

Pathways to labour market activity: Crafting effective policies for 25+ NEETs in Europe

Center for the Study of Democracy

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

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 ([Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#)).

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Implemented by:



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1. Key Points

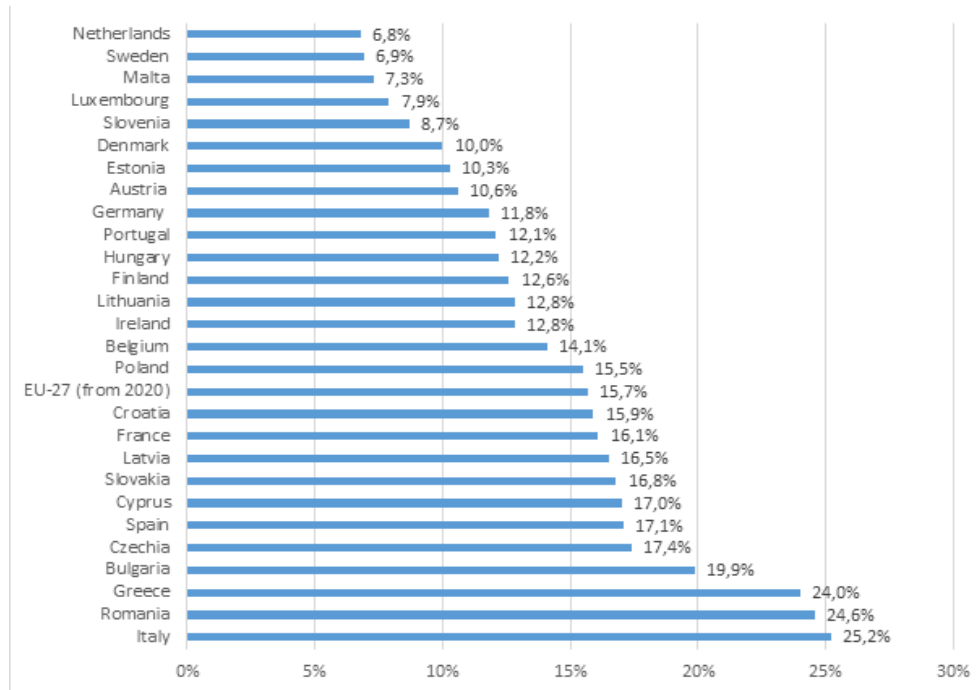
- 25+ NEETs across 9 EU member states (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic/Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) represent a variety of profiles which, although not commonly present in each of these countries, include: (1) women (typically young mothers and caretakers); (2) ethnic minorities; (3) people with physical or/and mental disabilities; (4) persons living in structurally disadvantaged regions; (5) individuals with low professional and social skills; (6) persons with low levels of education; (7) long-term unemployed; (8) (undocumented) migrants and refugees.
- Policy challenges related to 25+NEETs which these countries face are contextually dependent, but as a whole overlap across the following: (1) the heterogeneous nature of 25+NEETs; (2) content and financial insufficiencies of existing policies and programmes; (3) insufficient emphasis on the assessment of such policies and programmes.
- National and EU-level efforts to address such policy challenges should: (1) target specific subgroups of NEETs; (2) integrate age-sensitive approaches in tackling the issues of sub-groups of NEETs; (3) implement and enhance inter-institutional strategies to policymaking and implementation; (4) take additional specific actions towards closing the gap between education and work (e.g., through greater emphasis on upskilling, further career development, funded first-job opportunities); and (5) enhance the availability and comprehensiveness of policy/programme assessments by recognizing their benefits.

2. Introduction

Young adults experience increasingly convoluted trajectories of transitioning from education to work and becoming established on the labour market ([Eurostat, 2023a](#)). The complexities include a more frequent change of jobs, a blurred boundary between education and employment as more young people are simultaneously studying and working, and persisting risks of becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training).

The mean NEET rate in the EU varies across the different age groups, markedly rising with age. In 2022, it corresponded to: 5,8% for the age class 15 to 19 years; 13,3 % for 20 to 24; **15,7% for 25 to 29** ([Eurostat, 2023b](#)).

Figure 1 NEET rate for the age class 25-29 in the EU-27, 2022



Source: Eurostat (2023c)

Data for 2022 about the average EU NEET rate in the age group 25-29, disaggregated by degree of urbanisation, show that the share of NEETs is highest in rural areas – 16,9%, followed by 16,8% in towns and suburbs, and 14,3% in cities (Eurostat, 2023d). Disaggregated by sex, in 2022, the average EU NEET rate for the same age group was 33,9% for females and 14,8% for males (Eurostat, 2023b).

This policy note comparatively analyses the policy situation related to 25+NEETs in 9 EU countries: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic/Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. The comparative analyses presented here are based on national policy analyses by researchers from these countries with expertise on policies and policy monitoring/evaluation practices targeting NEETs.

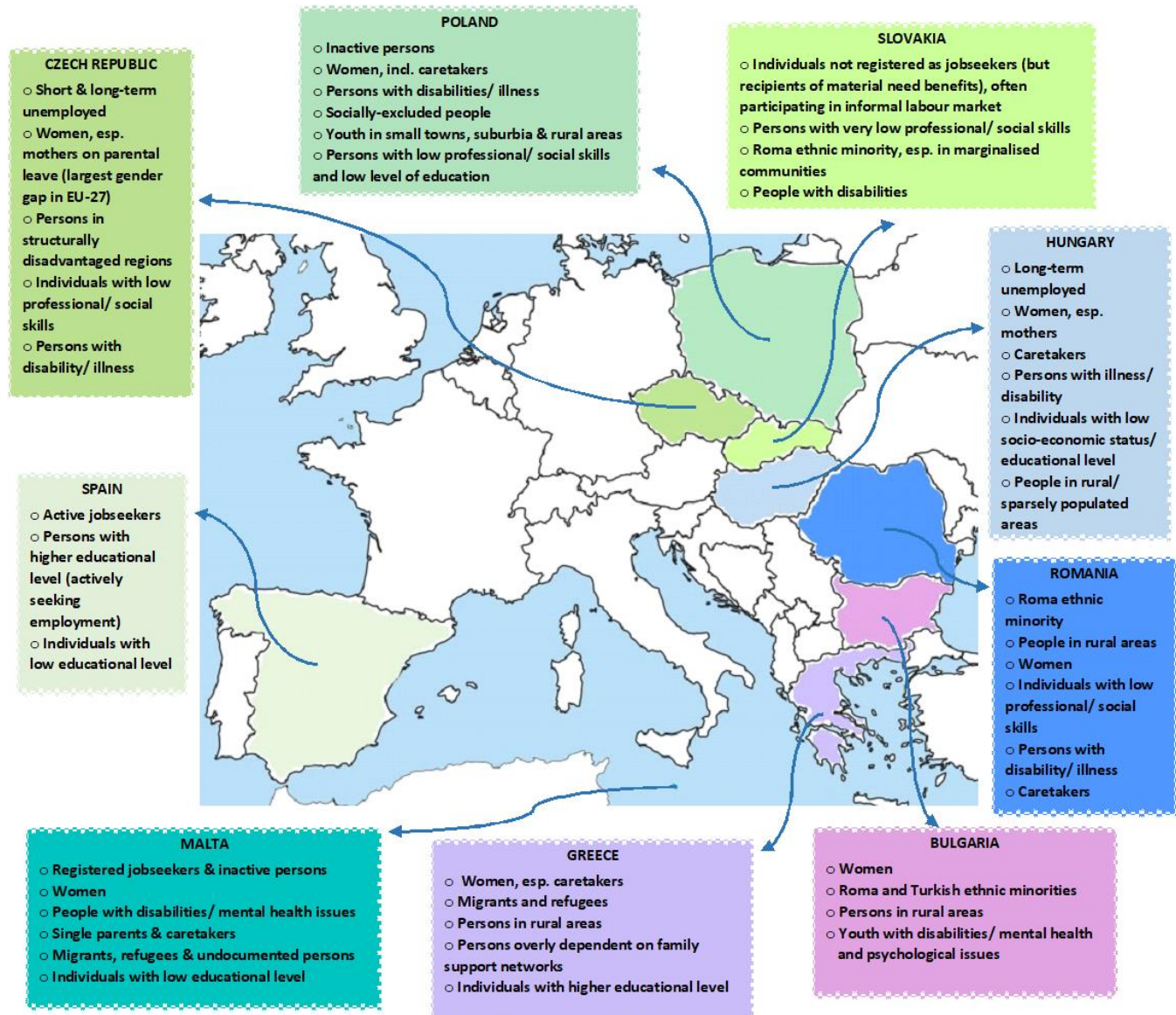
3. Tackling policy challenges

3.1 The heterogeneity conundrum

Across the selected countries 25+ NEETs face the common challenge of inactivity on the labour market. However, there is not a monolithic NEET profile characteristic for all the selected country cases. Rather, the NEET profile across the countries is heterogeneous and determined by the particularities of the

respective national contexts. Data analyses about the selected countries show a range of identity categories associated with being a NEET, including: gender, migration status, health situation, education level, geographical attribution, ethnicity, socio-economic status (poverty) (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2 Subgroups of NEETs per country

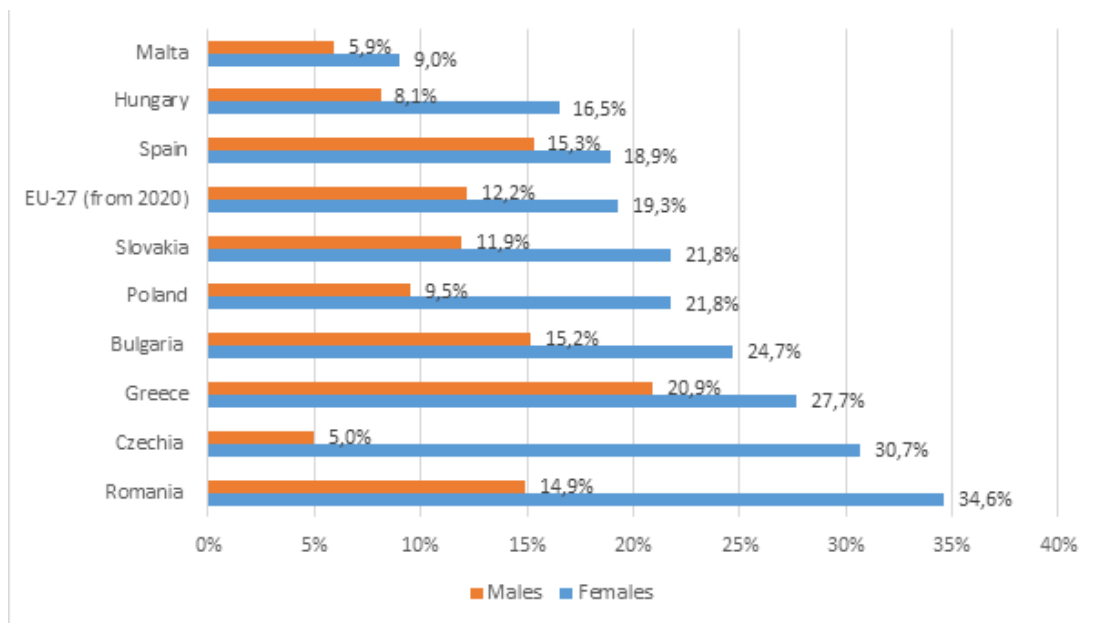


Source: CSD

In the majority of the country cases, **gender is a notable marker of NEET status**. Women tend to be NEETs more often than men and such a gendered aspect is very prominent in some of the post-

communist countries of Eastern Europe (e.g., Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, the Czech Republic). The higher 25+ NEET rate among women in these countries is associated with the post-communist legacy of prolonged maternity leave periods, which in some countries (e.g., the Czech Republic), reach up to 4 years. Such dynamics can also be tied to the tendency of women in the countries of Eastern Europe to have their first-born child earlier (between 25-29) compared to women in other parts of Europe (e.g., Southern Europe) (Eurostat, 2021). Being a woman is also often associated with caring for elderly family members. Furthermore, a crucial layer of the gender gap issue relates to discrimination and gender stereotypes in the workplace, particularly relevant to Greece where gender-based discrimination in male-dominated fields is a recognized issue overlapping with gender stereotyping ('male' versus 'female' dominated fields).

Figure 3 NEET rate for the age class 25-29 by sex, 2022

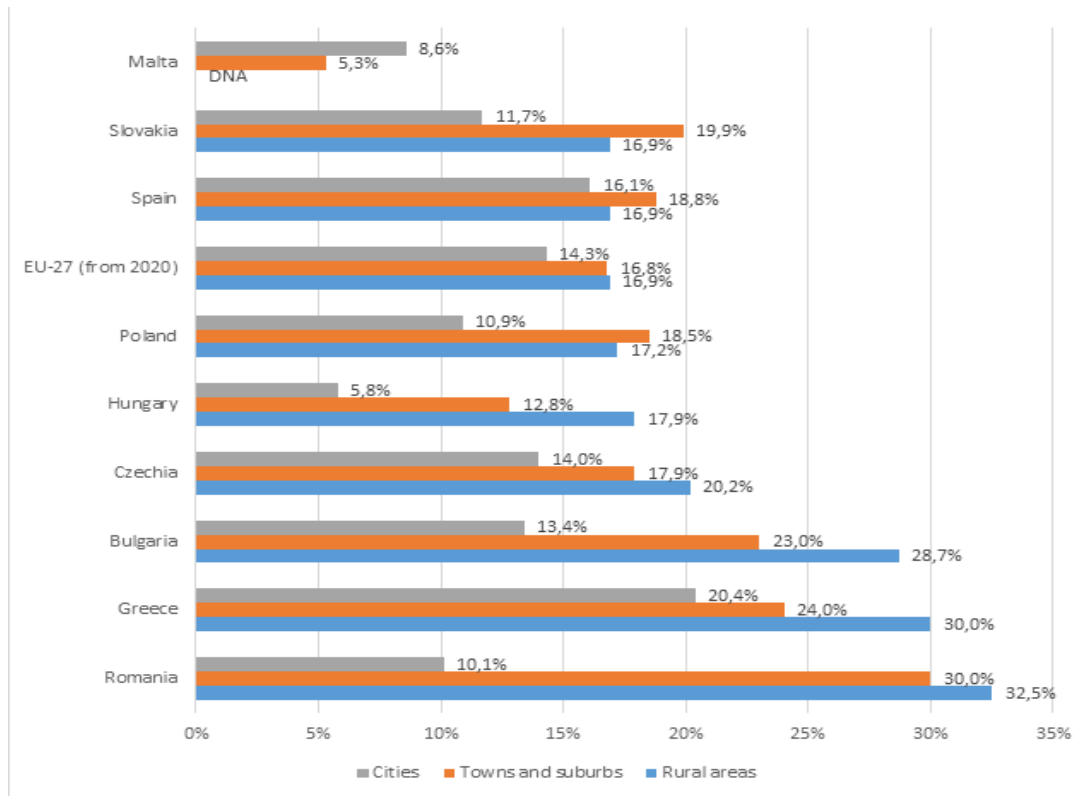


Source: Eurostat (2023c)

Across a number of the countries (e.g., Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Greece) 25+ NEETs are geographically distributed in structurally-disadvantaged areas, typically suburban and rural areas. Romania and Bulgaria are the EU member states with the highest degree of difference between the NEET rates in cities and rural areas, respectively 19.1 and 14.5 percentage points (Eurostat, 2022). This rural-urban divide is due to more stagnant economic capacities of such areas, more limited mobility of the

local labour force, the challenges of seasonal work (e.g., in Greece), as well as the limited availability of child-care for young parents (e.g., Poland).

Figure 4 NEET rate for the age class 25-29 by degree of urbanisation, 2022



Source: Eurostat (2023d)

Among the critical identity categories of NEETs in the selected countries are also **migrant and ethnicity status**. In Malta and Greece, among 25+NEETs are migrants, refugees and undocumented people who are facing peculiar challenges with unemployment (Eurostat, 2023e; Jobsplus, 2023). Migrants and refugees often struggle with the local language which is tied to their capacity to be employed. Obtaining essential documents and citizenship can be also problematic, creating difficulties for these people to obtain legal jobs forcing some of them to enter the hidden labour market (both in Malta and Greece). Relatedly, youth from ethnic minorities appear to be the group with the greatest chance of being NEET, especially in Bulgaria and Slovakia, and particularly ethnic minority subgroups from marginalized communities.

Other important identity **categories which shape the critical groupings of NEETs in the selected countries relate to disability/illness status, education status, labour market characteristics**. Individuals with a disability are among the prevailing groups of 25+NEETs across a number of the selected country cases (e.g., Malta, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Poland).

People without sufficient or low-quality education are also more likely to be NEETs across the countries, but there are specific ways in which education ties to their chances of becoming NEET. Spain, for instance, is an example of how education and skills do not guarantee labour market activity. Even though there is a high number of NEETs with low education in Spain, there is also a high number of NEETs who are overqualified for the jobs available on the labour market. Similar is the situation in Bulgaria and Greece, in the latter of which there is also a significant number of educated youth who are NEETs. Such specifics raise questions about the role of the economic cycle and the broader dynamics of the national labour markets which appear to be determining influences on the capacities of even well-educated youth to be active.

3.2 Unpacking policy predicaments

The selected countries do not always face the same issues in policy towards 25+NEETs, but there are some overlaps. First, a common issue with existing policies across a number of the case studies is that they do not target 25+NEETs or NEETs overall as separate from other more general target groups. Instead, if the policies target NEETs at all, NEETs are encompassed within more general categories of people. One layer of this issue is that policies and programmes do not manage to fully reach out to the NEETs that they target (as observed in Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary). This is because programmes usually address youth who are registered with labour offices, but the young people who need assistance the most do not have such registration. Indeed, it can be the case that labour offices do not have a proper strategy on how to identify and reach out to these hidden NEETs who can also be persistent NEETs (e.g., in Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania).

Another deficiency concerns **content deficits**. In the cases when initiatives exist and reach out to the target groups, they appear to be missing some components which are essential to addressing the difficulties of 25+NEETs. For instance, in Poland training courses offered by labour offices are not adapted to the preferences of youth and the needs of the labour market, forcing youth to self-select specific trainings and avoid what is being offered by the state. In Bulgaria, policies tackling the employment challenges of youth mostly offer apprenticeship and internship opportunities, but do not always secure opportunities for long-term employment. Relatedly, in some countries there is a lack of proper career guidance programmes (Romania), easy access to vocational education training (Bulgaria), lack of preventative programmes (Romania). There have been also instances of clearly failing

programmes, limited programmes targeting persistent NEETs, such as young Roma in the material needs system (e.g., Slovakia).

No less important are issues related to the financial aspects of the policy initiatives for 25+NEETs. Across the case study countries, we observe a **natural overreliance on EU funding for such programmes** (typically reliance on the ESF and the YEI) as well as an expectation from EU institutions for the implementation and evaluation of such programmes. While highly favourable, especially for countries with lower economic performance, this has been identified as an issue in some instances, such as Spain (this dependency can be interpreted as a sign of more limited national political will for and commitment to the employability of NEETs).

A further policy issue concerns **the mere availability and adequacy of financial resources**. A recent evaluation of the Career Start Programme in Bulgaria, a keystone intervention supporting young university graduates' transition between education and employment, shows that the financial resources for such initiatives may not always meet the budgetary needs and expectations of the beneficiaries.

3.3 Assessing policies. How far does it go?

Across the majority of the countries there have been complexities with the monitoring and evaluation of the policies supporting 25+ NEETs. On the one hand, there has been an insufficiency of activities which could be evaluated in regards to 25+NEETs. This tendency coincides with the lack of comprehensive strategies targeting NEETs in some of the countries (e.g., Poland and Bulgaria).

In the instances when policy evaluations exist, their quality has been compromised. One reason for this, as is in the cases of Poland and Bulgaria, is the reality that national-level data about policy performance is not readily available to contribute to reliable monitoring and evaluation efforts. A further layer of this matter is the reality that individual programme evaluations are practically impossible to make in some places. This has necessitated an umbrella evaluation approach in which only the umbrella programmes and policies are evaluated, but not their constitutive programmes (e.g., in the Spanish case there are more than 40,000 programmes targeting NEETs).

Furthermore, a major monitoring and evaluation tendency in a number of the countries (e.g., Poland, Malta, Bulgaria, Spain) is that there are evaluations of large-scale programmes which are funded by the EU (through the ESF or the YEI). While such evaluations contain ex-post conclusions, across the countries they are usually limited to reporting results on product indicators such as the number of participants who benefitted from the programmes or the amounts of funds spent on these programmes. In some cases satisfaction surveys are present (e.g., Poland), but post-programme employability has not been

analyzed extensively, let alone the particular experiences of beneficiaries with programmes. In other countries, e.g. Bulgaria, beneficiary surveys are not a regular practice. Counterfactual analyses, a recognized approach in policy monitoring and evaluation, have been scant (e.g., in Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria). Relatedly, a possible underlying dynamic in the state of policy evaluation can be the lack of recognition in some contexts on the benefits of using impact evaluations (e.g., Hungary).

4. Next steps

Whereas the policy recommendations below refer to national contexts (as they are based on national policy analyses), they also outline directions which can guide EU policy making more broadly.

Target specific subgroups of NEETs.

Since the lack of differentiation of NEET subgroups is one of the most common problems with policy interventions across the analysed countries, these interventions should respond to the differing needs and characteristics of the subgroups. This calls for establishing more specialized programmes and initiatives for the critical subgroups of NEETs in the respective countries (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023; Evidence Institute Foundation, 2023), as well as according to target group diversification. This entails a clarification of the NEET concept, and where necessary, redefinition of the target group within the beneficiaries of the Youth Guarantee System (e.g., in Spain). This effort requires robust analyses on NEETs' differential challenges and clear definitions of target subgroups within the beneficiaries of each country's intervention system (e.g., the Youth Guarantee system) (Delgado-García et al., 2023). Future policies may also need to **take an age-senistive stance towards subgroups of NEETs** (e.g., women who are in the 25-29 category are more likely to be NEETs than women who are in the 15-19 age category).

To manage the gender gap, policies and interventions should **promote alternative work schemes** (including flexible work hours, opportunities for part-time and remote work options) and alternative childcare support schemes (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023; Institute of Entrepreneurship Development, 2023). Since parental duties are a major contributing factor to the gender gap among 25+ NEETs, policymakers should consider alternative and tailored childcare support schemes. Such schemes could include services by labour offices to young parents for improving their skills, increased availability of good-quality nurseries and kindergartens, new forms of child care and attractive conditions at the workplace for people raising a young family (Dvořák et al., 2023; Szőnyi & Koltai, 2023; Evidence Institute Foundation, 2023). National policies should enhance gender equality at the workplace, equal opportunities and fair treatment through establishment of gender quotas, career-guidance, mentorship

and scholarship, lifelong learning for women (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023; Institute of Entrepreneurship Development, 2023).

The high degree of rural-urban disparities calls for action. Strong political leadership is to allocate funds to address the social situation of communities in these regions (Dvořák et al., 2023). Measures should also include: (1) a combination of job creation and accessibility enhancement, promotion of rural entrepreneurship (e.g. SMEs, startups); (2) improvement of urban-rural connectivity through an upgrade of digital and mobility infrastructures, (3) development of rural industry clusters such as agriculture, agri-tourism and renewable energy; (4) promotion of lifelong learning and vocational training, (5) enhancement of off-season tourism in regions heavily reliant on tourism; (6) engagement of companies in social dialogue to mitigate the impact of closures and offer retraining and reskilling programmes (Institute of Entrepreneurship Development, 2023). Tailoring support measures to local needs is imperative (Szónyi & Koltai, 2023), suggesting a need for stronger engagement of local-level stakeholders versus primarily an approach led by national-level leadership.

Migrant dynamics are not to be underestimated either. There are several possible approaches to address the migrant-related issues of 25+NEETs which can be combined into: (1) prioritizing language acquisition through language (online) training programs; (2) simplifying the legal documentation process for migrants with possibilities for free-of-charge legal counselling; (3) recognizing foreign professional qualification and credentials; (4) improving working conditions for migrant workers (fair wages, safe working conditions, workers' rights); (5) enforcing anti-discrimination measures (Kósa, 2023; Institute of Entrepreneurship Development, 2023).

Reinforce inter-institutional approaches to policy

There is a further need for coordinated inter-institutional management of projects and programmes designed for NEETs. Institutional frameworks which connect governmental institutions at the local and national levels, NGOs, relevant interest groups should be established (Bálint et al., 2023)¹. There is a need to also promote a holistic assessment of policies and evaluation of actions (e.g., Spain, Czech Republic). Wherever there is no good enough inter-institutional connectivity for data exchange (e.g., in Bulgaria), there is a need for the development of such mechanisms, for instance through the creation of inter-institutional data registers to guide better data-driven policymaking and evaluation.

¹ An inter-institutional approach could incorporate organisations and partners in the field of education and labour (policies), social and family policy, gender equality, youth work (non-formal education sector included), health promotion organisations, employer and employee interest groups, etc.

Implement steps to close the gap between education and work

Across the country cases, there are substantial discrepancies between education and employment. In some countries, such as in Malta, closing this gap is about prioritizing 25+ NEETs to re-engage in the education and training systems. This can be achieved by encouraging NEET participation in lifelong learning courses, work-based learning programmes, preferential options for these groups in existing apprenticeship and internship schemes (Kósa, 2023). Boosting the knowledge capacities of 25+NEETs could be done through targeted e-literacy skills training, support as well as opportunities for the development of entrepreneurial capacities, as well as the mere training of and support of the personal capacities of the program beneficiaries (Evidence Institute Foundation, 2023; Slovak Business Agency, 2023).

Relatedly, in some of the country cases (e.g., Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Malta), the gap can be closed by a stronger emphasis on career guidance for NEETs which can include: 1) career education to strengthen career management skills development (e.g., short courses), 2) career counselling with separation of the jobs of school counsellors and career guidance specialists, 3) career information with the creation of national career guidance portals where labour market information, training, occupations and career paths can be found in one place. In this regard, as information about existing upskilling and employment opportunities can be scant in some countries (e.g., the Career Start Programme in Bulgaria), it is important to promote initiatives well through far-reaching information campaigns to stimulate youth interest in employment and increase youth employability. This should be done in a collaborative manner between implementing institutions and career orienting institutions and mechanisms (universities and high schools, career centres and fairs, personalised career counselling and orientation).

In some countries (e.g., Greece, Spain), policymakers should also work on the need of repairing the mismatch between educational attainment and existing labour market opportunities by adjusting the education system more in line with the demand of the labour market. In such cases it is important to enhance the labour market relevance of education and training by fostering strong connections between educational institutions and industries to meet evolving labour market needs and equip students with desirable skills needed by the labor market. To ensure better utilization of highly educated individuals' talents and skills, revision of employment policies is required towards a shift from policies that encourage low-skill jobs to those supporting high-skill jobs. Upskilling programs and financial incentives for participation in such programmes could also bridge this gap.

Since the education aspect appears highly age-specific (education is typically acquired by younger people), tackling education challenges is essential and could be a pillar of an EU-wide NEET strategy should one be adopted by the EU.

Perform regular impact assessments

A high-quality impact assessment can provide knowledge on what has worked and on potential unintended impacts, and it can also enable policymakers to improve and fine-tune programmes. Impact assessments should start at the stage of policy design, as for the implementation of good-quality evaluations, it is necessary to build measurement aspects into the design of programmes or services and establish data collection systems early on (Szónyi & Koltai, 2023). This requires the establishment of more consistent and frequently scheduled monitoring and evaluation of programmes and initiatives on an individual initiative basis, encouragement and enhancement of collaborations between research institutes with expertise in policy evaluation and policy institutions, as well as trainings of institutional staff and project implementers in evaluation/monitoring methodologies to enhance the evaluation capacities of implementing institutions (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023).

Cross-checking data between institutions and services will help evaluate better the effectiveness and impact of actions that have effect on beneficiaries and assess their long-term situation (Delgado-García et al., 2023). Surveying beneficiaries might also be helpful in making reliable policy and programme assessments. To that end, creating and introducing systematic digitalized survey mechanisms aimed at collecting feedback from programme beneficiaries can measure the overall satisfaction of the beneficiaries and the long-term consequences of programmes on their employability (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023).

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