

Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on 25+ NEETs

COUNTRY REPORT – BULGARIA

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

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Project summary:

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

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

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Implemented by:



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1. Introduction

Understanding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on 25+NEETs,¹ necessitates an initial grasp of the context in which it emerged and how it intersected with the Bulgarian socio-political landscape at the time.

The first confirmed Covid-19 case in Bulgaria was on 8 March 2020. Anticipating an outbreak of the disease, a National Operational Headquarters was established on 25 February (BNT, Denyat zapochva, 25.02.2020). On 13 March 2020, the government declared a state of emergency across the country for a period of one month, which was extended on 3 April to 13 May 2020. From 14 May to 14 June 2020, an epidemic emergency was declared. The epidemic emergency was subsequently extended numerous times. On 30 March 2022, the Council of Ministers decided to lift the epidemic emergency as of 1 April 2022 (Covid-19 Single Information Portal; Ministry of Health). Bulgaria announced the end of the state of emergency imposed due to the spread of Covid-19 in mid-2022 (National Employment Agency, 2023, p. 5).

There were two lockdowns and various restrictive measures with different levels of rigidity during the epidemic emergency. Lockdown measures only allowed for individuals to leave their residences for essential employment (healthcare, social care, law enforcement, armed forces, firefighting, utility services like water and electricity supply) or for activities such as medical appointments and food supply (Mladenova, 2021, p. 93). The first lockdown between March and May 2020 was the most rigid and targeted everyone, but afterwards the levels of restrictive measures varied and there were no complete closures. When the epidemic peaked, there were temporary closures of schools (switching between distance and in-class learning), restaurants and nightclubs (Eneva, 2022, p. 3).

Thus, in the beginning of the pandemic, the measures were very strict, with press conferences by the National Operational Headquarters held on a daily basis. Later on the measures were eased off and even when introduced, were not actually enforced during the second and third pandemic waves. At times, they were even considered rather lax compared to other neighbouring or West European counties.

The Bulgarian healthcare system was reorganized to meet the new pandemic realities. Vaccines were imported and vaccination was promoted by the government, yet with questionable success as vaccination levels remained low and mortality rates linked to Covid-19 rose unprecedentedly. While in the beginning masks were obligatory despite the backlash from the population, the information about vaccines was much more ambiguous with some doctors claiming on national TV that vaccination was not

¹ There are not many data available specifically on 25+NEETs in Bulgaria. When data are missing and we cannot refer directly to this particular subgroup, we focus more generally on youth. In this respect we deem that what is typically relevant of youth in general, or NEET youth, could also be considered somewhat relevant to 25+ NEETs.

needed. This might have contributed at least partially to Bulgaria's lowest vaccination rates in the EU. The widespread disinformation in the media at the time aggravated the problem (Center for the Study of Democracy, June 2021).

In the beginning of the pandemic, there were several blockades with entry/exit checkpoints. On 17 March, the tourist town of Bansko was placed under full quarantine for a period of 14 days (BTV News, 18.03.2023). On 15 April 2020, partial restrictive measures were introduced in the Roma districts of 'Fakulteta' and 'Filipovtsi' in Sofia, as a consequence of rising number of Covid-19 cases among the population there (Standartnews, 16.04.2020). On 17 April 2020, right before Easter, a strict regime of entry and exit from the Capital of Sofia was introduced (Svobodna Evropa, 16.04.2020). These measures were lifted soon afterwards and no such closings of towns or cities were imposed until the very end of the pandemic.

In terms of school closures, however, Bulgaria was in fact one of the countries with the longest closing periods in the EU (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, 2021, p. 56). The closures of kindergartens and schools had an impact on more than 700 000 pre-school and school aged children. Overall, the Covid-19 effects on education had a serious negative economic, social, psychological and organizational impact on the Bulgarian society. A UNICEF study shows that the most affected by the closures were children with families living in poverty, or who had long-term unemployed or economically inactive parents (Yankova, n.d.).

The COVID-19 situation in Bulgaria was closely linked to the political crises and changes that began unravelling about a year after the initial onset of the pandemic. In 2021, there were three rounds of parliamentary elections and one presidential election. The electoral campaigns were centered on the avoidance of potentially unpopular measures, such as extensive lockdowns (Eneva, 2022, p. 1). During the political instability and turmoil, the country was governed by caretaker governments appointed by the President, and the political campaigns were marked by street protests and public discontent, as well as by the spread of disinformation campaigns which exploited Covid-19 conspiracies about the disease and vaccines (Center for the Study of Democracy, Policy Brief, April 2021).

While some information campaigns were implemented, such as official statements regarding COVID-19 on the Bulgarian National Radio's website in ten languages (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, p. 39), such measures were insufficient in contrast with the marked absence of comprehensive vaccination campaigns, high levels of disinformation and a traditionally present high level of citizen mistrust towards institutions. This resulted in 'discontent, non-compliance and distrust in the infection prevention measures, low vaccination rates and difficult access to treatment whenever the healthcare system collapsed'(Eneva, 2022, p. 1).

The spread of COVID-19 in Bulgaria at the end of the first quarter of 2020 caused a sharp deterioration of the economic situation and of the short-term GDP growth. The introduced measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus had a serious adverse impact on economic activity in the different sectors. The two lockdowns during the year caused the closure of restaurants, the disruption of transport links, the introduction of checkpoints between major cities, which led to the shutdown of a number of businesses, including industry, but the service sector was hit the hardest (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021, p. 80). To slow down the spread of Covid-19, the authorities advised people to start working from home if possible. As a consequence, some sectors switched to home office. By and large, the sector that suffered the most was hospitality (hotels and restaurants), which was shut down periodically - either completely or partially (Ibid., 83).

In 2021, as the anti-Covid-19 measures were relaxed more and more, life gradually returned to normal and economic activity picked up which affected youth unemployment as well. National Employment Agency (NEA) data show that youth unemployment in the country had fallen between January and September 2021 compared to the same period of the previous year (cited in Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021, p. 85). Unemployed youth from both groups monitored by the NEA (up to 24 and up to 29 years) decreased in number and as a relative share of all registered unemployed people. The unemployed youth under 29 in January-September 2021 were 21,203 on average per month, 11,312 less than in the same period in 2020. Their relative share of the registered unemployed was 11.2%. Unemployed youth up to 24 years of age decreased by 4,526 persons to 8,734 persons on average per month, and their relative share was 4.6% (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021, p. 85).

Prior to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic situation in Bulgaria had seen a notable improvement with 'soaring growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)' until 2019 (Stamatev and Bozev, 2022, p. 27). Before the pandemic, moreover, the labour market in Bulgaria was also improving in terms of performance and wage growth. The country saw a decrease in unemployment from 13% in 2013 to 4.3% in 2019 (International Labour Organization, 2023). Overall unemployment in Bulgaria thus had reached its historical minimum by the end of 2019 (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, 2021, p. 43).

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted negatively the country, as employment rates decreased in 2020. The government intervened by adopting measures such as wage subsidies and temporary tax exemptions to mitigate the consequences on the labour market and employment. In early 2021, unemployment peaked at 5.7%, but then fell again to 5.3% later in 2021 (International Labour Organization, 2023). Unemployment rates for the Bulgarian population as a whole in the period 2019 – 2022 are presented in the following table:

Table 1: Bulgaria unemployment rate, 2019 - 2022

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022
Rate	4.23%	5.12%	5.27%	4.40%
Decline/increase from previous year	0.98% decline	0.89% increase	0.15% increase	0.87% decline

Source: Macrotrends, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/BGR/bulgaria/unemployment-rate>

In terms of **youth unemployment**, the 2014-2019 period was also characterised by a notable decrease, marking a significant progress in the aftermath of 2008, with a lowest unemployment rate of 6.9% in 2019 among young people aged 15 – 29. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, halted this positive trend as the figures increased to 8.8% in 2020 and 10.4% in 2021 (Stamatev and Bozev, 2022, p. 30).

2. The impact of the pandemic on 25+ NEETs

The assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on 25+ NEETs (and NEETs in general) in Bulgaria poses significant challenges. This is due to the systemically absent use of the NEETs category in Bulgarian legislation as well as data collection, also resulting in the absence of a national strategy that targets their needs (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023, p. 2). Bulgaria, as one of the countries with already high NEET rates before COVID-19, was among the EU Member states with the less pronounced increase in its NEET rate (European Parliament, 2021, p. 13), which remained relatively stable during the pandemic (European Parliament, 2021, p. 26). The changes in 25+ NEETs rates (in total and by sex) before and during the pandemic can be traced in the table below:

Table 2: Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex; age class: 25 to 29 years (25+ NEET rates); activity and employed status: not employed persons

Sex \ Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total	32.3%	29.6%	26.5%	28.3%	24.0%	22.6%	21.1%	24.1%	23.9%	19.9%
Males	26.5%	24.5%	21.6%	21.9%	16.6%	16.5%	13.9%	16.7%	17.6%	15.2%
Females	38.5%	35.0%	31.6%	35.0%	31.7%	29.1%	28.6%	31.9%	30.5%	24.7%
EU total /27 countries (from 2020)/	21.6%	21.1%	20.4%	19.5%	18.4%	17.7%	17.2%	18.9%	17.4%	15.7%

Source: Eurostat 2023,

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_29_custom_7598611/default/table?lang=en

The figures show that 25+ NEETs rates in Bulgaria have been more or less steadily falling with disruptions in 2020 and 2021 – the two pandemic years, and afterwards started again their downward trend. However, 25+ NEET rates in the country remained above the EU average for the whole 10-year period as indicated in *Table 2*.

Bulgarian legislation, more specifically the Youth Act, refers to the category of ‘young people’, which includes persons aged from 15 to 29 (Stamatev and Bozev, 2022, p. 27), therefore significantly widening the scope of the findings available and the subsequent analysis provided here. Furthermore, the measurement of employment versus unemployment rates in Bulgaria in general is hampered by the divergent methodology and criteria used by the two state institutions mandated with handling such data (the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy’s Employment Agency and the National Statistical Institute), potentially resulting in misleading information that does not account for specific circumstances such as undeclared work or persons unregistered in labour offices (Stamatev and Bozev, 2022, p. 28).

A Eurofound (2021, p. 55) report concludes that key challenges of the Covid-19 crisis for young people in Bulgaria are: 1) educational - the decreased quality of education, estimated to have long-term negative effects due to the prolonged periods of distance learning which have compromised young people’s employment prospects; 2) labour – increase in (long-term) youth unemployment; 3) financial– lower income and limited social protection; and 4) in terms of mental health – deteriorating mental well-being and more pessimistic outlook on the future. Policy reactions did not specifically target young people. Rather, they were ‘covered by general labour market policies as a disadvantaged group’, with a focus on retention in education and transition to employment (Ibid.).

2.1 Labour market

2.1.1 Covid-19 and the Labour Market

Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bulgaria’s labour market was performing well, characterized with increasing employment rates and lower unemployment levels compared to previous years. The pandemic impacted the labour market negatively, and although currently it has largely recovered, its long-term effects are not yet fully known (OECD, 31 March 2023). The Bulgarian labour market has experienced more moderate blows from the Covid-19 crisis compared to other European countries, but the challenges posed by the deepening demographic crisis and acute shortages of skilled labour remain significant. This increases even more employers' interest in hiring foreigners from third countries (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, 2021, p. 92). The country has succeeded in mitigating the impact of the crisis on the labour market (OECD, n.d.). As the situation improved in 2022, ‘the labour market in Bulgaria was characterised by a shortage of staff, growing wages, and falling unemployment’ (EURES, 8 May 2023).

Despite the unfavourable subsequent developments of the external environment, e.g., the war in Ukraine and high inflation rate in European economies, the Bulgarian economy registered very good macroeconomic indicators. GDP growth for 2022 has reached 3.4%, with consumption being the main driving factor behind this development. Real growth in the total final consumption is 5.2%, with individual consumption rising by 4.8% (in 2021 prices) (National Employment Agency, 2023, p. 5) One of the main contributing factors has been the rise in pensions in recent months. Gross fixed capital formation fell by 4.3%, but this decline slowed compared to 2021. This indicator was negatively affected first by the development of the COVID-19 crisis over the last two years and then by the war (Ibid.). Most sectors of the Bulgarian economy registered growth in constant prices of their gross value added (GVA) in 2022. GVA growth in industry was particularly high, reaching 14.4%, while nominal labour productivity growth exceeded 15%. Since the end of the COVID-19 crisis, all economic activities in the service sector have recorded growth in the range between 0.2 and 2.6%. The only sectors to register a decline were agriculture (-0.8%) and construction (-4.5%). The decline in construction is exclusively due to the fall in gross operating surplus. The sector was adversely affected by the dynamics of prices of basic raw materials (metals, etc.), whose increase could not be fully included in the final prices and this led to a reduction in realised profits (Ibid., p. 5- 6).

As a consequence of the good development of the economy, the number of employed persons in 2022 registered a relatively high growth. According to the data from the system of national accounts, the number of employees increased by 1.3% compared to the previous year. This growth is primarily due to the dynamics of employees in the service sector economic activities, where employment increased by 2.9%. According to the Labour Force Survey data, the economic activity rate of the population (age group 15-64) reached 73.6% and increased by 1.6 percentage points compared to 2021 (Ibid. 6). The employment rate for the same age group is 70.4%. Both rates have already exceeded the levels reached in 2019, the last pre-COVID year. The unemployment rate for 2022 is 4.3% or 1 percentage points less than 2021 (Ibid, p. 6). The expectation is that in 2023, the still high inflation and rising interest rates, both globally and in Bulgaria, will lead to a reduction in consumption growth and investment activity in the country. As a result, GDP growth for 2023 is expected to slow to 1.8%. Inflation at the end of 2023 is expected to fall to 5.6% and the annual average to 8.7%. The slowdown in the growth of the Bulgarian economy in 2023 will cause the expected slowdown in the employment growth rate, which is projected to be 0.4%. In 2024, the number of employed persons in the country is projected to reach the level recorded in the pre-crisis year 2019. The unemployment rate is expected to decline to 4.1% (Ibid. p.6-7).

As of 2022, the uncertain economic environment and high inflation have not yet had a significant impact on the labour market in Bulgaria. Compared to 2021, employment and economic activity are increasing, while unemployment and economic inactivity are decreasing. The economically active population aged 15-64 grows by 1.1% compared to 2021 and reaches 3,191.2. The economic activity rate for the

population aged 15-64 increases by 1.6 percentage points on an annual basis and reaches 73.6% in 2022. Both the employed persons and the employment rate are increasing. In 2022, the employed persons aged 15-64 increase by 2.2% on an annual basis to reach 3,053.3. The employment rate for the same age group is 70.4%, 2.3 percentage points higher than in 2021. At the same time, unemployed persons and the unemployment rate are decreasing. In 2022, the number of unemployed persons declined by 17.9% on an annual basis to 140,400. The unemployment rate is 4.3%, decreasing compared to 2021 by 1 percentage point. According to Eurostat, in 2022 the unemployment rate in Bulgaria will remain lower than the EU average (4.3% vs. 6.2% for the EU). Compared to 2021, the number of unemployed persons decreased in all statistical regions, with the most significant decrease in the Severozapaden and Yuzhen tsentralen regions, by 39.6% and 24.9% respectively (Ibid., p. 7).

Youth unemployment (15-29) is also falling. Compared to 2021, the number of unemployed youth decreased by 21.9% to 31.7 thousand and the youth unemployment rate decreased by 2.5 percentage points to 7.9%. The rate of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) aged 15-29 in 2022 is 15.1%, 2.5 percentage points lower than in 2021. According to Eurostat, the level of young people not in employment, education and training in Bulgaria in 2022 was higher than the EU average (15.1% vs. 11.7% for the EU). In 2022, youth unemployment in the country has decreased by 15.5% for youth under 24 and by 18.2% for those under 29 compared to the same period in 2021. The average monthly number of registered unemployed youth under 24 is 7,050 and their share in the total number of unemployed persons is 4.8%. The registered unemployed youth under 29 in 2022 averaged 16,540 persons and their share was 11.2% of the total unemployed persons (Ibid., p. 7-8). In 2023, the priority target groups of the active labour market policy are young people not in employment or education up to the age of 29 and the long-term unemployed (National Employment Agency, 2023, p. 16).

According to Eurostat (2023) data on NEET rates for the age group of 25 to 29 years with 'not employed persons' activity and employed status, Covid-19 seems to have had impact in the worst pandemic years of 2020 and 2021 as NEET rates rose to 24.1% and 23.9% respectively, compared to 21.1% in the pre-pandemic 2019. In 2022, as the pandemic abated, the percentage dropped to 19.9%, slightly below the pre-pandemic level in 2019 (*Table 1*).

2.1.2 Gender imbalance

Variables such as gender, the rural/urban divide, ethnic background, education, health issues and disabilities intervene in the causal relationship between Covid-19 and youth unemployment. The presence of an intersection of multiple vulnerability factors (ethnic minority, gender, disabilities, low-income, single-member households) places families and individuals at even higher risk of the negative effects of COVID-19 pandemic (Eneva, 2021, p. 3; Sterev, 2021, p. 2).

Generally-speaking, Bulgaria belongs to a cluster of countries characterised by a majority of female NEETs compared to male NEETs, which is often attributed to societal factors such as the traditional allocation of family caregiving responsibilities (European Parliament, 2021, p. 25). This trend is overall characteristic of Eastern European states, which in consequence makes female NEETs more vulnerable to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (European Parliament, 2021, p. 27). One of the most vulnerable NEETs subgroups consists of young mothers in need of support (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023, p. 4).

In fact, the pandemic has produced a detrimental effect on the labour market, notably intensifying the pre-existent inequalities, such as the gender pay gap, which is especially significant in more feminised sectors (Eneva, 2022, p. 1), such as ‘services, commerce, administrative assistants and accommodation and food service activities’. As those fields are often less able to transition to remote work, their situation resulted in higher numbers of job losses. The labour force recovery has been more solid for men compared to women. In the former case, unemployment rose from 83,300 to 96,300 in 2020, but in 2021 declined to 93,900. In the latter case, the number of unemployed women in 2019 was less – 60,500, but increased precipitously to 72,300 in 2020, and continued to grow reaching 74,700 in 2021. Low-skilled women are also more prone to unemployment compared to low-skilled men (Ibid., p. 2). In the period from 2020 to 2022, the emergence of employment opportunities for women was restricted to the healthcare sector, while sectors including ‘education, manufacturing, electricity, transport and communication, hospitality, and culture’ saw a notable decline (Ibid. p. 1). Due to the unequal distribution of family caregiving duties, the impact of the October 2021 - March 2022 measures concerning school-aged children severely impacted women primarily responsible for their care, with this impact doubled for those falling under the ‘housewives and unemployed’ category (Ibid., p. 3).

The comparison between the 25+NEET rates for men and women (*Table 3*) supports the general finding that women in Bulgaria predominate in the 25+ NEET group compared to men. Surprisingly, however, while the rates for male 25+NEETs in the pandemic years increase and do not return to the pre-pandemic levels in 2022, the rates for female 25+NEETs show a slight increase in 2020, a small decline in 2021 followed by a sharp decrease to levels lower than the pre-pandemic ones in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023). These figures show that female 25+ NEETs in Bulgaria recovered better than males from the impact of Covid-19 and the related measures. Nevertheless, the disparity between male and female 25+ NEETs remains very high with nearly 10% difference in 2022 (a slight improvement from pre-Covid 2019 when the difference between the two groups was more than 14%).

Table 3: Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and degree of urbanisation (NEET rates); age class: 25 to 29 years; activity and employed status: not employed persons

Year		2019	2020	2021	2022
Degree of urbanisation	Sex				
Total	Total	21.1%	24.1%	23.9%	19.9%
Total	Males	13.9%	16.7%	17.6%	15.2%
Total	Females	28.6%	31.9%	30.5%	24.7%
Cities	Total	14.4%	16.5%	16.6%	13.4%
Cities	Males	8.4%	12.3%	12.8%	11.6%
Cities	Females	20.2%	21.0%	20.4%	15.2%
Towns and suburbs	Total	22.2%	27.4%	27.3%	23.0%
Towns and suburbs	Males	15.7%	16.6%	18.6%	18.9%
Towns and suburbs	Females	29.6%	38.0%	36.0%	27.2%
Rural areas	Total	33.4%	34.9%	34.3%	28.7%
Rural areas	Males	22.3%	24.4%	24.7%	18.6%
Rural areas	Females	46.3%	46.5%	45.4%	40.1%

Source: Eurostat 2023,

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_29_custom_7598611/default/table?lang=en

2.1.3 The Rural/Urban divide

There is a significant rural/urban divide in terms of NEET rates. In 2021, the difference between the NEET rates in cities and rural areas was the largest in Bulgaria among EU States (18.2%) (Eurostat, 2022a). Such a reality suggests that NEETs in rural areas, one of the most disadvantaged groups of young people in the country, have been particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 3 above also shows that rural areas exhibit much higher 25+NEET rates compared to cities, towns and suburbs which supports our finding of a significant rural/urban divide in Bulgaria. However, the figures show that during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021 there has been a slight increase in the already high 25+NEET rates (34.9% and 34.3% respectively), followed by a decrease of 28.7% in 2022 which is below the 2019 rate of 33.4%. The pandemic has led to a more substantial increase of 25+ NEET rates for persons living in cities: from 14.4% in 2019 to 16.5% and 16.6% in 2020 and 2021 and then drops to 13.4% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023).

The ratio of 25+NEET rates for male and female persons in urban and rural areas also favours men over women in all three categories: 'cities', 'towns and suburbs' and 'rural areas'. While in cities the NEETs rate for men in 2019 has been 8.4%, it increased in 2020 (12.3%) and 2021 (12.8%), and then dropped to 11.6%, remaining above the NEETs rate in the pre-pandemic year. There was also an increase of NEET rates in the 25 – 29 age group in towns and suburbs as the rate rose from 15.7% in 2019 to 16.6% and

18.6% in the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, and – surprisingly, having in mind the overall drop of 25+ NEET rates in 2022 – even rose slightly more in the post-pandemic year to 18.9%. In rural areas the rate for male NEETs 25 - 29 increased from 22.3% in 2019 to 24.4% in 2020 and 24.7% in 2021 and then decreased to 18.6% in 2022 – below the level in 2019. Overall, we can conclude that the 25+ NEET rates for men in rural areas remain generally higher than in cities, towns and suburbs, but unlike the latter, the former have recovered below pre-pandemic levels (Ibid.).

Unlike men, the 25+NEET rates for women in cities increased slightly from 20.2% in 2019 to 21.0% in 2020, then slightly dropped to 20.4% in 2021, and finally marked a substantial decrease, falling substantially to 15.2% in 2022. In towns and suburbs, the 25+NEET rate also fell below pre-pandemic levels with 27.2% in 2022 compared to 29.6% in 2019. During the pandemic years it first rose substantially to 38.0% in 2020, then started falling to 36% in 2021. The figures for rural areas followed the same pattern. Starting from 46.3% in 2019, the rate slightly increased in 2020 to 46.5%, then dropped to 45.5% in 2021, and further fell in 2022 to 40.1% (Ibid.). The figures suggest that despite the higher 25+ NEET rates for women compared to men, the recovery in the post-Covid-19 period was more significant for women than men.

NUTS 2 dimension

Table 3 shows is an interesting trend in NEET rates across NUTS 2 regions, indicating the existence of considerable regional disparities. The best performing region in terms of NEET rates (15 – 29 age group) is, understandably, the Yugozapaden region because of the presence of the Capital City of Sofia, with its higher employment compared to the rest of the country, whereas the Severozapaden region is worse off in NEET rates. What is notable is that NEET rates in the post-pandemic 2022 have decreased below their pre-pandemic levels in all regions but Yugozapaden. Interestingly, the Yugozapaden region marks a slight increase not only during the two pandemic years, but also in the following 2022. The ratio between male and female NEETs is more favourable for men compared to women across all regions.

Table 3: Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex and NUTS 2 regions (NEET Rates); age class: from 15 to 29 years

NUTS	Sex \ Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Severozapaden	Total	29.5%	29.9%	33.1%	30.0%	24.4%
Severozapaden	Males	29.1%	27.6%	30.8%	27.2%	24.0%
Severozapaden	Females	29.9%	32.4%	35.5%	32.6%	24.7%
Severen tsentralen	Total	19.8%	16.7%	17.7%	18.7%	16.1%
Severen tsentralen	Males	17.7%	15.4%	14.5%	16.4%	15.8%
Severen tsentralen	Females	22.2%	18.1%	21.4%	21.2%	16.4%
Severoiztochen	Total	20.4%	19.8%	17.8%	18.8%	14.1%

Severoiztochen	Males	13.5%	12.0%	12.4%	14.5%	10.6%
Severoiztochen	Females	27.6%	27.9%	24.0%	23.3%	17.8%
Yugoiztochen	Total	24.4%	23.6%	24.6%	23.8%	21.6%
Yugoiztochen	Males	18.3%	17.6%	20.2%	16.8%	14.5%
Yugoiztochen	Females	30.7%	30.1%	29.1%	30.9%	29.0%
Yugozapaden	Total	8.1%	7.0%	8.7%	9.3%	9.4%
Yugozapaden	Males	6.4%	5.1%	7.6%	7.3%	8.3%
Yugozapaden	Females	9.9%	8.9%	9.9%	11.3%	10.6%
Yuzhen tsentralen	Total	23.0%	19.4%	22.2%	19.9%	15.9%
Yuzhen tsentralen	Males	18.2%	16.5%	17.3%	17.9%	14.6%
Yuzhen tsentralen	Females	27.8%	22.3%	27.6%	22.0%	17.4%

Source: Eurostat, [EDAT LFSE 22](#)

In sum, as Covid-19 affected not only individuals but also economic sectors, healthcare and education, we can conclude that it significantly contributed to the rise of NEET rates during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, and, as the pandemic subsided, these rates dropped to lower values.

2.1.4 Levels of Education

Levels of education have a direct impact on employment (Stamatev and Bozev, 2022, p. 32). According to Eurostat data, the highest unemployment percentage is among the young people with the lowest degrees of education. Conversely, the lowest unemployment percentage is to be found among young people with higher education (Ibid.). The largest group of unemployed persons in Bulgaria continues to be the group without qualifications and specialisation, which includes 102,088 persons on average per month for the period January - September 2021, but recorded a decrease of 26,859 persons compared to the same period of the previous year. The relative share of this group is logically the highest, recording an annual basis increase of 1.8 percentage points and settling at 53.8% in the period January-September 2021 (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, 2021, p. 85).

There has been also a decrease in the number of unemployed persons in the group with primary, elementary and lower education, with an average of 62,622 persons per month in 2022. The parallel with 2021 shows that the absolute number has decreased by 17.4%, while their share has increased by 0.6 percentage points - 42.4% of the total number of unemployed persons in the country. The group of the unemployed without qualifications and specialisation remains large, comprising 81,282 persons, recording a decrease of 17.1% compared to the previous year. The relative share of this group in 2022 in the total number of unemployed is logically the highest, recording an increase of 1.0 percentage points compared to 2021, settling at 55.0% (National Employment Agency, 2023, p. 8).

2.1.5 Ethnic minorities

In Bulgaria, a significant proportion of NEETs comes from vulnerable and disadvantaged subgroups, namely women, ethnic minorities such as the Roma and Turkish population, and disabled persons (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023, pp. 3 - 4).

Measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 included the limited access to and from Roma neighborhoods with additional checkpoints (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020, p. 32). This extended policing resulted in increased job losses, thereby increasing NEET rates among the Roma population and subsequently intensifying their already disadvantaged situation (European Parliament, 2022, p. 130).

2.2 Reskilling and upskilling

The longer periods of school closure in Bulgaria have been assessed as potentially detrimental to long-term employment and skill acquisition (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, 2021, 56).

The COVID-19 pandemic (coupled with the effects of the war in Ukraine) has been found to negatively affect the entry of young persons into the labour market, making the transition between education and professional life 'more insecure, prolonged and fragmented', and the situation in Bulgaria is considered to be among the worst in the EU not only in terms of the detrimental effects on public health, but also on the already unstable political situation. The effects of the measures implemented by the caretaker governments, such as the extended school closures and online learning have been particularly unfavorable to 'their access to quality education, lifelong learning, and the labour market' (Kovatcheva and Hristozova, 2022, pp. 1 - 2).

Although Bulgaria is marked by a relatively high rate of students enrolled in higher education – 36.4% for 20–24-year-olds in 2019, surpassing the 33.4% EU average, this does not directly translate to increased employability; the Bulgarian university education and overall vocational training are considered to be generally too theoretical at the expense of skills useful in the labour market (Kovatcheva and Hristozova, 2022, p. 5). This exacerbates further the existing issue of the gap between skills and labour market needs.

Bulgaria is also one of the countries where the practice of exclusively working remotely is less common – 10% (Eurofound, 2021, p. 2). When it is implemented, it is considered to be deficient in the context of professions that require the development of highly practical skills, such as the medical field. A study on dental education students' satisfaction with remote learning has demonstrated that although the measures to move to online learning were generally positively welcomed by most students and present some advantages, such as better time-management, the majority of students exhibited high levels of

concern regarding the acquisition of quality skills, as the most detrimental effects were 'lack of muscle memory, improvement of fine motor skills and demotivation due to lack of working environment' (Avramova, et al., 2021, p. 112). Another significant concern that was raised concerned the lowered levels of communication with teachers and insufficient feedback from instructors (Ibid.). A more negative assessment was expressed by the students who were closer to the start of their medical practice.

2.3 Mental health and well-being

Eurofound (2021, p. 55) report finds mental health, deteriorating mental well-being and the more pessimistic outlook on the future as one of the key challenges of the Covid-19 crisis for young people in Bulgaria.

One consequence of the pandemic has been the imposition of various restrictions such as lockdowns, social exclusion, staying at home, etc. that has led to radical changes in people's lives and increased levels of stress and anxiety. Families have encountered economic problems and job losses. It has been found that abusive and violent relationships hurt primarily women and children, as they spend more time with the abuser and stay away from relatives and friends from whom they could receive support and protection. The burden of household duties has also affected women as a consequence of the pandemic constrains. School closings are also found to increase stress levels among students. Further complication of the situation has been the reduced access to services and the difficult functioning of protection services. There has been an increase of more than 150% in the number of calls to national specialized hotlines for victims (see Zarkov et al., 2022, pp. 48 - 49).

While the absence of official data on domestic violence at the national level makes it difficult to assess the exact numbers, it has been postulated that the COVID-19 pandemic has considerably intensified pre-existing issues surrounding domestic violence, which represents a problem primarily faced by women and subsequently, female NEETs (Eneva, 2022, p. 5).

Among the subgroups particularly vulnerable during the COVID-19 crisis, and coinciding with a substantial proportion of the NEETs population, is the Roma community (Eneva, 2022, p. 4). Already faced with high levels of discrimination, individuals of Roma ethnicity also experience a significantly lower access to support and healthcare. This situation was worsened by the pandemic context characterised by the securitization approach in relation to migrant and ethnic communities, which only exacerbated their marginalisation, including in relation to their living conditions. (Eneva, 2022, p. 4) This significantly was increasing their risk of infection.

3. Support measures

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated some of the extant youth employment problems (such as the increase in unemployment, including long-term unemployment), which resulted from factors related to the epidemic situation in the country. It also presented new challenges to improving the well-being of young people (Eurofound 2021, p. 55). This situation required policy measures and support to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic.

3.1 Employment and financial support

The budget for supporting unemployed people and jobseekers was generally lower in most Southern and Eastern European countries prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby placing them in a disadvantaged position in crisis situations (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, 2021, p. 54). There were also marked discrepancies in the EU related to the capacity for remote working as remote working in Southern Eastern European countries was a lot less common (Ibid, p 55). This was coupled by issues with internet supply and unfavourable levels of basic and specialized digital skills, which badly impacted the ability of labour markets to accommodate unemployed individuals during crisis situations (Ibid., 55).

In Bulgaria, in line with the wider-EU trend, the large majority of support measures put into place favoured businesses as primary beneficiaries of relief funds. In 2022, a total of 45 measures were implemented, out of which 14 specifically assisted businesses, 7 aimed at preventing social hardship and 6 aimed at protecting workers (Eneva, 2022, p. 3).

The most common measure aimed at supporting businesses was the 60/40 measure which was a type of compensation and employment preservation scheme paid by the National Social Insurance Institute through the state social security budget to employers in sectors affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, it was introduced for the period March - June 2020, but was subsequently extended on several occasions and changes were made that led to a broadening of the scope of employers who can benefit from support and easing the conditions for access to job retention funds. The aim of the measure was to maintain the employment relationship between the employer and the employee for as long as possible in times of economic hardship and to prevent mass lay-offs. From the launch of the 60/40 measure in March 2020 until 9 December 2021 more than BGN 1 654.0 million have been paid. The four sectors with the largest share of paid funds are: manufacturing (41.6%), hotels and restaurant (14.6%), trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (10.5%), transport, storage and post (9.5%) (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, 2021, pp. 89 - 91). The 60/40 measure thus included direct funding of employee salaries in order to keep them at work (Eneva, 2022, p. 3).

Other measures include: 1) 'Retain me' - payment of 24 BGN per day to employees insured on 8 hours and on unpaid leave; 2) 'Employment for you' - employers may receive funds from the state for hiring the unemployed persons and covering the minimum wage and the social security contributions to it; 3) 'Short-term employment' - payment of BGN 290 for each employee whom the employer wants to keep to companies and self-employed the sectors of 'Hotels and restaurants', 'Tourism' and 'Transport'. The 'Short-term employment' measure can be combined with the 60/40 measure and so for the three sectors the state support becomes in effect 80/20 (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, 2021, p. 91). There were also emergency funds offered to the sector of culture, both for employees and self-employed people (Eneva, 2022, p. 3). Given the high proportions of female NEETs, it is notable that there was no provision for Covid-19 measures addressing gender-based discrimination on the grounds that they were already handled by prior legislation such as the Labour Code (Eneva, 2022, p. 4). Although these measures did not exclusively target 25+ NEETs, and youth unemployment more broadly, they had an indirect effect on job retention and keeping general unemployment rates at bay.

In the 2019-2022 period, fiscal policy was also countercyclical in nature and helped to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic, both in terms of increased government spending to support consumption, employment and investment, as well as through increased net transfers to households. This initial support, while useful, was considered by the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria as too low, as it constituted one of the lowest support packages an EU member state has provided to its population. While this deficiency was partially compensated around the end of 2020 and in 2021, its initial delays were considered to have had detrimental effects (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, 2021, p. 45).

The Bulgarian government also 'provided additional funding of BGN 20 million (approximately €10 million) for municipalities to expand their social support services and cover more beneficiaries (including persons with disabilities)' (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, p. 30). In response to Covid-19, amendments to the Bulgarian Labour Code were made that 'oblige employers to grant annual paid leave, upon request, to employees including pregnant women, in-vitro patients, mothers of children up to 12 years of age or children with disabilities, and employees with a certain degree of disability.' (European Union Agency for Fundamental Human rights, 2020, p. 20).

Childcare compensations were provided to alleviate some of the responsibility in result of the school closing because of the pandemic. This measure targeted people unable to work from home and aimed at enabling parents to look after their children. Families were also supported by another contribution – a one-off grant for incidental expenses for families facing financial difficulties. This support measure was 'intended for parents who had used up their paid leave and had taken at least 20 days of unpaid annual

leave, as well as for cases where one or both parents were unemployed but were not receiving any benefits. Under these conditions they could receive a one-off grant of BGN 375' (Eneva 2022, p. 3). In Bulgaria, these measures are of relevance to NEETs due to the majority of them being women.

3.2 Reskilling and upskilling support

There is not much data on upskilling and reskilling during the COVID-19 aimed at 25+ NEETs. Generally speaking, 'the participation in upskilling and reskilling measures among the adult population is very low'. Despite efforts at development of digital skills, 'Bulgaria's level of basic digital skills (29 % of individuals possess basic digital skills against a Union average of 57 %) remains among the lowest in the Union' (Terziev, 2020a, p. 62).

According to a UNICEF report (cited on the Bulgarian National Radio, 2022), there is a serious lack of basic job skills and digital literacy among young people in Bulgaria. Nearly half of the young people (48%) lack the basic skills needed for secondary education. This reflects on their employability and accounts for the higher NEET rates in the country.

We also could not find vocational training programmes and certifications designed specifically for 25+ NEETs.

3.3 Mental health support

The extant data on mental health and mental health support are very limited. Where available, they target the general population of the country. We were unable to find data focusing on the provision of mental health support to 25+ NEETs during the pandemic. On this basis, conclusive data on 25+ NEETs could not be extracted and analysed.

4. Conclusion

Estimating in detail the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on 25+ NEETs in Bulgaria is a major challenge due to the limited availability of reliable information and sources regarding this particular age group of NEETs. In terms of data collection, we acknowledge the fact that data are either lacking, general, inconclusive or limited to general unemployment, or in some instances – to youth unemployment. This narrows the scope of our conclusions and calls for further study of the impacts of Covid-19 on 25+ NEETs groups both by institutional stakeholders and research organisations. However, looking at youth in general, or concentrating on vulnerable groups, which have been found to constitute a substantial part of NEETs, can give us some insights into the post-pandemic situation of young people on the labour market.

Despite these limitations of publicly available information, especially as regards anti-Covid-19 measures and post-pandemic recovery policies targeting 25+NEETs, Eurostat presents valuable data on post-pandemic 25+ NEET rates, compared to the pre-pandemic and pandemic levels. As the figures show, these rates have risen in the two pandemic years, followed by a recovery in 2022. Still, differences between the rates for men and women, between cities, towns and rural areas and across regions remain substantial.

We could not find support measures tailored specifically to the situation of 25+NEETs in the context of Covid-19 and post-pandemic recovery. Existing measures of support were rather general, aiming to keep businesses working in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and thus retaining jobs and curbing unemployment.

Implementing public policies is a way to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. This could be done through the use of active market policies to create temporary employment, targeting the most affected and vulnerable groups on the labour market and including them in employment. What employment programmes will function most effectively largely depends on various factors such as the specifics of the target groups, the institutional environment, etc. (Stoyanova et al, p. 31). A more focused approach on 25+ NEETs as a subgroup in policy and programme design may show more promising results of post-Covid-19 recovery and further lowering of NEET rates.

Summing up, a targeted, data-based policy process is needed, which takes into account the specific needs of young people neither in employment, nor in education or training in the 25 – 29 age group, as well as the different conditions of rural areas, towns and cities, and regions, in order to alleviate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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