

Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on 25+ NEETs

COUNTRY REPORT – SLOVAKIA

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2023

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

Please cite as: Polačková, Z., Blizman Servilová, V. (2023) Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on 25+ NEETs. Country Report – Slovakia. Slovak Business Agency. Lost Millennials – Transnational Research Network for the Evaluation of Initiatives Targeting 25+ NEETs. Available at <https://lostmillennials.eu>

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](#)).

The Lost Millennials project is funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment.

Implemented by:



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1. Introduction

The Government of the Slovak Republic declared a state of emergency due to the threat of uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 virus on 12 March 2020 and has been gradually taking measures to prevent its spread.

The situation was complicated by the change of government resulting from the elections held in February 2020, with a new Slovak Government appointed on 21 March 2020, shortly after the declaration of the emergency.

With the declaration of the state of emergency, a number of measures were introduced such as the closure of schools, the introduction of a mandatory 14-day quarantine upon return from abroad, a ban on meetings, the closure of international airports and the restriction of international transport to supply only or the restriction of entry of foreigners into the territory of the Slovak Republic (ÚVZ SR, 2020). The measures were released in five phases, with children returning to school in stages from 1 June 2020, with participation being voluntary and a parallel, distance learning form of education running until the end of the school year (30 June 2020).

Thanks to the rapid and strict adoption of anti-pandemic measures, the first wave of pandemics (in Slovakia it lasted between March and June 2020) was managed well, keeping both the number of infected people and the number of deaths low. The atmosphere of solidarity and mutual support and the common effort to defeat the pandemic also played an important role.

However, this cannot be said of the second wave. This ran from August 2020 to May 2021 and involved a large number of infected people, a large number of deaths, a collapsing health system and rising tensions in society. The management of the pandemic was mismanaged, and planning, routing and even testing were neglected. During the second wave, many chaotic political decisions were made and measures were inappropriately communicated to the public, which significantly increased tensions (Pažitný et al,2022).

The third wave ran from September 2021 to May 2022, despite the fact that a vaccine was available, the situation was still dire with a large number of casualties and a surge in hospitals. The politicization of the pandemic and vaccination was also a major problem during this period, the strong anti-vax scene, which was well established also among the political elites, the high level of activity of the dis-information media spreading hoaxes was also a major problem and had a significant impact on the willingness of the population to be vaccinated.

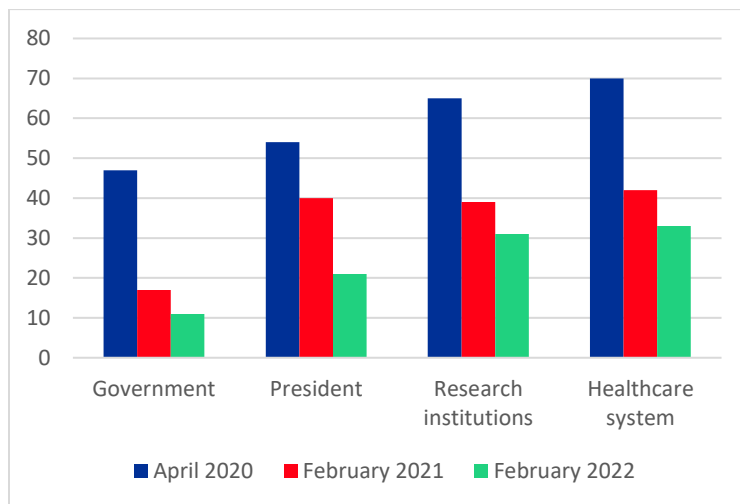
The end of the third wave was overlapped by the crisis caused by the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the large number of refugees from Ukraine who were entering Slovakia from the end of February 2022.

The unprecedented number of refugees arriving in Slovakia made it absolutely impossible to implement most of the anti-pandemic measures. The inability to comply with the anti-pandemic measures also on the part of the governmental authorities encouraged the activity of the anti-vax and anti-pandemic scene and the activism of the disinformation media, which questioned the pandemic and politicised and polarised the debate in a deceptive way.

One of the extremely controversial anti-pandemic measures was the quarantine of Roma settlements. This was carried out by physically cordoning off selected Roma settlements, with people not being allowed to leave the settlements and not being able to provide for their basic living needs. The army ensured compliance with the quarantine measures and provided supplies, which made the solution even more unacceptable. What was absurd about the solution was not only the physical fencing off of selected Roma settlements, but especially the leaving of infected and uninfected together, which did not prevent the spread of the disease in the Roma community (e.g. in the village of Bystrany, a locality with a population of 2200 inhabitants, was closed). The implementation of the above measure has generated a wide human rights debate and demonstrated the attitudes of the majority towards the Roma minority, with the Roma often considered as second-class citizens by the majority.

In addition to the well-known effects of the pandemic on the mental health of the population and their economic and social stability, one of the serious negative externalities of the pandemic has been a marked decline in trust in all governmental, public, and scientific institutions (see in Figure 1).

Figure 1. Trust in institutions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (%)



Source: SAV, 2022.

The pandemic was accompanied by three persistent lockdowns and one of the longest school closures in Europe (28 weeks during the calendar year 2020). Although financial assistance from the state began

to be implemented shortly after the outbreak of the pandemic, many individuals, often the most vulnerable, who were working in precarious conditions, fell through the safety net.

A negative impact that would only become apparent in the long term was the poor participation of children from marginalized backgrounds in education. According to analysts from the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports, 52,000 (7.5%) primary and secondary school students were not engaged in distance education during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and nearly 128,000 (18.5%) students were not on-line learning. The situation was particularly critical in schools with a high proportion of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (primarily kids from marginalized Roma communities) and in special primary schools, where the proportion of non-engaged and non-on-line learners was several times higher than the average for other schools (Vitáloš, 2021).

2. The impact of the pandemic on 25+ NEETs

The topic of the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic in Slovakia has been addressed in several scientific and analytical studies. These address both the impact of the pandemic on the labour market and selected segments of the economy. Of course, most studies are devoted to the impact on the health situation.

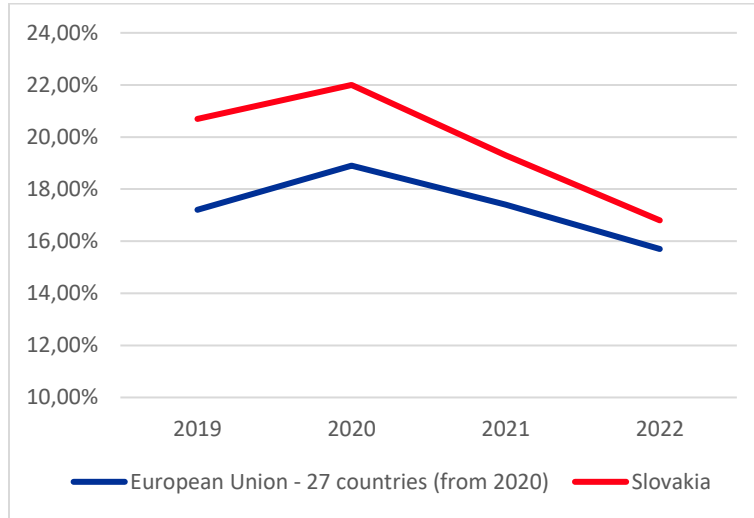
However, in the spectrum of published documents, none has been identified that specifically addresses young people aged 25+, or young people in the NEET situation. The NEET 25+ group has always been part of a larger category, so it is almost impossible to abstract findings specifically relating to NEET 25+.

As an example, the identified study focusing on the attitudes of young people affected by the COVID 19 pandemic also specifically describes the group of young people aged 25-29, but not with a specific focus on NEETs.

Based on the statistical data, the proportion of NEET increased by 1.3% between 2019 and 2020 (from 20.7% in 2019 to 22% in 2020) but fell below pandemic levels in 2021 (the rate reached 19.3% in 2021) and continued to fall thereafter. Slovakia's trend follows the trends of the European Union averages, with a faster decline in NEET 25+ in Slovakia compared to the European Union average in the year-on-year comparison of 2021 and 2022 (see in Figure 2). This trend can be explained by the demographic situation, as from 2021 the number of young people entering the labour market is lower than the number of retirees leaving the labour market, and the labour market in Slovakia is starting to suffer from a significant shortage of available labour (Štefánik et al, 2021)

Similar trends can be observed for other population groups; the registered unemployment rate in Slovakia in 2022 has returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 2. Young people neither in employment nor in education and training, age 25-29 (%)



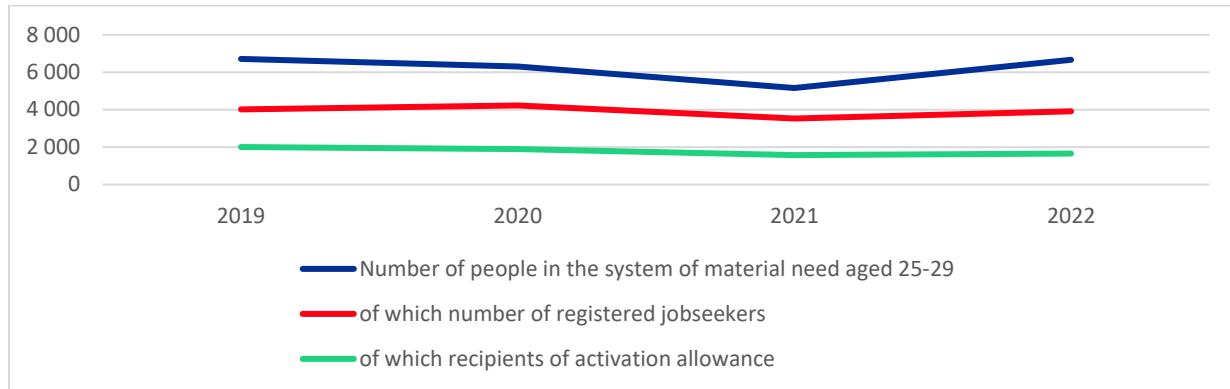
Source: Eurostat EDAT_LFSE_20__custom_6690448.

In the context of the economic situation, in addition to the impact of the pandemic on registered unemployment, it is also important to monitor the data on material deprivation, which includes individuals who live in the situation of greatest poverty, are in most cases outside the labour market and can be considered the most disadvantaged group.

In the context of developments during the pandemic period, it can be noted that the number of recipients of material need benefits fell during the pandemic period. In the comparison between 2019 and 2020, the decrease was in the range of about 6%, but in the comparison between 2020 and 2021 it was already 12%. In 2022, the figures returned to pre-pandemic levels. The reasons for this development are certainly not to be found in the higher labour market participation of people on material need benefits, but they can be found in the payment of several types of financial assistance to people in the district, which were aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic.

However, the values that have failed to return to pre-pandemic levels are in payment of the so-called activation allowance, which is paid to recipients of material need benefits for participation in activation programmes, especially activation implemented in the form of work for the municipality of 20 hours per week. For the most disadvantaged, this is usually the only way of officially increasing their income from the material need benefit, so it is to be argued that the situation of people facing high levels of poverty has worsened since the pandemic.

Figure 3. People aged 25-29 in the system of material need (in number of people)

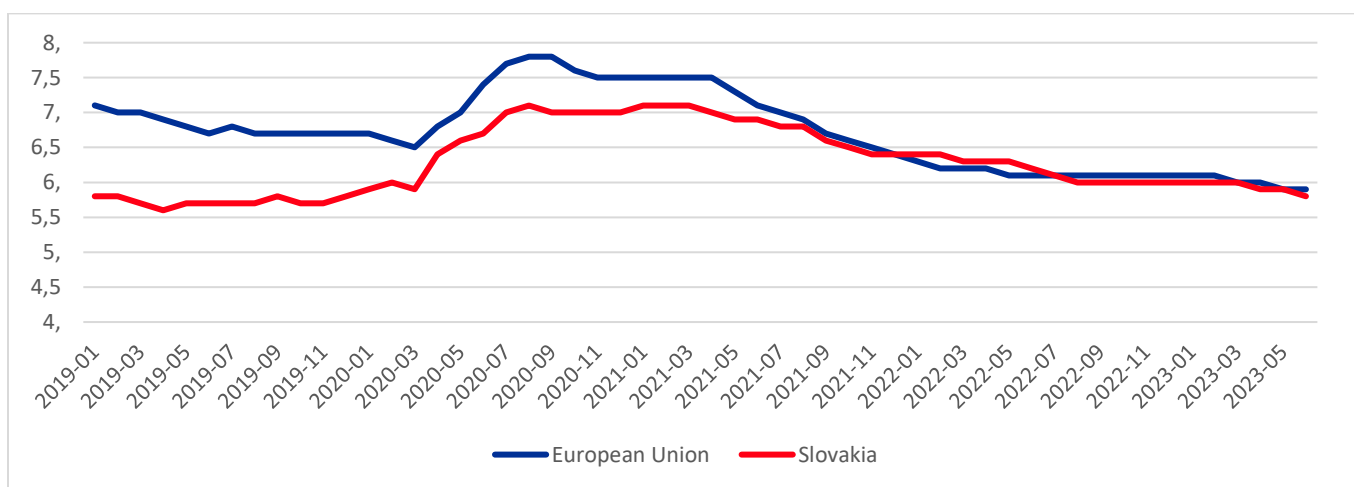


Source: Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family.

2.1 Labour market

Slovakia entered the period of the COVID 19 pandemic with historically low levels of registered unemployment. In March 2020 the rate of registered unemployment reached 5.9%, which was half a percentage point lower than the average in EU countries. Further developments followed the trends in other countries, with an increase recorded from the following month onwards, and the value peaked in August 2020, when the rate of registered unemployment in Slovakia rose to 7.1%. With small deviations, it remained at this level until May 2021, when the values started to fall imperceptibly, and by the end of 2021 it had almost reached the pre-pandemic level (6%).

Figure 4. Unemployment rate (%)



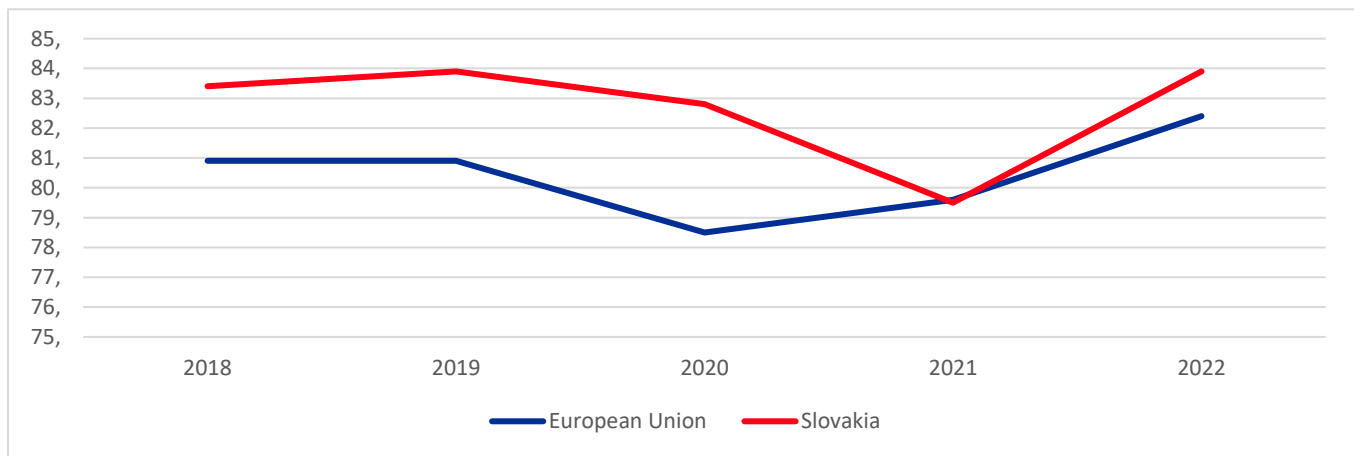
Source: Eurostat, EI_LMHR_M_custom_89629.

In the early stages of the first wave of the pandemic, the registered unemployment rate rose mainly due to the return of people who had been abroad for a long time. Later, the registered unemployment rate was affected by people working in precarious and precarious conditions (especially people working on performance contracts and employed through other non-standard contracts).

The entry of young graduates into the labour market was also complicated. Their entry was not supported both by active labour market policies, the implementation of which was severely paralysed at the time of the pandemic (see Section 3 for more details), and by the demand side of the labour market, as employers were opening significantly fewer jobs. In May 2018 Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (COLSAF) registered an inflow of 26 811 vacancies, while in May 2019 it was only 22 074. The number continued to fall in the following period, in May 2020 it was only 11 281 vacancies, approximately 42% compared to 2018 (official statistics of COLSAF).

The slowdown in recruitment was also reflected in the decline in graduate employment, which, although it had already occurred in Slovakia in 2020, did not become more pronounced until 2021, a one-year delay compared to the average for EU countries, which had already begun to recover by then. The difference between the employment rates of graduates in 2019 and 2021 is 3.4 p.p., with the employment rate of graduates in Slovakia reaching 83.9% in 2019 and 79.5% in 2021.

Figure 5. Employment rates of recent graduates (%)



Source: Eurostat tps00053\$defaultview.

The roll-out of pandemic mitigation measures has also been problematic (see Section 3 for more info). Although aid was deployed relatively quickly, a number of groups fell through the aid criteria in the early stages, particularly people working in precarious conditions and people in freelance occupations, especially in the creative industries and sports sectors. In the case of HORECA, which is clearly one of the

most affected sectors, the inadequate and very administratively demanding application process has also been criticised, resulting in a significant decline in the number of jobs in the HORECA sector. Indeed, in March 2020, 42% of all newly registered unemployed were from this sector. Nevertheless, the share of the HORECA sector in unemployment decreased to 13% in May 2020. We note, however, that in spite of the partial re-opening of restaurants in May 2020, 14% of them were not expecting to re-open at all because of bankruptcy (Kahanec and Martíšková, 2020)

The significant impact on the HORECA sector is also confirmed by an analysis of the year-on-year comparison of financial statements of enterprises in individual sectors by NACE categorisation (Finstat 2022), which identified the largest number of enterprises with a year-on-year drop in sales in the HORECA sector.

In the context of the automotive industry, which is the backbone of the Slovak economy, a decline in production was also identified. This was primarily due to problems in the supply chains of European companies, which are heavily dependent on supplies from third countries. Slovak factories were also significantly affected by production disruptions, but the financial losses were not reflected in mass layoffs, but rather in temporary production shutdowns, which also caused shutdowns in their local supply networks.

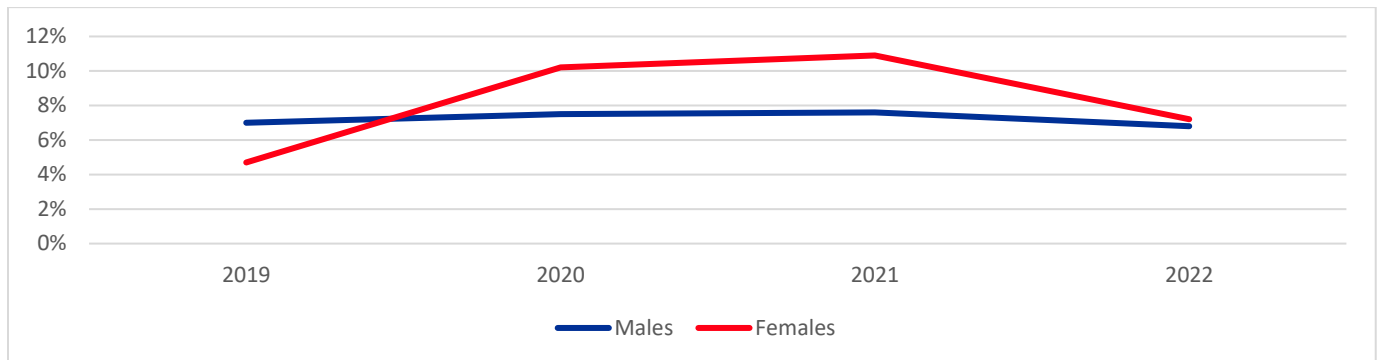
On the other hand, the pandemic also brought a higher need for employees in the fields of health and social care, information technology and digital communications. Of these areas, NEETs 25+ were best placed in social care, where they filled low-skilled jobs in institutionalised social service provision. However, this statement is not statistically visible; rather, these are reported examples of good practice where the pandemic, absurdly, has brought job opportunities for people far from the labour market (including people from marginalised Roma communities), who have taken up jobs that other groups were not interested in. However, it should be noted that there have not been many such cases and the numbers are in the tens rather than the thousands.

2.1.1 Gender and gender differences

In terms of the gender division of young people and the impact of the pandemic on employment, it can be noted that the impacts were more substantial for women than men, with only a marginal year-on-year change for men. Registered unemployment for women aged under 29 was in Slovakia higher than for men and increased substantially faster in the year-on-year comparison between 2019 and 2020.

This can be interpreted as an unequal sharing of household care responsibilities, so women were more likely to be forced to give up employment to provide childcare activities for children who stayed at home due to school closures.

Figure 6. Youth unemployment rate in Slovakia, age 25-29, by sex (%)

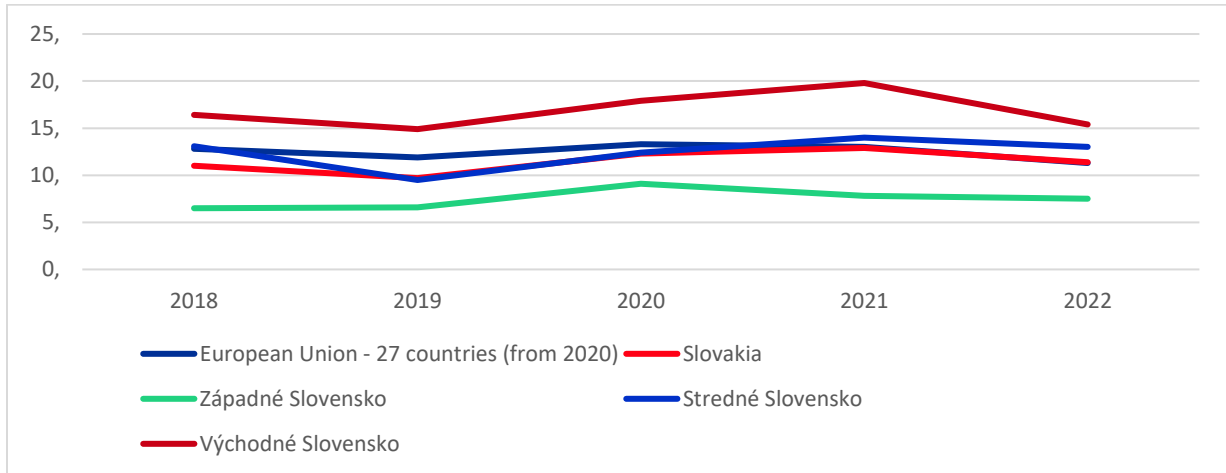


Source: Eurostat YTH_EMPL_110.

2.1.2 Rural vs. Urban

There is no relevant data or relevant research on the rural-urban divide. Given the fact that Slovakia is a country characterised by high regional disparities, we consider regional divisions to be a more appropriate division, and it can be observed that the highest rates are traditionally reached in Eastern Slovakia, while Western Slovakia reaches lower rates than Slovakia and the European Union average.

Figure 7. Youth unemployment rate, age 15-29 (%)



Source: Eurostat yth_empl_110\$defaultview.

2.1.3 Disabilities and health issues

The employment rate of people with disabilities in Slovakia is relatively low compared to the EU average, with about 10% of people with disabilities working in sheltered employment, i.e. in sheltered workshops and social enterprises of labour integration (Polačková, 2018).

Protected employment in Slovakia is subsidised by means of active labour market policy. Paradoxically, the only measures that continued to be implemented during the pandemic were only the payment of

allowances to support sheltered workshops and work integration social enterprises. From this perspective, subsidized jobs for people with disabilities were not at risk. On the other hand, data on how many employees of sheltered workshops and work integration social enterprises with disabilities are in age 25-29 is not available, but based on observation it can be assumed that the majority are older employees.

As with other groups, the pandemic has made it significantly more difficult for new employees to enter the labour market; given the overall marginalisation of people with disabilities, it can be assumed that this group of young people has not even attempted to enter the labour market.

In the context of young people with disabilities, the impacts of the pandemic were dramatically more severe in terms of their daily lives, mental health and access to health care. Due to the collapsing health system (especially in the second and third phases of the pandemic), people with health disadvantages (as well as other groups) were not provided with the necessary health care, which meant that many health problems were neglected. In the case of people with disabilities living in institutionalised facilities, the pandemic period also meant a loss of all contact, as visits to these facilities were forbidden, resulting in a loss of physical contact with family, with dramatic consequences for their mental as well as physical health.

2.1.4 Parents' perspective on education

Slovakia is one of the countries in which the total duration of distance education during the calendar year 2020 was 28 weeks, according to UNESCO statistics, only two countries in Europe had schools closed for longer (Czech Republic and Romania) (Vasiljic, 2021). This had a significant impact on the employment of women, mothers who had to stay at home with their children (see in Figure 6). In the case of young people, parents, who are in the NEET situation, although the distance education of their children did not have a major impact on their employment, it did significantly endanger the children, who usually did not have access to the necessary technical equipment and their housing conditions often did not even provide opportunities for education at home.

In the context of the pandemic, the issue of single-parent households has also become more widely discussed. Although this has not yet been quantified in a significant way, the topic has captured significant attention from the media, foundations as well as academic debate.

2.1.5 Precarious labour conditions

The quality of work in Slovakia shows low values in international comparison (Košč at al, 2023). People often work long hours, shift and night work account for a significant proportion, and wages are low. People also often work in a kind of grey zone, where part of the work is carried out under labour relations (usually through agreements on work performed, where the employer has no obligations towards the

employee) and part is carried out outside labour relations, in informal economy. In the event of redundancies, these workers are the most vulnerable, as the experience of the pandemic confirms.

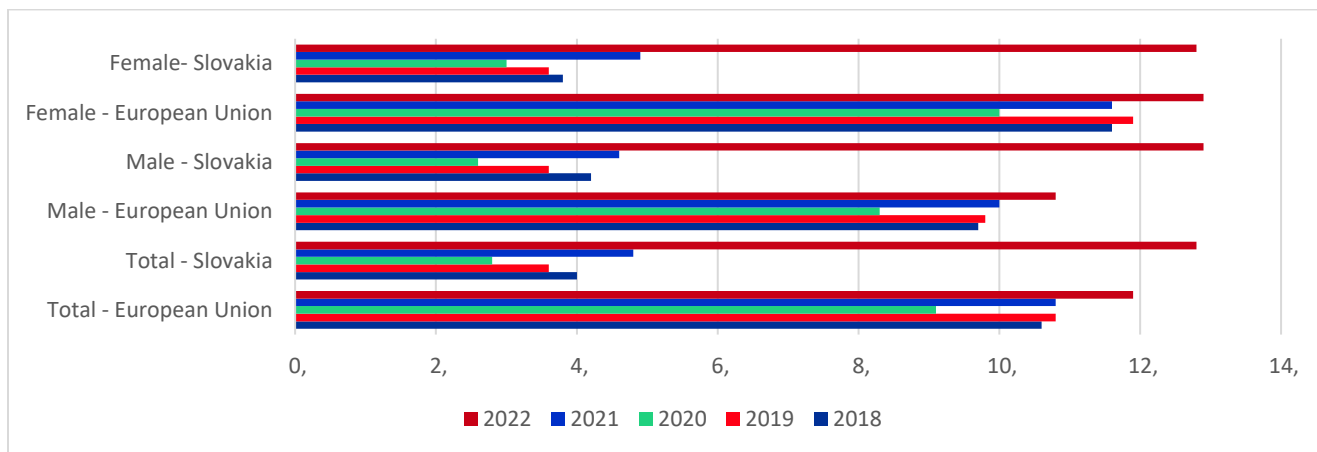
2.2 Reskilling and upskilling

Compared to other EU countries, Slovakia is one of the countries with a low participation of adults in education. The low participation is related to the established practice of acquiring formal education in schools before entering the labour market, which goes hand in hand with a monotonous and limited offer of learning opportunities.

The change in the reporting methodology (a wide range of activities beyond upskilling and reskilling started to be counted) implemented since 2022 has closed the gap between the EU and Slovak average, but the increase in participation of young people in the NEET category is still questionable.

Compared to the EU average, it is interesting to note, in the context of general statistics on adult participation in education, that there are no significant gender differences in Slovakia and that the participation rate of women in further education programmes is comparable to or only marginally higher than that of men (see in Figure 8).

Figure 8. Adult participation in learning in the past four weeks (%)



Source: Eurostat sdg_04_60.

Research suggests (Habodászová and Studená, 2021) that the main space where adult learning is provided is employment. In the case of people who are outside the labour market, the main entity that provides training opportunities for this group is the social and family labour offices, which delivers upskilling/reskilling through active labour market policies. Given the fact that the implementation of active labour market policy was significantly paralysed during the pandemic period (see reasons in

section 3), it can be argued that the group of people in the NEET 25+ category were left without further education opportunities during the pandemic.

The limited educational opportunities were confirmed by the findings of ACTLY (in Adamčíková and Závorská, 2022), which, based on the results of a representative survey, found that about 18% of respondents agreed or rather disagreed with the statement about improved opportunities for education and personal development during the pandemic, while about 28% of respondents disagreed or somewhat disagreed.

However, in terms of the impact of the pandemic, there was a positive impact on improving digital skills, which according to the same survey was reported by about 27% of the respondents, while on the opposite spectrum (i.e. the pandemic did not contribute to improving digital skills) about 11% of the respondents.

2.3 Mental health and well-being

The COVID 19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on the country's economic performance, but the mental health impacts on the population have been just as severe, and these are manifested in the long term.

The WHO states that the impact of the pandemic on mental health can be seen in three categories: the direct effects of the outbreak (fear, anxiety), the indirect effects of preventive measures (isolation, loss of routine, unavailability of therapies) and the indirect effects of socio-economic decline (debt, unemployment, poverty, social exclusion).

According to the survey "How are you, Slovakia?" in May 2020, more than a quarter of the population experience a deterioration in their mental health due to COVID 19, and 48% of respondents experience occasional or frequent feelings of depression (SAV, 2020). Restriction of social contacts and isolation particularly affect young people under the age of 30, who suffer from increased nervousness, anxiety, anger and loneliness. Almost half of the respondents (48.2%) said that they experience depressive feelings during the pandemic (SAV, 2021).

The results of the same survey also suggest that, in terms of mental health, the pandemic was best managed by the elderly. They are more accustomed to limited social contact and, in principle, their economic security was also not threatened, as the old-age pension continued to be paid regardless of the situation.

The topic of mental health was largely neglected, even tabooed in many cases, before the pandemic. In 2018, about 15% of the population (about 625,000 people) suffered from mental illness. However, more than 80% of people in Slovakia aged 15 to 64 suffering from anxiety disorders or alcohol dependence,

and almost 70% of those suffering from depressive disorders, received no professional care. (Adamčíková and Závarska, 2022).

A significant challenge to the provision of better mental health care is the lack of support networks (whether in the form of psychiatric or psychological care) as well as the significant stigma and taboo surrounding the topic.

During the pandemic, crisis helplines also experienced an increase in the number of calls related to the topic of COVID-19 pandemic and its direct and indirect consequences. “Ipečko”, a psychological counselling centre for young people, saw a 5-fold increase in contacts compared to the previous year. The second most frequent topic of conversation, after loneliness, is the topic of thoughts of suicide. Compared to the period before the pandemic, the number of these conversations has increased more than 5 times (the counselling centre recorded 8 thousand conversations regarding the topic of suicidal thoughts and 3 thousand conversations regarding life-threatening crisis situations) (Gogova. 2021)

It can also be assumed that the most devastating impacts can be observed in relation to the group of school-age children and young people who were unable to cope with the situation, and there was no appropriate rescue mechanism to help them cope with the situation.

Although we do not yet have accurate statistics on the mental health impacts of the pandemic, through anecdotal chatter data it is possible to conclude that the trend has been identical to other countries, e.g. in the Czech Republic, the first wave of the pandemic caused an increase in mental illness, from 20% to 30%, and the risk of suicide increased threefold (MZ ČR, 2020).

The pandemic has highlighted the need for a debate on mental health as well as the absence of a support system, which in Slovakia is mainly provided by NGOs and funded through donations from individuals and corporations.

In addition to individual feelings of fear about the future, financial insecurity, and the health of themselves or their loved ones, the politicisation of the pandemic and the issue of vaccination has also had a significant impact on the state of mental health. The issue of vaccination has significantly divided society, with politicians and the opinion media contributing significantly to the polarisation.

3. Support measures

3.1 Employment and financial support

The core package of support initiated by the central government aimed at helping companies, employees and tradesmen was implemented in Slovakia through the ‘First Aid’ scheme. The scheme was

implemented from April 2020 as a combination of support for short-time working and wage subsidies. According to data from December 2021, the scheme has supported roughly one-third of jobs in the economy with more than €2.2 billion (Baliak et al. 2021).

More than 71% of the support has been spent through wage subsidies for employers (measure 3B) and self-employed workers (measure 2) whose sales have fallen. Around 26 % of the support was used through support for short-time working (Measures 1 and 3A). The remaining 2% was drawn by self-employed workers who were not eligible to draw support through Measure 2 and one-person Ltd. companies (Belin and Veselkova, 2022).

Although some studies find that more productive firms with a higher share of wage costs and previous experience with state aid participated in the First Aid scheme (Lalinsky and Pal, 2020), which may bias the results of the evaluation, other studies, even after controlling for the risk of the impact of firm incentives, have found that the scheme was successful and supported firms failed at a much lower rate than unsupported firms (Belin and Veselkova, 2022), and the extent of assistance was adequate during the first phase of the pandemic (Kahanec and Martišková, 2020).

In addition to 'First Aid', the deferral and remission of employers' and self-employed workers' levy obligations was an important complementary component of job retention support. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Slovak Republic proceeded to amend the Social Insurance Act in order to allow deferment and remission of employer and self-employed persons' contributions as early as March 2020. This measure was subsequently extended for several months.

Even if in the majority of cases employees with such work agreements are part of the social insurance system, employers are not obliged to compensate for their wages if they do not have the work for them. To compensate these workers, in mid-April 2020 the government announced that those who have a valid work agreement but cannot perform their work are entitled to a monthly subsidy of 210 EUR provided by the state as a compensation for the wage loss.

In relation to the target group NEET 25+, there are no data on the impact of the implemented assistance on this group, we do not know whether the implemented assistance served as a prevention of falling into the NEET situation, or whether, thanks to the implemented assistance, employers were interested in creating jobs for NEET 25+.

The data regarding NEETs 25+ are also not available in relation to the other two aid schemes, which were the pandemic aid implemented by the Ministry of Culture for people active in the creative industries and the pandemic aid implemented by the Ministry of Economy for the HORECA sector.

The discussion of the amount is also important; Slovakia spent less resources than most developed countries on fighting the pandemic. For example, based on International Monetary Fund estimates (IMF 2021), additional spending outside the health sector in Slovakia was 4.7% of GDP, while in the Czech Republic 6.6%, France 8.2%, Germany 13.6% and Japan up to 14.6% of GDP was spent on aid.

The support has been increased and broadened as of October 1, 2020. The main changes were that self-employed with contemporaneous employment contracts could receive first-aid financial support (helping especially the culture and sports sectors), the maximum support to employees increased from 880 EUR to 1,100 EUR, and the support to self-employed increased by 50%. A specific instrument was introduced for the HORECA sector (support 1.4% to 10% of revenues, depending on the decrease of revenues (compared to 2019), if the decrease is at least 40%) (Kahanec and Martišková, 2020).

In the context of the measures implemented to support the entry and retention of NEET25+ in the labour market, it should be noted that the pandemic has significantly changed the functioning of the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Offices. The clear focus on the disbursement of support under the "First Aid" scheme has paralysed the implementation of any further active labour market measures, and it can be stated that for more than a year active labour market policy, in terms of the implementation of the spectrum of support measures, has not been implemented. In the context of employment support for NEET 25+, it is not possible to cite any measure that has been implemented at a systemic level during the duration of the pandemic.

In view of the anti-pandemic measures, the implementation of activation through work for the municipality, which can be considered as a frequently used tool to increase official income in the NEET 25+ group who are recipients of the material need benefit, was also stopped. However, the income of people in material need was supplemented through various one-off allowances, which were not paid systematically and there is no data on the number of beneficiaries in the NEETs category, possibly on the number of the beneficiaries broken down by age.

For people who contributed to social insurance (ergo were employed), there was a so-called pandemic sickness benefit payment introduced, which covered the care of school-age children. The allowance was thus in many cases paid to people up to the age of 29, but bypassed the category of young people in a NEET situation, as they are not contributing to the social insurance scheme.

In December 2021, thanks to REACT-EU funds, a call for projects aimed at integrating inactive people into the labour market was launched with a total value of 20 million. 82 entities, mostly NGOs, received support from that call. Despite the fact that the creators of the call foresee a high participation of NEETs 25+, the target group of the call was not explicitly aimed at NEETs. The participation rate of NEETs 25+

and the impact of the call on this group is not yet known, as most of the projects will only be completed in November 2023.

In response to the experience with the disbursement of the First Aid programme and the need for a permanent job protection tool, the Law on Support during Shortened Working Hours (so called KurzArbeit) was adopted with effect from 1 March 2022 (MoLSA, 2022). This can be seen as a significant change in legislation in the field of social security for employees, which was initiated on the basis of the experience with the pandemic. However, this instrument only applies to employers and employees, therefore bypassing the NEETs group

3.2 Reskilling and upskilling support

The support measures implemented during the pandemic focused primarily on preventing job losses and preventing increases in unemployment.

On the basis of the available information, it can be argued that in the field of education and training, support measures focused mainly on the provision of formal education, with opportunities for further education and reskilling and upskilling initiatives lagging significantly behind.

In the employee environment, a number of employers have sought to use the time of the lockdown to implement a range of online training programmes in which employees have participated, either compulsorily or voluntarily. However, this only applied to people who were in an employment relationship and only to a select segment of employers/companies.

Young people in the NEET situation most often benefit only from training provided by the labour, social and family offices or by training provided by NGOs. However, this offer was non-existent during the pandemic, so it can be argued that young people in NEET situations were left without any opportunities during the ongoing pandemic.

The main exceptions were the localities where a community centre is set up and run through the ESF-funded national project 'Community-based Professional Capacity Building'. These are mainly municipalities with the presence of marginalised Roma communities, and the centres operate directly in the marginalised Roma communities. Given the structure and situation of marginalised Roma communities in Slovakia, it can be argued that the community centres work with young people who are often in a NEET situation. These community centres have continued to operate during the pandemic and have provided a wide range of support as well as educational opportunities.

An example of a supportive measure is the Banská Bystrica Regional Municipality's initiative called Space. Thanks to the support of the European Social Fund (ESF), a network of seven centres has been established in the region, each offering a comprehensive range of development, support, information

and advice services in one place. In addition to careers advice and coaching, the centres also offer non-formal education and experiential learning programmes for different groups of young people, not excluding NEETs 25+. The project started to be implemented in August 2021 and has largely taken into account the experience gained during the pandemic.

3.3 Mental health support

Despite the pandemic's fatal impact on mental health, the positive impact is that the full force of the pandemic has exposed the absence of an emergency system, the low availability of specialist help in mental health care, and drawn attention to the problem.

During the pandemic, there was more discussions about the collapsing psychiatric and psychological support system, the unavailability of child psychiatry and the absence of prevention programmes.

The experience of the pandemic also made mental health a priority in the Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Slovak Republic. The priority is entitled 'Humane, Modern and Accessible Mental Health Care' and aims to create modern and accessible mental health care that builds on strong inter-agency collaboration (UV SR, 2021). Activities specifically focus on modernising the psychiatric and psychological health-social care system, strengthening mental health promotion and prevention of disorders, strengthening health-social care and increasing its accessibility.

Attention towards the implementation of tools aimed at improving mental health is also paid by the "Programme Slovakia" (European structural and investment plans for 2021-2027 programmatic period), within which several national projects are planned to support telephone and online helplines in the long term.

So far, the corporate world and corporate foundations have played a significant role during and immediately after the pandemic, e.g. the Orange Foundation has been a leader in the discussion and financial support of non-governmental helplines operated by non-profit organisations.

4. Conclusion

Slovakia, like the whole world, experienced a great shock with the onset of the pandemic caused by COVID 19, for which the country was not prepared.

In addition to the economic downturn, the country experienced an unprecedented sense of threat and anxiety, people had to cope with new patterns of behaviour, reduced social contact, and a deterioration in the availability of (already poorly accessible before the pandemic) public services, especially in the health sector.

The pandemic also highlighted the dramatically inadequate mental health support network, the low availability of psychiatric and psychological care.

Slovakia has closed schools for long periods of time and shifted education to distance education, leaving a large proportion of children without any access to education, the consequences of which are only becoming apparent in the future.

The pandemic has not had a dramatic impact on the growth of registered unemployment; however, the pandemic has drawn attention to a large group of people in the category of the 'working poor', i.e. people who work but in precarious conditions, without the possibility of benefiting from the social security benefits of employment status and for very low pay. This group of people has often fallen through the safety nets, and this group of people is still poorly described and researched.

A separate chapter of the Covid 19 pandemic in Slovakia was the situation in marginalised Roma communities. Roma were often perceived as a public health threat and the government resorted to absurd solutions such as quarantining entire localities.

Due to the dominance of topics related to employment, entrepreneurship, education and economic growth in the public debate, the group of young people in the NEET situation became almost invisible. It is therefore extremely difficult to demonstrate through data the impacts on the NEET 25+ group. This group has usually disappeared in the statistics of the higher groups (whether in terms of age or economic situation). Thus, all the information presented in this document does not necessarily refer to the NEET 25+ group specifically but rather illustrates the situation in the country, of which this group of young people is a part.

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