' with a budget of 187.5 million euros for the period of 2014-2020.

As the coordinating body, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family is responsible for the evaluation of the Youth Guarantee programme. The evaluation of progress is carried out in three-year intervals. However, the evaluation is carried out internally and the reports are not significantly cited. Evaluation is also carried out in the context of the evaluation of the Operational Programme Human Resources and the Youth Employment Initiative priority axis. This type of evaluation usually focuses on issues of effective use of financial resources.

However, a number of sub-programmes implemented under Youth Guarantee evaluations have been carried out in the context of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. These are mainly active labour market policy measures specifically targeted at young people. Evaluations are often conducted in academic settings using expert (especially counterfactual) methods (Štefánik et al., 2022; Karasova et al., 2017; ISP, 2018; ISP, 2019). Several of these evaluations find a relatively high success rate for measures such as graduate traineeships or first job guarantees. However, the problem is often the high level of creaming among participants, which is a consequence of the setting of individual measures and

the selection of participants (e.g., the condition for participation in the measure graduate traineeships is the completion of formal education and training for employment not earlier than two years ago).

An important challenge in the implementation of youth guarantees is the high degree of focus on intervening actions in the area of direct job support. The main implementer of the activities is the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Office through its local branches. However, under the Employment Services Act, which regulates the provision of public employment offices, being a registered jobseeker is a condition for participation in any activities. Thus, the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Offices do not work with anyone who is not registered. However, there are no effective tools to identify, contact and inspire unregistered young people to register. In practice, the condition of registration means excluding the most vulnerable groups of young people and NEETs who, for a variety of reasons, are not registered or have been excluded from the register for non-cooperation.

The supporting framework for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee has been the Operational Programme Human Resources for the Programming period of 2014 - 2020, in particular its Priority Axis (PO) 2 'Youth Employment Initiative', which deals with unemployment of young people who are under 29 years of age, are not employed or involved in the education or training process (NEETs). The implementation of activities is realised through national projects and demand projects.

The situation of young NEETs was also a distinct topic of the National Employment Strategy 2020 (MPSVaR, 2014b). The National Employment Strategy was adopted in 2014 and lasted till 2020. Its preparation and approval were part of the fulfilment of the so-called 'Ex ante conditions', the fulfilment of which conditioned the possibility to draw on European Social Fund (ESF) funding for employment support programmes. In the following period, the National Employment Strategy became the main starting document for employment support. During the period of its implementation, the labour market reached historic lows in registered unemployment, began to experience significant labour force shortages due to the rapid ageing of the population, and began to open up more significantly to workers from third countries.

Under the National Employment Strategy, new legislations were adopted (Act 112/2018 Coll. on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises), a number of reforms were implemented (reform of the activities of Labour, Social Affairs and Family Offices in the organisation of the provision of public employment services) and a number of laws significantly affecting the labour market and public employment services were substantially amended (e.g., the parallel payment of material need allowance and wage income has been supported in the case of long-term unemployed who have found employment).

In the light of this strategy, several measures specifically targeting the NEET situation, with no particular focus on 25+NEETs, have been proposed and implemented. The target group of the strategy is all groups

of jobseekers and people endangered by unemployment as well as institutions involved in promoting employment and providing public employment services in the country.

In Slovakia, competences in the field of employment support belong to the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. Public employment services are implemented through the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (body established and controlled by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic). Specific active labour market policy measures are implemented through the network of local branches of the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Office, of which there are 46 in Slovakia. Regional or local self-government does not have competences in the field of employment support and is involved in employment support activities mainly in the position of the implementer of individual policies.

The legislative support for the implementation of the Strategy is provided in particular by Act 5/2004 Coll. on Employment Services. The strategy was adopted as a cross-ministerial document with the aim of achieving 72% employment and reducing the long-term unemployment rate below 3% by the end of 2020. Given the forecast of uneven employment growth and uneven access to quality jobs between regions or population groups specified by age, gender, education or other characteristics, the Employment Strategy's objectives also focused on reducing existing and projected disparities.

The Strategy had eight priority areas defined as:

- promoting job creation;
- innovation as a tool for promoting employment;
- developing the social economy as an innovative tool for promoting regional and local employment;
- flexibility of labour relations, working conditions, labour protection and work culture;
- effective solutions to long-term unemployment;
- capacity, networking and development of public employment services;
- supporting the supply side of the labour market through skills for better employment;
- trans-ministerial coordination of policies with a positive impact on employment.

The main activities of the National Employment Strategy 2020 were financed through the Operational Programme Human Resources, through the priority axis 2 'Employment', whose budget amounted to 1 604 million euros.

Pursuant to Government Resolution No. 665/2014, which adopted the Employment Strategy, the Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family is obliged to report annually on the progress in the implementation of the Employment Strategy. Pursuant to this resolution, an annual progress report has

been prepared and is publicly available. The reports have been produced through internal sources and are rather formal in nature. They are relatively seldomly quoted reports. According to the available information, the implementation of the Employment Strategy has not yet been subject to external evaluation, and evaluation has been carried out only through annual implementation reports submitted to the Government at annual intervals. The expert reports prepared by external experts have been prepared in relation to specific topics of the Strategy (e.g., active labour market measures, or the quality of provision of public employment services, or the impact of new legislation on the promotion of the social economy). The outcome of the evaluation is conditional on the aspect of the employment strategy (or the evaluation question) on which the evaluation focuses. Although the National Employment Strategy was adopted as a key document for employment promotion, its implementation did not resonate strongly in the professional debate. There is also disagreement among experts as to the extent to which the individual measures implemented under the Employment Strategy have had an impact on the achievement of historically low levels of registered unemployment, whether this was more the result of the economic cycle, which was in its expansionary or peak phase for most of the period under review, combined with the demographic situation, which in the period of implementation of the Employment Strategy began to be characterised by a disproportion between the number of outgoing (retirement of the strong years) and incoming labour force (entry of the weak years) in the labour market, or the result of targeted active labour market policy measures and the increasing quality in the provision of employment services (Štefánik et al., 2022). The second objective of the Strategy, to reduce long-term unemployment to below 3%, has stalled close to the target, with the long-term unemployment rate reaching 3.2% in 2020, according to Eurostat data. It has also failed to substantially reduce the significant regional disparities in employment rates or to increase the employment of disadvantaged groups in the labour market, such as women, people with disabilities or people with low levels of educational attainment. The challenge for the next period in the provision of employment services is therefore likely to be not to reduce the overall unemployment rate in the country, but to influence the structure of unemployment, with a strong emphasis on increasing the employment of groups that are further away from the labour market.

The National Employment Strategy 2020 is not yet followed by any other strategic document so far. Currently, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic has set up a 'Working Group on Employment, Active Labour Market Policy, Youth Guarantees and Social Economy'. The outcome of the Working Group is to be a set of strategic priorities for the development of employment in the Slovak Republic with a view to 2030, including the situation of NEETs (Štefánik et al., 2022).

Due to the high degree of centralisation of public policies as well as the size of the country, regional strategies aimed at addressing NEETs do not exist. The competences of regional governments (NUTS 3

level) in Slovakia are limited and are rather focused on the implementation of policies/strategies adopted at the national level.

In Slovakia, The Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic is responsible for entrepreneurship support. A wide range of support is implemented through the Slovak Business Agency, which is an organisation established by the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, the Entrepreneurs Association of Slovakia and the Slovak Craft Industry Federation for the purpose of supporting small and medium-sized business (SMEs). The Slovak Business Agency, among other things, implements a national project financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) National Entrepreneurship Centre¹. This provides a wide range of support for different groups of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs and carries out its activities in eight regional centres. Despite the broad focus of the National Entrepreneurship Centre as well as the strong emphasis of several government priorities on supporting SMEs, no programme specifically aimed at supporting youth entrepreneurship or supporting NEET entrepreneurship could be identified. Perhaps the most explicit support for entrepreneurship of disadvantaged groups (including young people) is implemented in terms of active market measures, where there is a measure aimed at supporting entrepreneurship of jobseekers. The support is implemented through a financial contribution, the amount of which is differentiated by the location of the business (applicants from economically lagging regions receive higher financial support than applicants from Bratislava, for example, the amount of support varying between 3,954 euros and 6,327 euros).

In 2019, 1,561 jobseekers benefited from the allowance, 210 of whom were aged 25-29. Despite the still significant popularity of the measure, the number of beneficiaries of the allowance is decreasing year-by-year (ÚPSVaR, 2020). This is mainly the result of the tightening conditions for benefit take-up and significant changes in the Slovak labour market, which in the pre-pandemic period was characterised by a labour shortage and a relative abundance of employment opportunities in the labour-intensive sectors, which is favoured in Slovakia.

Employment policy, social services and social inclusion issues in Slovakia are the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, which is responsible for drafting appropriate legislation. The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic is responsible for legislation in the field of formal education, vocational education/training, lifelong learning and youth work.

In Slovakia, the policies existing on the EU-level are implemented into national legislation. The legislation of the Slovak Republic on the field of youth employment is fully compatible with the EU legislation, individual EU regulations are transposed into national legislation, the strategies adopted on the

¹ For more info see <https://www.npc.sk/sk/>

European level are also reflected. The priorities of the European Pillar of Social Rights are reflected in a number of documents, either already adopted or under preparation. Following the European initiatives, the National Strategy on Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma until 2030 has already been adopted in Slovakia². The 2030 Strategy on Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation is not focused on NEET issues in a particular way, but due to the high unemployment rate and low education/training attainment among people from marginalised Roma communities, it also touches upon NEET issues. The strategy does not bring any specific measures on this topic, rather it aims to influence sectoral policies to be inclusive also towards people from the marginalized Roma communities (hereinafter as MRC) (ÚSVRK, 2021). The European Employment Strategy has been followed in the past by the Employment Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2020, the adoption of which was also one of the ex-ante conditionalities that allowed for the use of ESF funds for the benefit of strengthening employment.

A high percentage of active labour market policy expenditure, as well as other topics related to social inclusion of disadvantaged groups (young people and NEETs particularly), is covered by the European Structural and Investment Funds. The adoption of national strategies and a high degree of compatibility with European documents is therefore often perceived in Slovakia as a condition for access to financial resources. Documents and commitments adopted at the European level can therefore be seen as a starting point in the context of promoting employment and social inclusion in Slovakia. As an example of implementing EU strategies/plans addressing young people and 25+ NEETs, in 2014, the Slovak Republic joined the Youth Guarantee programme and adopted the Youth Guarantee National Plan. Young people are also considered to be one of the priority target groups of active labour market policy and jobseekers aged up to 29 have relatively quick and easy access to a wide range of active labour market measures. The active labour market policy is implemented almost exclusively by the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and through a network of its 46 local offices. The involvement of non-public providers in the provision of public employment services is almost non-existent in Slovakia. The problem of Youth Guarantee implementation in Slovakia is the high emphasis on demand-side policies in a cost of supply-side policies. Programmes aimed at training, up-skilling or re-skilling lag behind the implementation of programmes aimed at subsidising jobs (Studená, Polačková, 2020). Participation of the most vulnerable groups also remains a challenge. Participation in active labour market policy programmes is conditional on registration in the register of jobseekers, which many of the most vulnerable groups (homeless young people, people from marginalized Roma communities background, people with disabilities) do not fulfil for a variety of reasons. There is no system in place to

² For more info see: <https://www.romovia.vlada.gov.sk/strategie/strategia-pre-rovnost-inkluziu-a-participaciu-romov-doroku-2030/?csr=5372745840042923624>

effectively identify and contact the most vulnerable groups of young people, and there is very limited cooperation with NGOs that have good contact with these groups of young people.

3. Institutional framework

The public administration in Slovakia is ensured at three levels. These are the national level (NUTS1), the regional level (NUTS3, eight regional municipalities) and the local level (LAU1, 2927 local municipalities). Despite the relatively wide range of competences of regional and local municipalities, the competences in the field of employment support of young people are centralised and are taken by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. The regional and local level has no competence in this area; however, the regional and local level often act as an implementer of the specific policy programmes. The situation is different in the field of education, where regional and local governments have the possibility to regulate the number and size of schools in their territory. The local self-government controls and manages the level of pre-school education and primary schools, while the regional self-government is responsible for the control and management of secondary schools.

Inter-institutional coordination is formally ensured through mandatory inter-ministerial commenting as part of the adoption of new legislation or a national strategy. In the case of Youth Guarantees, it is also ensured through the involvement of two ministries in the implementation plan. However, voices from the field indicate that the implementation of individual measures is rather isolated and inter-institutional coordination is rather formal (Štefánik et al., 2022).

4. Supply-side policies

4.1. Education and qualification

The central body of the state administration of the Slovak Republic for elementary, secondary and higher education, educational facilities, lifelong learning, science and for the state's support for sports and youth is the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. Fundamental law regulating education in Slovakia is Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education (the School Act). Pursuant to this act, citizens of the Slovak Republic have the right to free of charge education in state primary and secondary schools. The act stipulates conditions under which students have the right to financial assistance from public funds.

Looking at the ten years old data, the main characteristics of the Slovak Republic in terms of education were the low early school leaving rate compared to the EU average, the low percentage of the population completing tertiary level education, the low participation of the adult population in lifelong learning and

the below-average results in the PISA testing. Even ten years on, most of these problems persist or are worsening (Polackova et al., 2021). Education reform is a major policy issue, and its importance is also underlined by the COVID19 pandemic; e.g., according to a questionnaire survey among school principals and teachers, as many as 52,000 pupils (7.5%) were not involved in distance learning at all during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and 128,000 (18.5%) were excluded from online learning (Čokyna, Ostertágová, 2020).

4.1.1. Compulsory education

Compulsory school attendance in Slovakia lasts for 10 years. In the past, compulsory schooling started at the age of 6. The amendment to Act 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education (so called School Act) from 2019 introduced compulsory pre-school education for all children from the age of 5. The aforementioned modification was a response to the low rate of pre-school enrolment of children from marginalised backgrounds, with an emphasis on children from marginalised Roma communities (MŠVVaŠ, 2019). The amendment's entry into force was originally set for September 2020, but due to insufficient capacity in kindergartens, it was postponed to September 2021. The introduction of compulsory pre-school education is also important in relation to children with health disabilities, who are very often left out of pre-school education. Insufficient capacity in kindergartens is also one of several reasons for the low employment rate of mothers of young children who are unable to enter labour market because they are unable to place their child in a facility.

Equal access to free education for all is guaranteed by legislation. In practice, however, there are wide disparities in the quality of education. Slovakia is one of the countries where educational outcomes are significantly influenced by the pupil's socio-economic background. It can be assumed that the pandemic has further widened the already existing huge disparities in educational outcomes. As the final PISA testing report notes, *'schools reproduce patterns of socio-economic advantage rather than contributing to a more even distribution of learning opportunities and outcomes'* (OECD, 2015). According to OECD data, up to 18% of educational outcomes in Slovakia can be explained by socio-economic status (compared to an average of 12% for OECD countries) (OECD, 2018). This is confirmed by the results of the nationwide Test 9³ and the numbers of pupils repeating a year, where the worst results are achieved each year by pupils from districts with the highest unemployment and relative poverty rates⁴. It can also be argued that children from weaker socio-economic backgrounds are already at a significant disadvantage when entering the education system. The low enrolment of pre-school children is a long-standing problem in Slovakia. In 2019, the enrolment rate in Slovakia was 77.8%, compared to an EU

³ Test 9 is an external testing of pupils of 9th grade at primary schools

⁴ See statistics of National Institute for Certified Educational Measurement, accessible at <https://www.nucem.sk/sk/merania>

average of 92.8%⁵, while it was only 41% for children from households in material need benefits and 32% for children from marginalized Roma communities (MF SR, MPSVaR, MŠVVŠ, 2020). The most disadvantaged groups of children in the education system include children from marginalised Roma communities, who are often placed in special classes, and children with disabilities, who are often denied education.

In relation to the poorer results of children from weaker socio-economic backgrounds, a major problem of the education system in Slovakia is the level of inclusiveness and the support provided to children and young people who need it. The system lacks hundreds of teaching assistants, and the position is only provided on a project basis thanks to European Social Fund resources, which can be considered an unsystematic and temporary solution. It was only the amendment to the School Act from 2021 that added inclusive education as one of the main principles of the educational system in Slovakia. Despite the fact that the obligation to implement the principles of inclusive education in Slovakia had already arisen from earlier international documents⁶, the principle of inclusiveness had not been anchored in legislation at national level until the adoption of the amendment, despite repeated and long-standing recommendations by international organisations. However, it is too early to say what impact this step will have in practice.

The system of career guidance in schools is defined and established by legislation, but its implementation in practice often runs up against the capacities of individual schools. The main responsibility for the provision of career guidance in schools lies with 'the school career counsellor' or, in the absence of a school career counsellor, with the 'educational counsellor'. In both cases, this involves the performance of specialised activities within the framework of the careers of teaching or professional staff. In practice, this means that the role of careers counsellor can be carried out by teachers alongside their other duties. So-called career orientations are also often carried out in schools in cooperation with local employment offices, whose staff come to schools and conduct discussions on possible career paths. Since 2019, the focus of diagnostic activities as well as coordination activities has been on the so-called Centres for pedagogical-psychological counselling and prevention. The Centres methodologically guide the performance of career counselling in schools and educational institutions within its territorial jurisdiction. The centres also carry out diagnostics of pupils' career preferences.

Early school leaving is becoming a significant problem in Slovakia, where a negative trend can be observed in recent years. While in 2011, 5.1% of young people dropped out of education, which was 8.1% less than the EU average, in 2019 the figure was already 8.3%, bringing Slovakia closer to the EU average of 10.2% in 2019⁷. Early school leaving is also significantly differentiated among regions, with

⁵ Eurostat: Participation in early childhood education by sex (children aged 3 and over) (online data code: SDG_04_31)

⁶ E.g., UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

⁷ Eurostat: Early leavers from education and training by sex and labour status (online data code: EDAT_LFSE_14)

the highest rates in the poorest regions of Slovakia, which again confirms the hypothesis of a high rate of reproduction of socio-economic advantages of pupils and students in the Slovak education system. Regarding early school leaving, no programmes/policies have been identified that aim to prevent early school leaving in Slovakia.

In 2020, Slovakia was among the four EU countries with the lowest share of people aged 25-64 who had attained the maximum level of primary education⁸. While the national statistics are relatively favourable, the problem is the huge regional disparities and the high drop-out rate among children from marginalised backgrounds. People with ISCED 0-2 level education can participate in the so-called 'second-chance-education' course. The organisation of such courses is mainly run by vocational secondary schools offering 2-year apprenticeship courses, so-called 'F-courses'. Upon completion of the 'F-course', the participant receives a certificate of completion of primary school (not an apprentice certificate) which does not help them much to entry the labour market much. The available data indicate that only a small proportion of early school leavers without completed primary education are enrolled in the 'second-chance-education' courses. At the same time, the observations of the State School Inspectorate indicate that not all courses are of the required quality (Hall et al., 2019). In addition, the provision of such courses is not common, with fewer than half of eligible schools delivering them. In some districts the availability of 2-year 'F-courses' is very limited, in fact, three quarters of the F-courses are located close to marginalized Roma communities primarily in the Košice, Prešov or Banská Bystrica regions (Hall et al., 2019). Another problem is the poor flexibility of the system, which makes completion of the 'F-course' a condition for entry into higher vocational education. Although the Ministry of Education has drawn up a proposal whereby the early-school leaver could complete their primary education as part of their higher vocational education, this has not yet been translated into practice. It can be concluded that opportunities to reintegrate early school leavers are limited in Slovakia and reintegration into the formal education system takes place only rarely.

4.1.2. Vocational Education Training

As regards secondary education and vocational schools, in the last ten years, one of the highly discussed topics has been the dual education system and linking the education system with practice. The problem underlies in the decline in the number of the students at vocational secondary schools providing practical training and the growing mismatch between the structure of secondary school courses and the needs of practice. Two instruments have been introduced legislatively to address the mismatch between secondary schools and the labour market. The first is the central financial regulation of the fields of study, whereby individual fields are classified as having a surplus or insufficient number of graduates, on the

⁸ Eurostat: Population by educational attainment level, sex and age (%) - main indicators (online data code: EDAT_LFSE_03)

basis of which a per-student financial norm is determined. The second is the regional regulation of the number of first year classes in secondary schools (vocational schools included). However, these measures have achieved only partial success in matching supply and demand in the labour market (MŠVVaŠ, 2017).

The adoption of the Act 61/2015 Coll. on Vocational Education and Training from 2015 created the legislative prerequisites for the entry of employers into the dual education system in Slovakia. The dual education system is a regulatory framework under which secondary vocational schools and employers prepare students for future careers. The relationships between the student and the employer as well as between the employer and the secondary vocational school are ensured through the dual education contract and the apprenticeship contract; the policy has promoted an increase in the quality and attractiveness of vocational education and training in the Slovak Republic. Vocational education in Slovakia had a strong tradition under socialism, but in the 1990s, this tradition was broken and vocational education lost credit. The Act on Vocational Education and Training, which incorporates an element of dual education, seeks to build on this strong tradition and significantly strengthen the credit of dual education in vocational education.

The target group of this policy is vocational school students aged 15-19, vocational education and training schools and employers who are able to provide vocational training. According to the State Vocational Education Institute (ŠIOV), currently, 207 secondary schools in Slovakia offer a dual education programme.

Despite the fact that employers are not legally obliged to offer a job to students upon completion of their education, many employers guarantee jobs to students. The Act is more concerned with education than with employment services, yet it can be considered perhaps the only programme that includes an element of transition from education to employment. There are also a number of instruments for young graduates within the framework of employment services but none of them are implemented in cooperation with schools.

According to the Act on Vocational Education and Training, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport has the competences concerning providing legislation, and the State Institute of Vocational Education (ŠIOV) is responsible for providing methodological support. Higher territorial units (Regional municipalities, NUTS 3) have the competences in terms of regulating the number of schools and students participating in given programmes in the regions.

The funding of dual education is part of the secondary school funding package. Information on the budget specifically earmarked for dual schools was not identified. Also, no study or evaluation on the dual education was identified.

Since its adoption, the Act on Vocational Education and Training, specifically the part on dual education, has undergone several modifications. These have been aimed, among other things, at facilitating the entry of secondary vocational schools into the dual education system, at ensuring better provision of training by employers or at adapting the curriculum of theoretical training. Despite the general consensus and the efforts of all stakeholders to create effective support for dual education, individual voices point out that the system is not sufficiently flexible and does not predominantly take into account the needs of employers. It is also not sufficiently supportive of participants from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, is particularly attractive to large employers and is not sufficiently accessible in several regions. It also does not fully reflect the needs of the most disadvantaged young people and does not provide sufficient opportunities for early school leavers to return.

Policies to improve awareness among and access of young people to vocational training were not identified in Slovakia. The State Institute of Vocational Education⁹, which is an organisation established by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, is responsible for the implementation of vocational education. It runs awareness raising campaigns, subject to the availability of financial resources, but these are sporadic activities rather than systematic programmes or policies. Awareness raising programs are usually carried out by the vocational schools themselves, which try to attract enough students to the different vocational training programs. The intensity of information campaigns is also often conditioned by the presence of competing schools; in an environment where there are more schools, schools behave more proactively. Awareness raising programs are often carried out by employers themselves, who run dual training programmes in cooperation with schools. Individual employers (often large employers, e.g., the Volkswagen in Bratislava) often carry out information campaigns in order to attract perspective quality employees whom they themselves, in cooperation with secondary schools, train.

The scope and form of training programmes in vocational schools varies considerably. It depends both on the type of vocational school, the school's links with employers or the question whether the school is involved in a dual education system. In dual training programmes, in individual cases, the extent of work experience with an employer can account for up to 80% of the whole programme. However, in a dual training programme, the scope of work experience may reach 60% of the total programme. In the regular fields of study of vocational schools not involved in a dual training programme, it is not exceptional if the scope of the work experience does not exceed two weeks over the course of one year.

In Slovakia, there is a legislative framework for the flow of information regarding the labour market between the school system and employers at the regional and national levels, which was created by the

⁹ More info: www.siov.sk

amendment to the Act on Employment Services as of 1.1.2013. The main instrument to fulfil the policy is the 'National Structure of Occupations' (NSO), defined by Act No. 5/2004 Coll. on Employment Services as a nationwide, unified information system describing standard labour market requirements for individual jobs. The NSO determines the requirements for professional skills and practical experience needed to perform work activities in the labour market. At its centre is the Register of Occupations, made up of the National Occupational Standards, which describe employers' requirements for the skills and competences in the context of specific occupations. The development and updating of the tool are financed through ESF-funded projects¹⁰.

4.1.3. Higher education

As regards tertiary education, the share of the Slovak population with tertiary level of educational attainment is growing. According to Eurostat data, between 2012 and 2020, the share of the population with a tertiary education degree increased by 6 percentage points, reaching 17.8 % in 2012 and 23.9% in 2020¹¹. In spite of these trends, there is a growing proportion of university graduates who continue their studies at a university abroad in the year of graduation. While in 2012, 12% of students went to universities abroad, in 2018, the number was already 17% (Martinák and Varsik, 2020).

Aligning the curriculum with the needs of the labour market is one of the major topics of public debate in Slovakia. The mentioned 'National Structure of Occupations' and the 'National Structure of Qualifications' is supposed to be a basic tool for strengthening reflection / projections of labour market needs in the content of education. Despite the great pressure for better reflection of the labour market needs in education, employers still often claim that graduates are not sufficiently prepared, the educational programs only minimally reflect the needs of the future and that there are gaps not only in theoretical knowledge and practical skills but also in social skills. A number of schools are running/designing specialised programmes with employers, but these are rather isolated cases conditioned by the activity of a particular school and the commitment of a particular head teacher.

In Slovakia, there have not been identified any policies in place to match supply with the demand of employers (and future demand) in the labour market or policies to tackle the problem of overqualification.

4.2. Labour market policies

Under the Act on Employment Services - (§51- measure Allowance for graduate practice), the graduate practice enables the acquisition of professional skills and practical experience with an employer that correspond to the level of education attained by the school leaver. The aim of the programme is to

¹⁰ More info on www.sustavapovolani.sk

¹¹ Eurostat: Population by educational attainment level, sex and age (%) - main indicators (online data code: EDAT_LFSE_03)

support activities and innovative approaches targeting those entering the labour market. These activities combine counselling, vocational guidance, training and/or job placement and support young people in their transition from school to employment. Graduate practice shall be carried out for a maximum of 6 months, without the possibility of extension and re-performance, in 20 hours per week. During the graduate traineeship, the Labour Office provides the graduate with a flat-rate allowance of 65 % of the minimum subsistence level for an adult person per month to cover his/her necessary personal expenses (currently 139 euros). The Office provides the graduate with a refund of the accident insurance during the graduate traineeship. The target group is registered jobseekers under 26 years of age who completed the relevant level of education in full-time programme less than two years ago and have not had regular paid employment since its completion. Based on the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family database, during 2019, 3,575 individuals participated in the Allowance for graduate traineeship programme, representing 2.3% of the total number of participants in all ALMPs in Slovakia (LMP types 2-7).

The Act on Employment Services is an intervening type of policy. The competences are divided between the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic (which provides legislation and methodological support) and the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (which, through its network of local labour offices, distributes the allowance). The amount of the budget varies from year to year: in 2019, 1,977,147 euros was used for the measure (ÚPSVaR, 2020).

There are some weaknesses of the policy that should be mentioned. For example, the maximum duration of the measure is 6 months, with some voices calling for the possibility to extend. The measure is designed for graduates, which prevents participation for early-school leavers, who might find participation in the measure useful. Moreover, participation in the measure is also restricted to those under the age of 26, therefore only minimally captures 25+ NEETs groups.

To our knowledge, the Allowance for graduate practice is also the only policy in effect that encourages young people and promote access to internships/traineeships. However, this only marginally captures people aged 25-29.

Regarding the employment contract framework, Slovak legislation recognizes only the 'agreement on graduate practice', which is signed between the local labour office and the participant of the graduate practice (see info on the graduate practice allowance) or the so-called 'apprenticeship contract with a secondary vocational school student', which is signed between the students (a participant of dual education) and the employer with whom the student performs the practice. There are no other legislations that would regulate/ease the school-to-work transition or the undertaking of any traineeship in Slovakia. Other types of contracts are standard employment contracts which must respect the Labour Code and the Minimum Wage Act.

In the field of job support, training or counselling, the long-term unemployed are a priority group for a number of active labour market measures. These active labour market measures are implemented through the modality of so-called 'national projects', of which several dozen have been implemented since 2014.

In connection with the persistent problem of long-term unemployment in Slovakia, the 'Action Plan for strengthening the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market in the Slovak Republic' (MPSVaR, 2016a) was adopted in the past. The Action Plan was adopted in November 2016 at the level of the Monitoring Committee of the Operational Programme Human Resources. To a large extent, it was an initiative of the Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (hereinafter as DG EMPL) to direct more funding of the above-mentioned operational programme in favour of the long-term unemployed. The Action Plan described specific measures to be implemented by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in cooperation with relevant actors within two years from the adoption of the document – i.e., primarily in the period 2017–2018.

The Action Plan was directly related to the National Employment Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2020 and was based on the Recommendation of the Council of the EU of 15 February 2016 on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market (Council of the EU, 2016). It can also be seen as a response to the EU Council Recommendation of 18 May 2016 concerning the National Reform Programme of Slovakia for 2016.

The activities of the Action Plan were designed as a comprehensive, integrated package of targeted measures that complemented other support measures (available at the time) for the long-term unemployed. The newly proposed activities were based on thorough profiling of jobseekers, involvement of non-public providers and better cooperation with employers. The voices from the field suggest that the proposed activities (such as the creation of a sophisticated profiling system or better involvement of non-public providers, for example) failed to be implemented, and the focus of the activities was on wage subsidies for jobs filled by long-term unemployed jobseekers (Štefánik et al., 2022).

However, policies designed specifically (or exclusively) for young long-term unemployed are not implemented in Slovakia.

The minimum wage in Slovakia is regulated by law. In accordance with Section 119(1) of the Labour Code, every employee has a legal right to a wage of at least the amount of the minimum wage. There is an act on the minimum wage, but there are no specific measures for young people. According to the law, the minimum wage must be respected for all employees, regardless of their age or education. The amount of the minimum wage is determined by the difficulty of the work: there are 6 degrees of difficulties set

by the law. The Act applies not only to employees in an employment or similar working relationship, but from 1 January 2013, also to individual persons performing work for an employer on the basis of one of the agreements for work performed outside the employment relationship (agreement for work performance, agreement on part-time work by students and agreement for work). The minimum wage is set by regulation by the Government of the Slovak Republic in two forms: in euros per month (monthly minimum wage) and in euros per hour worked (hourly minimum wage). The monthly minimum wage applies only to employees who are paid a monthly wage. For employees who are paid in a form of wage other than the monthly wage (e.g., hourly wage), their legal entitlement to a wage is based on the hourly minimum wage.

The responsible institution with the competences is the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic in charge of legislation, however, the amount of the minimum wage is the result of a tripartite negotiation - i.e., between employers, trade unions and the government.

Evaluations of the impact of the minimum wage on the economy are carried out, but the results of the evaluations are significantly conditioned by the research question and the interests of the contracting body. The problem is the rapid growth of the minimum wage, which, on the one hand, reduces the risk of poverty in the country, but on the other hand, the growth of the minimum wage is faster than the growth of the average wage, which reached 1,211 euros in 2021 in Slovakia.

The issue of the so-called 'chaining' of the employment relationship is regulated by § 48 of Act No. 311/2001 Coll. the Labour Code, which states that *'an employment relationship for a fixed term may be agreed for a maximum period of two years. An employment relationship for a fixed term may be extended or renegotiated within two years no more than twice.'* The Labour Code also states that *'a fixed-term employment relationship that is renegotiated is an employment relationship to be entered into before the expiry of a period of six months after the end of the previous fixed-term employment relationship between the same parties'*. The repeated renewal of a fixed-term or temporary employment relationship is not permitted by law. Compliance with this condition is monitored by the Labour Inspectorate, which may impose a fine in the event of a breach.

There are no measures specifically designed for young people, the only exception are young people under the age of 18, for whom restrictions on night or so-called 'heavy' work apply. There is also an exception for people with disabilities (irrespective of age), whose dismissal can only be carried out with the consent of the local labour office.

However, none of these measures prevent the problem of temporary employment contracts or precarious contracts. Practice suggests that the level of awareness of employees' rights is generally low and employees are often unaware of their rights. The law is often violated and circumvented by

employers, e.g., by rotating employment with several employers, whereby the employee is still doing the same job in the same place, but the employer owns several companies among which the employee rotates. There is also the problem of violation of the law through employment under so-called performance agreements (this is employment on a part-time basis) and work without a contract of employment (undeclared work). However, policies promoting the shift of informal workers (undeclared work) into formal employment have not been identified in Slovakia.

An international comparison of Slovak expenditure on ALMPs reveals at first glance a clearly lower share of expenditure in this area compared to the EU average. Moreover, the structure of this expenditure is also significantly different. Slovakia invests relatively little in education and training programmes. Only 10% of the total expenditure on ALMPs is allocated to this type of measures for jobseekers in Slovakia (the EU average is 40%). This is in contrast to the relatively high unemployment rate of low-skilled persons, as well as the situation of the country, which is increasingly experiencing an urgent shortage of skilled labour and needs to increase the productivity of the available workforce.

The second specificity of the structure of ALMP funding in Slovakia is the relatively high share of expenditure on measures in the employment incentives group (type 4 according to the LMP Database classification) (EC, 2018). At the same time, Slovak measures in this group represent instruments on the borderline of the definition of incentives to employment (LMP type 4) and direct job creation (LMP type 6).

The unemployment benefit is part of the social insurance system in Slovakia, which means that it is only available for individuals who have been contributing to the social insurance scheme for a certain time¹². Currently, a registered jobseeker who has contributed to the unemployment insurance system for at least 24 months (760 days) in the last 48 months is entitled to unemployment benefit. Compared to other EU countries, Slovakia is among the countries with lower access to unemployment benefits as approximately only 1/3¹³ of the total number of registered jobseekers are entitled to unemployment benefit. Given the conditions, registered jobseekers who have not contributed to the social insurance system in the last 48 months or who have contributed for less than 24 months during the given time of 48 months, are not eligible for unemployment benefits, which is the case for many young people.

In the case of not applying for unemployment benefit, if the registered jobseeker meets the conditions, he/she can apply for material hardship benefit. However, the assessment of eligibility for this is very strict and takes into account the income of the whole household in which the unemployed person lives;

¹² See Act 461/2003 Coll on Social Insurance

¹³ Out of the total number of 212,637 jobseekers registered as of 31 June 2021, only 78,816 was entitled to unemployment benefit.

a large proportion of claimants do not qualify for the benefit. This group of people is left without any income.

The last change in the unemployment benefit was made in 2020, when, as part of the package of measures implemented in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the maximum length of unemployment benefit was extended by two months, from the original 6 months after entitlement to 8 months. However, this was only a temporary measure implemented until March 2021.

The combination of unemployment benefit and income from part-time employment is allowed in Slovakia, but strongly controlled and limited to a maximum monthly income in amount of the subsistence minimum¹⁴ for a maximum of 40 days per year.

4.3. Entrepreneurship

In Slovakia, there are no policies that specifically support youth entrepreneurship. The measure that focuses on supporting entrepreneurship of the disadvantaged (registered jobseekers specifically and exclusively) is an allowance for self-employment implemented under the Act on Employment Services (§49 measure Allowance for self-employment). The target group of this intervening type of policy are registered jobseekers registered for at least 3 months. In the case of young people up to 29 years of age, the so-called national projects (§54 of the Employment Services Act) were implemented, which reduced the period of compulsory registration in the register of jobseekers to one month. In periods with no vacancies, this is a relatively popular measure. In 2010, according to the data of the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, as many as 15,033 individuals participated in it, while in 2019, it was only 1,561 participants, of which 13.45% were aged 25-29. Approximately only 2% of participants in the measure have education at ISCED 0-2 level.

According to the Act on Employment Services, the Labour Office provides a self-employment allowance for partial reimbursement of costs related to self-employment to a jobseeker who has been registered for at least three months and who will be self-employed if he or she applies for the allowance in writing. A jobseeker who has been granted the allowance must be self-employed continuously for at least three years. The amount of the allowance is determined by the average unemployment rate in the district concerned (applicants from economically lagging regions receive higher financial support than applicants from Bratislava, for example, the amount of support varying between 3,954 euros and 6,327 euros). The allowance is granted by the local labour. The labour office may also arrange a training for the applicants. Preparation for self-employment also includes the preparation of a business plan.

¹⁴ In 2021 it is EUR 214.8 per month

The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic provides legislation and methodological support of the policy, and the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family administers the allowance through its network of local labour offices. The amount of the budget varies from year to year; in 2019, 7,766,003 euros was used for the measure (ÚPSVaR, 2020).

The policy has been repeatedly evaluated and analysed. Concerning the return of programme participants to the jobseekers' register, it is one of the most effective measures (Karasova et al., 2017). The qualitative evaluations suggest that a considerable share of participants would have started a business even without the allowance; this suggests that a strong presence of deadweight can be assumed in the context of the policy. However, this has not yet been estimated and is only an assumption.

The popularity of the measure is largely contingent on the availability of vacancies. In periods when jobs are more available, the measure is utilised less. Jobseekers often prefer employment to entrepreneurship.

Qualitative evaluations suggest that the implementation of support measures such as assistance in developing a business plan or training to promote entrepreneurial skills are only occasionally implemented and their scope is insufficient (Polačková, 2019). Also, participation in this policy requires a high level of motivation on the part of the jobseeker, so it is jobseekers with higher education or shorter unemployment periods who participate in this policy more often.

Even if there is no policy specifically targeted at young people aged 25-29 in Slovakia, these candidates are not excluded from participation in entrepreneurship support policies. Also, no measures are reported that would increase the participation of more disadvantaged participants in the policy.

In Slovakia, there are also incubation and mentoring programmes available for entrepreneurs. Incubation and mentoring programmes are implemented by the National Entrepreneurship Centre implemented by the Slovak Business Agency (see above for more details). However, these programmes are intended for any entrepreneurs, regardless of their background, age or situation. Based on observation, it can be stated that a large part of the participants in mentoring and incubation programmes are under 29 years of age, but the programmes are not specifically implemented for young people. Perhaps the only identified exception is the Social Impact Award incubation programme, which in Slovakia is specifically designed for people up to the age of 29 and focuses on supporting entrepreneurship with social impact. The programme is implemented by the non-profit sector.

In both the non-profit and business environment, it is possible to occasionally come across youth entrepreneurship support programmes, but these are implemented occasionally and always on a project basis, so it is not possible to say that these are systematically implemented and established programmes.

Entrepreneurship support programmes specifically targeted at young NEETs or young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have not been identified.

4.4. Work-life reconciliation policies

In Slovakia, a distinction is made between maternity and parental leave. In the last ten years, one of the most frequently discussed topics in relation to social insurance has been the receipt of the so-called maternity allowance, which is part of the sickness insurance system. This is paid for the purpose of caring for a child up to the age of three. The child's mother or another insured caretaker who has contributed to the sickness insurance scheme for at least 270 days in the last two years is entitled to the allowance. In addition to the fact that in 2017 the amount of the allowance was increased from 70% to 75% of the income assessment base (but not more than 71.8 euros per day), the possibilities for fathers to receive the allowance have been significantly expanded. Whereas in 2010, only 107 fathers received maternity allowance, in 2020, the number of fathers receiving maternity allowance was 14,881¹⁵.

In connection with childbirth and the care of the newborn, the mother is entitled to maternity leave of 34 weeks. A single mother is entitled to a maternity leave of 37 weeks and a woman who has given birth to twins is entitled to a maternity leave of 43 weeks. In connection with the care of a newborn child, a father is entitled to maternity leave from the birth of the child to the same extent if he takes care of the newborn child. If the father is caring for an older child (but not older than three years), maternity leave for fathers lasts 28 weeks.

Parental leave, which can be taken after maternity leave until the child is three years old (in rare cases until the child is six years old), is part of the universal social security system and the amount of the allowance is the same for everyone. The amount of the allowance is 280 euros per month.

To encourage childcare, both a mother and a father can ask the employer for parental leave. The employer is obliged to comply with such a request. Parental leave is granted to the extent requested by the parent, but no later than the child's 3rd birthday. In the case of a child's long-term unfavourable health condition requiring special care, the employer is obliged to provide parental leave for a parent who can request it until the child's 6th birthday.

Legislation allows parallel income from maternity/parental allowance and wage income or income from the business. The only restriction is that the wage income cannot be based on the previous work contract with the employer from whom the mother (father) went on maternity leave.

Policy on compulsory pre-school education has been effective only since September 2021 in Slovakia. The amendment to Act 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Training (so called School Act) from 2019

¹⁵ Data of Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family

introduced compulsory pre-school education for all children above the age of 5. The aforementioned modification was a response to the low rate of pre-school enrolment of children from marginalised backgrounds, with an emphasis on children from marginalised Roma communities. The introduction of compulsory pre-school education is also important in relation to children with health disabilities, who are very often left out of pre-school education.

The policy aims to increase the low enrolment of pre-school children, specifically children from marginalised backgrounds. The low enrolment of pre-school children is a long-standing problem in Slovakia. In 2019, the enrolment rate in Slovakia was 77.8%, compared to an EU average of 92.8%¹⁶, while it was only 41% for children from households in material need benefits and 32% for children from marginalized Roma communities (MF SR et al., 2020).

The effectiveness of the amendment was originally set for September 2020, but due to insufficient capacity in kindergartens, it was postponed to September 2021. In Slovakia, insufficient capacity in kindergartens is also one of the several reasons for the low employment rate of mothers of young children who are unable to enter the labour market because they are unable to place their child in a day-care facility.

Regarding the School Act, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic has competences in terms of legislation and individual local municipalities have competences in terms of implementation.

Given the short duration of the amendment, it is not yet clear how it has been implemented in practice. Anyway, this amendment to the Act can be considered a good step towards increasing the enrolment of children from marginalised backgrounds or children with disabilities. However, there are concerns about the lower availability of training for younger children, as the intervening period, which should have been used to increase capacity, has not been fully utilised and kindergarten capacity in many regions (especially western Slovakia and larger cities) is still undersized (a child from the age of 3 is admitted to pre-primary education; exceptionally, a child from the age of 2 may be admitted).

In Slovakia, children under 3 years old may attend nurseries. Older children – children above the age of 3 can attend pre-school childcare facilities (kindergartens). There is no legal obligation to guarantee a place in these facilities for children below 5. Capacities are usually very low, and in many municipalities, facilities for children up to the age of three do not even exist. However, there are no statistics on the number of children not placed. The low availability of facilities is also reflected in the employment rate of mothers of young children. According to OECD data¹⁷, mothers in Slovakia work very rarely during the

¹⁶ Eurostat: Participation in early childhood education by sex (children aged 3 and over) (online data code: SDG_04_31)

¹⁷ See OECD family database: https://www.oecd.org/els/family/LMF1_2_Maternal_Employment.pdf

first few years of a child's life. In the EU, only Hungarians are worse off. This is not to be blamed either on women's poor motivation to work or on cultural differences within Europe. The problem is the low availability of nurseries and flexible forms of work for parents of young children. Moreover, social norms still place the burden of childcare and domestic work primarily on the shoulders of women.

4.5. Health/ Social Insurance policies

Health and safety protection of employees at work in Slovakia is guaranteed by Article 36 of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic. The key law on this subject is Act 124/2006 Coll. on Occupational Safety and Health. Health and safety protection at work must be ensured by all employers, whose duty is to take care of the technical, technological, organisational, personnel and other measures necessary to achieve this objective. Employees must take care of their own safety and health and the safety and health of others at work. These obligations of employers and employees are also adequately fulfilled by sole traders. Health and safety at work is ensured at the employer's expense. The National Labour Inspectorate ensures compliance with the rules on health and safety at work.

In Slovakia, there are also regulations regarding the employment of people with disabilities. On a general level, it is regulated by the Act No. 311/2001 Coll. Labour Code, as amended, which as the highest legal norm regulating employment relationships explicitly prohibits discrimination of employees, among others, on the bases of health or disability.

Labour Code also guarantees disabled employees a higher level of protection during termination of employment, as an employee with disabilities can be terminated by the employer only with prior consent of the corresponding Office of labour, social affairs and family, otherwise the termination is invalid¹⁸. Such a measure was certainly drafted and is maintained in good faith; in practice, however, it often has counterproductive effects as it increases employers' caution about employing people with disabilities (Holubová et al., 2021).

Besides the higher protection of persons with disabilities, the main policies increasing the employment of people of disability are active labour market measures and compulsory employment quotas. Act on Employment Services deals with this topic; specifically, §56- §60 concern measures specifically designed for people with disabilities. A list of active labour market measures specifically designed to promote the employment of persons with disabilities follows:

- subsidy for setting up of sheltered workshop and sheltered workplace (§56) (124 beneficiaries with the total support 443,273 euros in 2019);

¹⁸ See §66 of Labour Code

- subsidy for a person with disabilities for operating or engaging in self-employed activities (§57) (57 beneficiaries with the total support 320,921 euros in 2019);
- subsidy for maintaining a person with disability in employment (§56a) (32 beneficiaries with the total support 53,018 euros in 2019);
- subsidy for activities of a work assistant (§59) (1,253 beneficiaries with the total support 6,599,428 euros in 2019);
- subsidy for covering operating costs of a sheltered workshop or sheltered workplace and to cover the commuting costs of staff (§60t) (9,480 beneficiaries with the total support 32,022,270 euros in 2019).

According to §55 of the Act on Employment Services, sheltered workshops and sheltered workplaces are workplaces established by a legal entity or an individual person, where disabled persons who are unable to find employment in the open labour market are employed in an employment relationship, or workplaces where disabled persons are trained or prepared for work, and where working conditions, including performance requirements, are adapted to the condition of disabled persons. According to the Act, a sheltered workshop is a workplace where a legal entity (any type of legal entity) or individual person establishes more than one workplace for a disabled citizen and where at least 50% of the workforce are people with disabilities.

According to the Act on Employment Service, a sheltered workplace is a workplace where a legal person or individual person establishes a workplace for a disabled citizen and the workplace is not established in a sheltered workshop. A workplace where a disabled citizen is self-employed shall also be regarded as a sheltered workplace. A sheltered workplace may also be established in the home of a disabled citizen.

Based on the data of the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, as of 30 June 2021, there were 1,621 sheltered workshops in Slovakia, employing a total of 6,638 employees, 5,754 of whom had a disability. As of the same date, there were 4,722 registered sheltered workplaces with a total of 5,058 employees, of which 4,780 suffered from a disability.

Out of a total of 1,621 sheltered workshops, 644 have only two or less employees, so in view of the large number of sheltered workshops, it can be assumed that these are employers who create jobs for specific people, with no ambition for greater growth. Based on field experience, it can also be argued that many sheltered workshops as well as sheltered workplaces are part of a larger organisation. These sheltered workshops and sheltered workplaces can by no means be considered as closed workplaces where people with disabilities work in isolated environments.

Considering the available data, it is also possible to claim that sheltered workshops and sheltered workplaces employ about 11% of the total number of people with disabilities in Slovakia and a large part of the employees of sheltered workshops are people aged 50+ (Polačková, 2019).

In Slovakia, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic provides legislation and methodological support regarding the policy. The Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family through its network of local labour offices distribute the allowance. The total budget varies from year to year depending on the available financial resources. From the point of view of expenditure structure of ALMPs, expenditure on the benefit of people with disabilities represents a significant amount of the budget each year. It can be stated that in 2019, the expenditure intended to implement measures exclusively aimed at the needs of people with disability, were almost 21% of the total budget of expenditures for ALMP and the main budget (81%) was allocated for subsidies for the operating costs of sheltered workshops or sheltered workplaces (§60 of the Act).

The measures are often subject to evaluation. In terms of returning participants on each measure to the jobseeker register, participants show better results compared to the control group. In terms of the use of financial resources, individual measures are often criticised as being very expensive. A recurring criticism, however, is the emphasis on the promotion of sheltered employment and the lack of support for supported employment, which has a higher success rate based on experience abroad.

The problem of active labour market policy implemented in Slovakia in connection with the support of people with disabilities is an extremely strong orientation towards the support of sheltered workshops and sheltered workplaces at the expense of other measures supporting the work integration of people with disabilities. This disproportion has long been criticised, including by the Secretariat of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Holubová et al., 2021).

As in several other European countries, a quota system is applied in the Slovak Republic in relation to the employment of disabled people. Since 2004, this is defined by Act 5/2004 Coll. on Employment Services through § 63-65 and obligates employers who employ at least 20 employees to employ persons with disability at least as 3,2% of the total number of employees. The number of employees with disability, which the employer is obliged to employ as well as the actual number of employees with disability employed is rounded to the nearest whole number. In practice, this means that if the average number for a given calendar year was 20 employees, the employer is obliged to employ at least one person with health disability. Similarly, if the number was, for example, 100 employees, the employer is obliged to employ three persons with disability and at 500 employees it is 16 persons with disability (Ondrušová and Kešelová, 2015).

In case the employer does not employ disabled persons for any reason, the obligation of compulsory rate of employees with disabilities can be filled by contracting an order suitable for employing people with disability or by contracting an individual person with disability who operates as self-employed. Such contracts are, in practice, carried out by sheltered workshops, sheltered workplaces or registered work integration social enterprises employing people with disabilities as at least 30% among their total workforce. Minimum price contracts representing substitute for one employee with disabilities is determined by Act on Employment Services to be 0.8 times the overall labour price calculated from the average wages of an employee in the Slovak Republic. In 2020, the minimum price for contract was 877 euros per not employing one person with disability. In the case when the employer does not provide compulsory employment of persons with disability and does not contract within the specified range, he is obliged to pay the levy for not complying with the law, which is equal to the amount of 0.9 times total price of the work calculated from the average wage of an employee in the Slovak Republic, which in 2020, was 1,096 euros.

The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic provides legislation and methodological support regarding the policy. The Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family through its network of local labour offices administers the allowance. The funds from employers' levies for failure to meet the compulsory quota are considered to be non-tax revenue from state budget within Chapter 22, which belongs to Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. The aim of the payments according to the explanatory memorandum is 'to contribute to obtaining of funds from which employment of citizens with disabilities will be supported'. However, in practice, it cannot be determined what purpose the funds are used for, as the funds are not earmarked. However, in the absolute nominal value, the scope of the funds collected through the levies in year-over-year comparison is substantially declining (from 3,635,081 euros in 2013 to 1,941,458 euros in 2020). Despite the fact that the decrease is a loss of income for the budget of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, the trend can be interpreted as positive, since it indicates growing involvement of employers in performing duties arising from compulsory employment of people with disability either by direct employment or by substitution of performance in the form of awarding a contract, which certainly represents a positive impact concerning the employment of people with disability.

The policy is of interest to experts, but no relevant analyses have been identified that address the impact of the policy on promoting the employment of people with disabilities. The identified analyses primarily dealt with the technical aspects of the delivery of the measure. A criticism of the policy is that there is little incentive for employers to enforce the employment of people with disabilities, given the amount of the fine or compensation. The amount of the fine is insignificant compared to the cost and energy associated with employing a person with a disability. There is also criticism of the method of the fine, as it is accounted for as a 'levy', the possible inclusion of the fine in the company's costs reduces the tax

base and consequently the amount of tax paid. On the other hand, the instrument is considered to be quite effective in terms of market support for sheltered workshops, it was even incorporated in the newly adopted legislation on social economy and social enterprises adopted in 2018 in order to stimulate the market for social enterprises.

In Slovakia, no policies regarding physical and psychological health issues, diagnosis, and employment have been identified. The exception are jobs where good mental health is a prerequisite and is regularly checked (e.g., policeman).

5. Demand-side policies

5.1 Incentives

The majority of the ALMP measures are instruments through which the employer is given a financial subsidy for job creation. This trend is present in relation to all target groups of jobseekers, and the group of jobseekers under the age of 29 is no exception. The claim can be demonstrated by the structure of ALPM-expenditure (see in previous sections), where about 50-60% of the entire annual budget (about 90 million euros per year) is used each year just for financial incentives for employers, which are used as a contribution to the total labour cost of the newly recruited employee. The amount of the incentive is normally between 40-90% of the total cost of labour. Most of this budget is implemented through individual so-called 'national projects' designed by the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Directorate based on market requirements. Dozens of similar projects have been implemented since 2014, the typical budget of such projects is in the range of 10 million euros plus, the scope of the projects and the conditions of support vary slightly for each project (some of the projects focus on employment in a specific sector, others on employment in a specific region, others differentiate the amount of support according to the supported jobseeker). The budget is directed to all target groups; based on an expert estimate, it can be argued that about one third of the amount is used for the benefit of jobseekers aged up to 29 years.

In 2014, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic presented the first measure of the Youth Guarantee in Slovakia, which makes it easier for young people to enter the labour market. It is the 'Right to first job'. This policy - specifically designed for the needs of people under 29 (with a specific group 25-29) – is articulated in the Act on Employment Services, and it is materialized via the 'Allowance to support the creation of a job in the first regularly paid employment'.

The allowance supports employment of young people who has finished their education, completed compulsory education, or left school early and never obtained a regularly paid job, which means that they never had a job that lasted for at least six consecutive months. It is aimed at dealing with the

employment of young people up to the age of 29. The labour office reimburses part of her/his labour costs for their employer for a period of 6 to 12 months. The employer is required to maintain the employment contract for at least 50% of the subsidized period after the subsidy expires (e.g., if the placement is subsidized for 12 months, the employment must continue for an additional 6 months at least).

Participants in the programme are jobseekers up to 25 years of age who have been registered as unemployed for at least 3 months or jobseekers up to 29 years of age who have been registered as unemployed for at least 6 months.

Regarding the Allowance to support the creation of a job in the first regularly paid employment, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic provides legislation and methodological support, and the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family administers the allowance through its network of local labour offices. The amount of the budget varies from year to year; in 2019, 2,676,457 euros was used for the measure (ÚPSVaR, 2020).

The Allowance to support the creation of a job in the first regularly paid employment is associated with approximately six times higher costs per supported person compared to the Allowance for graduate practice, but the difference in impacts is also approximately the same (regarding the outcome of not being in the jobseekers register two to three years after the granting of the allowance) (Štefánik et al., 2022).

The monitored allowance is a relatively new measure effective from 2015, and it is still relatively underused. This may be due to its cost - it is a relatively expensive measure and is therefore offered preferentially to more prospective jobseekers. The weakness of the measure is also its orientation towards the reimbursement of the participant's wage costs. In the case of less prepared participants, it is difficult to combine the measure with other support instruments (training, counselling, etc.), so it is not interesting from the employers' point of view to create jobs for more disadvantaged jobseekers who are less prepared for work. On the other hand, the measure is open to a wide group of participants (participation is not limited to formal education graduates) and does not exclude the group of people aged 25-29.

5.2 Social security policies

Reductions in social security contributions for employers hiring young people/NEETs/25+ NEETs do not exist in Slovakia. In the case of employing people with health disabilities, there is a possibility to reduce the compulsory health insurance contribution by 50%. This measure applies to all ages, it is not a measure specifically for young people. In the context of social insurance, there is the so-called social insurance contribution relief for employment of a long-term unemployed person or a person residing in

a least-developed district; however, this measure is not designed specifically for young people either; it applies to all age groups.

5.3 Taxes

In Slovakia, reductions in taxes for employers hiring young people/NEETs/25+ NEETs do not exist.

6. Orientation

The topic of career guidance has recently (2019) been strengthened by legislation in Slovakia; however, these changes and support only apply to career guidance delivered in primary schools. The topic of career guidance in the context of young people has long been overlooked by public policy makers in Slovakia. In secondary and higher education, career guidance is implemented only very sporadically (rather it is an individual initiative of a particular school), and there is no systematic support for career guidance aimed at young people; activities are implemented mainly on a project basis.

A significant role in the provision of guidance and counselling is played by the local employment offices, which, in accordance with the Employment Services Act, provide orientation and career guidance to jobseekers as part of the first interview. Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family reports that every jobseeker automatically receives orientation and career guidance services. These are also covered by §42 of the Employment Services Act.

This preventative policy is effective from 2004 and it is aimed at every registered job seeker. In a normal situation, the caseworker sends the jobseeker to information and orientation services as soon as possible after registration. These can be carried out either individually or in a group. Here again, the practice of individual labour offices varies considerably. While in the case of some offices, group information sessions and counselling activities are implemented on a regular basis and participation is offered to jobseekers within a month of registration, other offices do not implement such activities at all. The contents of the information sessions mainly concern information on the obligations of jobseekers, on the services offered to jobseekers by a particular labour office, on job vacancies or information on existing ALMP measures. Even if information and orientation services is supposed to be offered to all jobseekers, several research reports (Stefanik et al., 2022; MF SR et al. 2020) point out that these services are only implemented formally, their quality varies substantially among labour offices, and not all groups of jobseekers are informed in an equal manner (e.g., people from marginalised Roma communities are often not informed about the possibilities of ALMPs, as several staff of local employment offices argue that these candidates 'do not have the capacity to understand the information').

The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic provides legislation within the policy and the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family provides the methodological support and its network of local labour offices provide the services.

Employment paths and counselling services are implemented as specialised counselling services. Specialised counselling services are implemented through §43 of the Act of employment service. The aim of the specialised counselling services is to provide counselling support to jobseekers by using career counselling methods that strengthen motivation, influence attitudes and develop skills for managing one's own career. Specialised counselling services are aimed at solving problems related to the employment of the jobseeker, at creating a match between their personal prerequisites and the requirements for performing a particular job, at influencing the decision-making and behaviour of the jobseekers, as well as their social and work adaptation. In specialised counselling services, the emphasis is on:

- development of individual action plans for jobseekers (in 2019, 7,674 action plans were developed for disadvantaged jobseekers; the development of an action plan is usually implemented through 4 meetings with the client);
- group counselling activities;
- selection of clients for participation in individual active labour market measures (including training programmes);
- assessment of jobseekers' competence (this is an analysis of the knowledge, skills, personal prerequisites and motivations of the jobseekers in order to develop a realistic plan for future career direction);
- assessment and development centre (this is a one-day intensive service which enables participants to assess their competences and personality and to prepare for selection procedures carried out in the form of an assessment centre. 444 job seekers participated in the assessment and development centre in 2019).

The policy is effective from 2004. In 2019, 25,029 jobseekers were provided with professional counselling services, 55% of whom were women. 34.2% of the participants were under 29 years of age, 15.2% of the participants were aged 25-29 years (ÚPSVaR, 2020).

The responsible institution for the policy is the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, which provides the legislation. The Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family provides the methodological support and its network of local labour offices provides the services.

Professional counselling services in Slovakia can also be implemented through national projects implemented under §54 of the Act. However, these are only implemented on a temporary and project-based basis, and the implementation is limited by the exhaustion of financial resources.

Vocational guidance services are provided through the tribal staff of the labour offices, so the services are not outsourced. Where services are also provided through a national project, the number of advisers is increased.

According to evaluation reports, access to specialised counselling increases a jobseeker's chances of leaving the jobseeker's register due to placement in the labour market. However, the availability of specialised counselling services is also the subject of individual analyses. In Slovakia, specialised counselling services are primarily provided to the long-term unemployed, who are automatically entitled to counselling. The chances of other jobseekers to make full use of counselling services are rather limited. The findings also suggest that, despite trends in international practice, the emphasis on specialised counselling services implemented within the PES in Slovakia is still low. During the pandemic period, counselling services even ceased to be provided altogether.

Expert discussion often highlights the need to intensify specialised counselling services in the provision of PES. The need to strengthen the activities of specialised counselling services has also been highlighted by several evaluation reports (Štefánik et al., 2022, Studená and Polačková 2019, IFP, 2016).

The role of employment offices and public employment services is crucial in the system in Slovakia. There is basically no other institution that provides similar support. A limitation of public employment services in Slovakia is that employment offices work only with people who are registered as jobseekers. A large group of the most vulnerable young people - those are without work but are not registered - is therefore left without support. Non-profit organisations work mainly with these young people, but their problem is poor access to financial resources and a long-standing state of underfunding. Their capacities and the range of services they may provide on the ground fundamentally undercuts the existing needs on the ground.

7. Conclusions

The Slovak Republic offers a standard range of instruments aimed at tackling youth unemployment. Programmes aimed at supporting youth employment form an important part of active labour market policy activities, and young people up to the age of 29 are among the priority target groups of the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Offices.

The challenges of the implemented policies are the dominant orientation towards subsidising jobs at the expense of training programmes (emphasis on the demand side as opposed to the supply side), the involvement of only registered jobseekers, the absence of programmes aimed at contacting and identifying young people who are NEETs but not registered as jobseekers, the weak emphasis on specialized counselling programmes as well as the absence of an individualised approach and case management, which is essential especially for young people who are far away from the labour market.

The quality of formal education and the link between the education system and employment also remains a challenge. Slovakia has recently experienced a serious problem regarding the increase of early school leaving, which contrasts with the declared policy priorities, and the number of students choosing to do their tertiary studies abroad is also increasing. According to several evaluations, Slovakia is also one of the countries in which the educational results of pupils most closely mirror the social situation of their backgrounds.

A positive trend can be observed in the field of dual education, where the number of pupils studying in a dual education programme is increasing, and cooperation with employers is also being strengthened. Although the trend can be considered good, the results are still coming very slowly.

In the area of social policy, no programmes have been identified that explicitly target young people or NEETs. Young people are considered as one of many target groups in social policy.

Programmes aimed at promoting youth employment are primarily funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds. It can be assumed that this trend will continue on in the future. Slovakia has not yet developed strategic documents that would determine the priorities of policies aimed at young people beyond 2020. At the time of preparing this report, the Employment Strategy 2030 was under preparation, which places a strong emphasis on youth employment.

A significant difference in the approach to the development of these programmes - compared to the past – is the greater consideration of the results of independent evaluations, and the involvement of a wider range of stakeholders in public policy-making.

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