

Transnational research report on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on 25+ NEETs

OUTPUT 4.8

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

Country specific contributions

Bulgaria: Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD)
Czechia: IREAS Institute for Structural Policy
Greece: Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (IED)
Hungary: HÉTFA Research Institute
Malta: Binda Consulting International (BCI)
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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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1. Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe has caused significant disruptions to the economy, the educational systems, and everyday life in addition to the significant risks related to health and the sustainment of health-care systems. While in general the trends in Europe have been similar at the macro level, it is important to also focus on the differences that may have emerged both in the pandemic evolution and in the governmental responses of the individual countries. This introduction provides an overview of the impact of the pandemic and the associated restrictions in the nine countries that are the focus of this report, namely Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain.

In these countries, which are part of the Lost Millennials project, the pandemic followed a similar pattern. In particular, the disease started spreading in the country in the early days of March 2020, as a result of which significant measures were put in place, including social distancing, school closures, and the implementation of remote working (see for instance Crețan & Light, 2020; ÚVZ SR, 2020; Dumitras et al., 2021; Kovács et al., 2021; Baranyai & Ferencz, 2023). Governments also implemented information campaigns (such as the ‘Stay at Home’ campaign, 2020), aimed at stressing the importance of responsible behaviour and adherence to governmental guidelines. After a decrease in the impact of the pandemic on the national healthcare systems, new waves of infections hit the countries in the autumn of 2020, leading to a new tightening of the measures of social distancing and school closures. In early 2021, vaccines became available, therefore governments started national vaccination programs, although struggling with vaccine hesitancy and also difficulties in the handling of the pandemic in general (Mortkowitz, 2021; Kottasová, 2021; Pažitný et al., 2022; SAV, 2022). By early 2022, the most significant measures related to the pandemic had been lifted in all the countries.

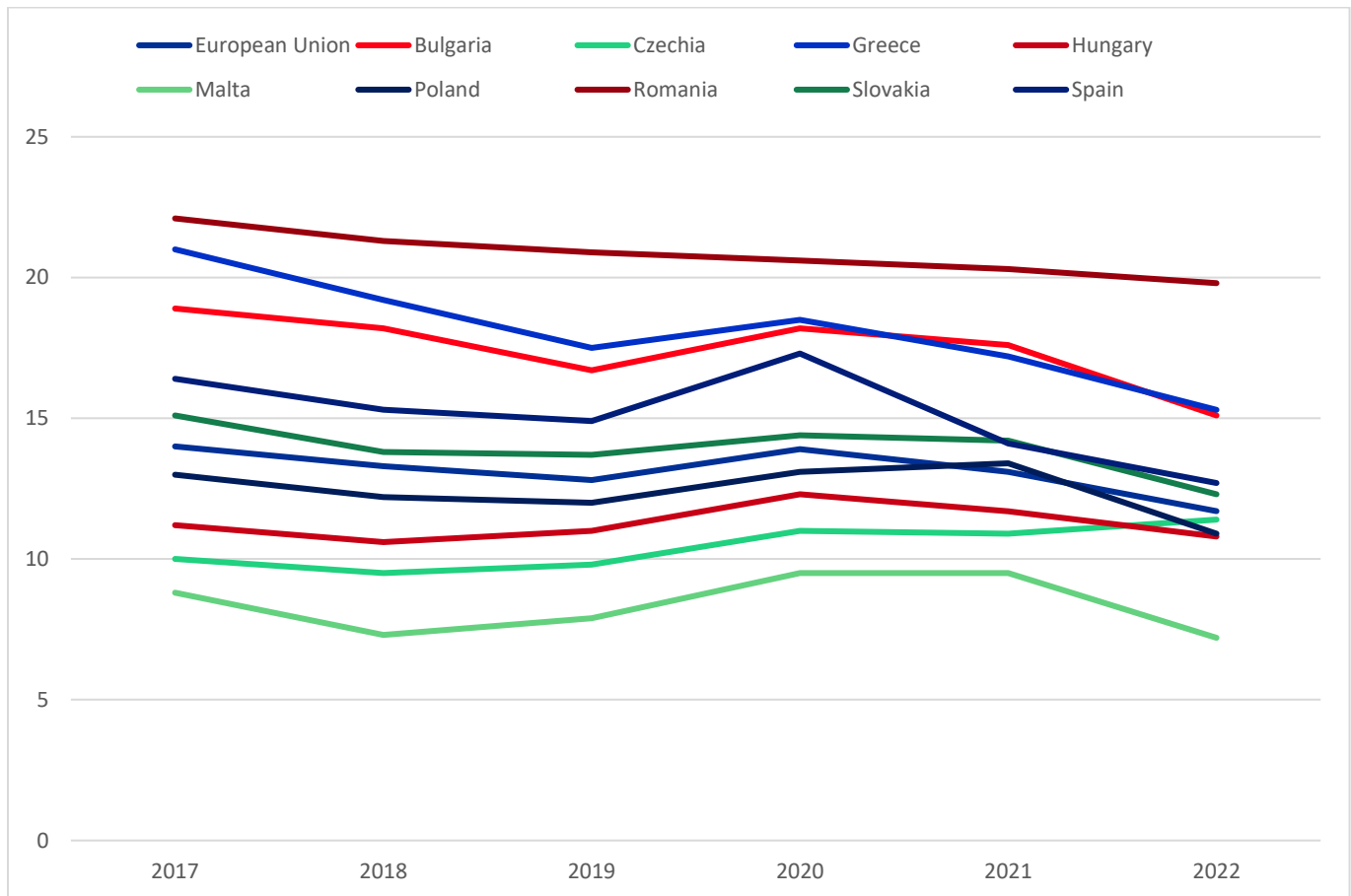
Governments’ strategies aimed at reducing the economic impact of the pandemic, which has been estimated to equal a significant share of GDP (Kapitsinis et al., 2021; Gajderowicz et al., 2022), with significant setbacks also observed in the labour market (Czifusz, 2021). For instance, Greece implemented support measures with government expenditures totalling €24 billion, which is equivalent to 14% of the country's GDP (IMF, 2021). Despite the success of some of these initiatives, as well as the effectiveness of policies related to vaccinations (such as the one of Malta, which earned international recognition for its successful vaccination strategy, see Agius et al., 2021; Statista, 2023), the impact of the pandemic has been significant especially for the most disadvantaged sectors of society, highlighting a significant heterogeneity (Prades Illanes & Tello Casas, 2020). For instance, the Roma community found itself at an elevated risk of unemployment and inactivity, mirroring a broader European trend (Eurofound, 2017; Matache & Bhabha, 2020; Vitáloš, 2021); emigrants have faced similar challenges (Caroleo et al., 2022).

NEETs during the pandemic: More evidence is needed

The situation of 25+ NEETs may have significantly worsened during the pandemic, especially among individuals aged 25 to 29, possibly also showing significant sectoral disparities. The evidence from Spain shows how the pandemic also caused an increase in the gender gap, as well as differences between rural and urban NEETs, together with a resurgence in the unemployment of young people with disabilities and challenges faced by single-parent families. Therefore, it is important to investigate if and how the pandemic has increased difficulties for this particular cohort of the population, given the urgent need of support that should be provided to them. This is because while the recent scientific evidence indicates how the pandemic may have impacted the most disadvantaged strata of the population the most (Katikireddi et al., 2021; Hacıoğlu-Hoke et al., 2021), there is still not a large body of evidence on the effect that COVID-19 may have had for NEETs and especially the older ones among them, also as a result of difficulties in surveying and reaching out to them.

In general, over the time period between 2017 and 2022, NEET rates among individuals aged 15-29 in Europe have demonstrated a remarkable degree of stability, with instances of marginal decreases even during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1). The collective efforts of European nations to address the complexities surrounding NEETs have played a crucial role in maintaining a relatively steady trajectory. This can be attributed to a combination of policy initiatives, educational reforms, and social support mechanisms implemented across the continent. However, it is important to acknowledge the divergent trend observed in Spain during 2020. In contrast to the overall European pattern, Spain experienced an increase in NEET rates during that period. The unique socioeconomic factors and specific policy responses in Spain may have contributed to this divergence. The surge in NEET rates in Spain in 2020 underscores the need for tailored and context-specific approaches to address the challenges faced by the youth demographic, particularly during the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. Despite the observed increase in Spain, the collective data for Europe suggests a resilience in managing and, in some cases, mitigating the impact of the pandemic on NEET rates. This resilience highlights the adaptability of European nations in intervening in the difficult landscape of youth disengagement, emphasizing the importance of continued collaboration and innovative strategies to ensure the well-being and future prospects of the young population of disengaged individuals.

Figure 1. NEET rates in Europe (aged 15-29)



Source: Eurostat, 2023

In this report, we examine the available evidence on this topic. In particular, in section 2 we delve into the impact of the pandemic on NEETs who are older than 25 years of age, and who are therefore in the most challenging position within the NEET group. To do so, we focus on three main topics: the labour market impact of the pandemic, the opportunities for reskilling and upskilling, and mental health and well-being. These have been chosen in order to offer a comprehensive view on the impact of the pandemic, both at the macro- and the micro- levels, thus allowing to broaden the scope of policy recommendations provided based on the available evidence. Where possible, we focused on NEETs who are older than 25 years of age, but in some cases the lack of specific measures for this cohort made it necessary to describe NEETs overall or other subgroups of the population. In section 3, we describe the most important and significant support measures that have been implemented as a result of the challenges described in section 2. In particular, we will focus on employment and financial support provided to workers affected by the pandemic, reskilling and upskilling support that allowed for an easier re-entry into the labour market, and finally, on initiatives for mental health support provided to the

affected population. Section 4 then concludes the report by summarizing the main findings and discussing their implications for policymakers and the initiatives targeting older NEETs and supporting them in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. The impact of the pandemic on 25+ NEETs

The issue of individuals Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEETs) has emerged as a significant concern for policymakers after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has created significant challenges for the economy and for individual well-being especially for disengaged young people (Aina et al., 2021; Palmer & Small, 2021). This group of people, and especially those aged between 15 and 29 (despite the definition not being always consistent across countries, see Batini et al., 2017), finds itself disengaged from formal education, the labour market, and vocational training, thus its individuals may face even further difficulties after the switch to remote learning; this is especially true for the older cohort of this group, namely the 25+ NEETs, who face further challenges related to professional expectations in the labour market (de Almeida & Simões, 2020). The challenges faced by NEETs in general, and older NEETs in particular, are multifaceted due to the interaction of several of factors, including the lack of educational opportunities and the absence of social support systems. The difficulties faced by this demographic can be also indicative of broader systemic issues, such as the potential mismatch between the evolving skillsets of the youth and the demands of the labour market.

The unprecedented disruptions triggered by the global health crisis have even worsened the challenges NEETs face. In fact, the pandemic has increased the existing vulnerabilities and introduced further obstacles, presenting additional challenges also to understanding and addressing the needs of this demographic. The evidence indicates how school closures have affected the most disadvantaged students the most (Engzell et al., 2021) while also increasing anxiety and reducing the effectiveness of learning (Hume et al., 2023). Therefore, like the rest of the world, Europe is confronted with the urgent task of recalibrating strategies in order to improve the situation for individuals who were or became disengaged, especially those who face the most difficulties.

The economic disruptions resulting from lockdowns, business closures, and economic downturns has further complicated the situation for NEETs in their pursuit of employment and education. The disruptions to traditional learning environments and the sudden shift to remote work have further marginalized those who were already left behind in their educational and economic activities. Therefore, the policy interventions for this group necessitate a comprehensive and adaptive approach, one that not only addresses immediate concerns but also lays the groundwork for an inclusive landscape in the future. In particular, strategies encompassing enhanced educational and training opportunities, targeted youth employment initiatives, and a robust support system for those at risk of disengagement become even more critical after the pandemic.

2.1 Labour market

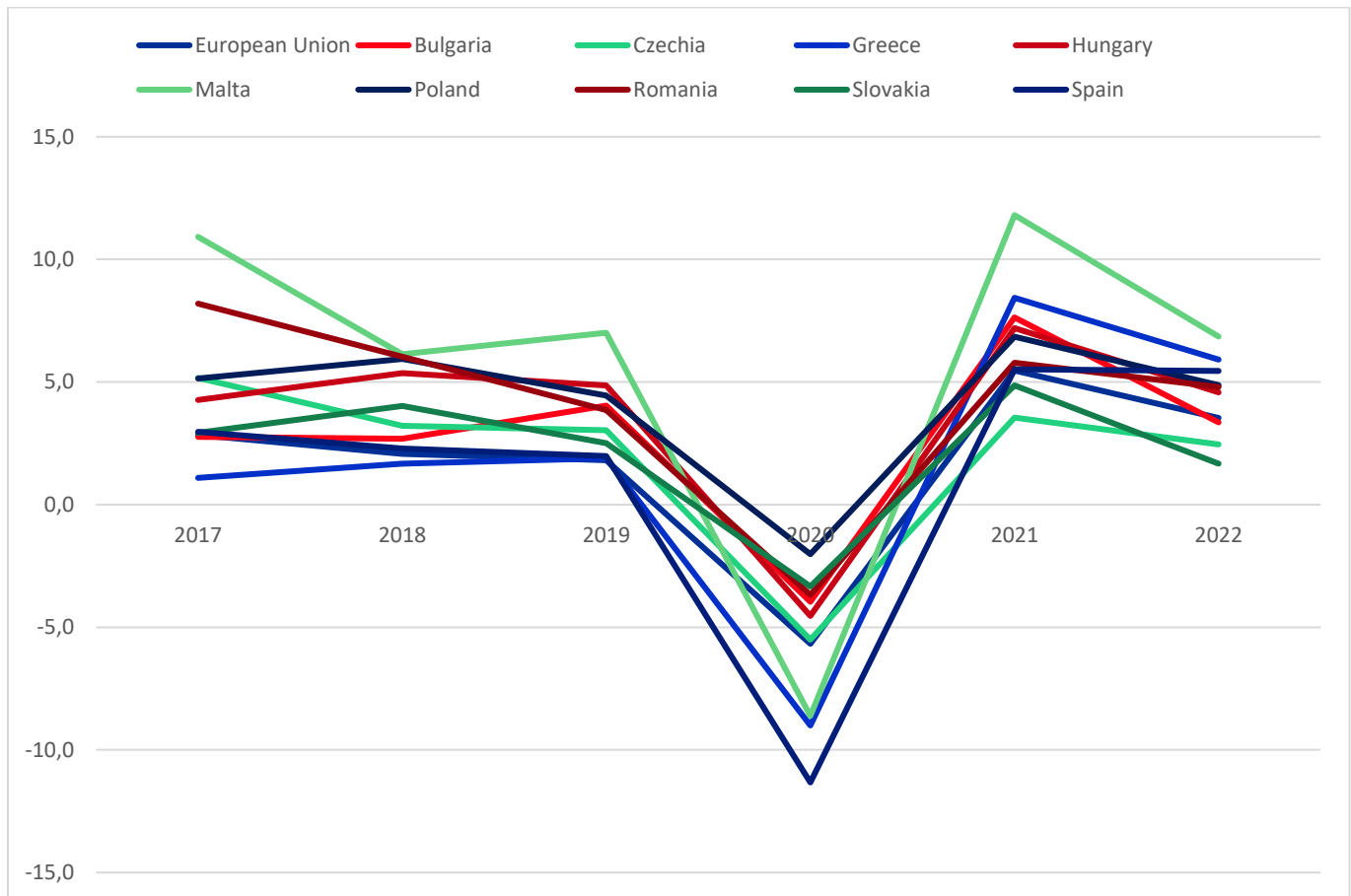
As noted above, the labour market is a sector among the most impacted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the structural challenges emerging from such sector can have impacts on the opportunities and difficulties encountered by NEETs, especially the older ones (de Almeida & Simões, 2020). Therefore, it is important to have an overview of the situation in the labour market in the wake of the pandemic; yet, due to data availability, our analyses are sometimes referring to the whole NEET population and not only to the cohort of those older than 25 years of age. Yet, it is important to stress how the latter may face even stronger challenges than the general NEET population, therefore the evidence should be interpreted as being more general and possibly optimistic compared to the one for older NEETs.

During and after the pandemic: economic drop and rebound

The economic landscape of Europe witnessed a relatively predictable trajectory in GDP growth between 2017 and 2022, marked by a significant drop in 2020, with Spain experiencing a particularly pronounced contraction (Figure 2). This could be relevant, as GDP growth can be expected to be associated to a lower unemployment rate (Soylu et al., 2018). The adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic reverberated across the continent, leading to a substantial decline in economic activity. Spain, in particular, faced a significant downturn with a contraction of up to -11.3% in its GDP during 2020, underscoring the significant economic challenges brought about by the unprecedented global health crisis.

However, amidst the challenges of 2020, the subsequent year brought about a remarkable rebound in GDP growth across Europe. Notably, Malta emerged as a strong performer with +11.8% in its GDP in 2021. This resurgence in economic growth can be attributed to a combination of factors, including effective policy responses, vaccination campaigns, and a gradual return to normal economic activities. Malta's resilience and robust rebound can be seen as a sign of the adaptability and recovery potential within the European economy.

Figure 2. GDP growth (%) in Europe

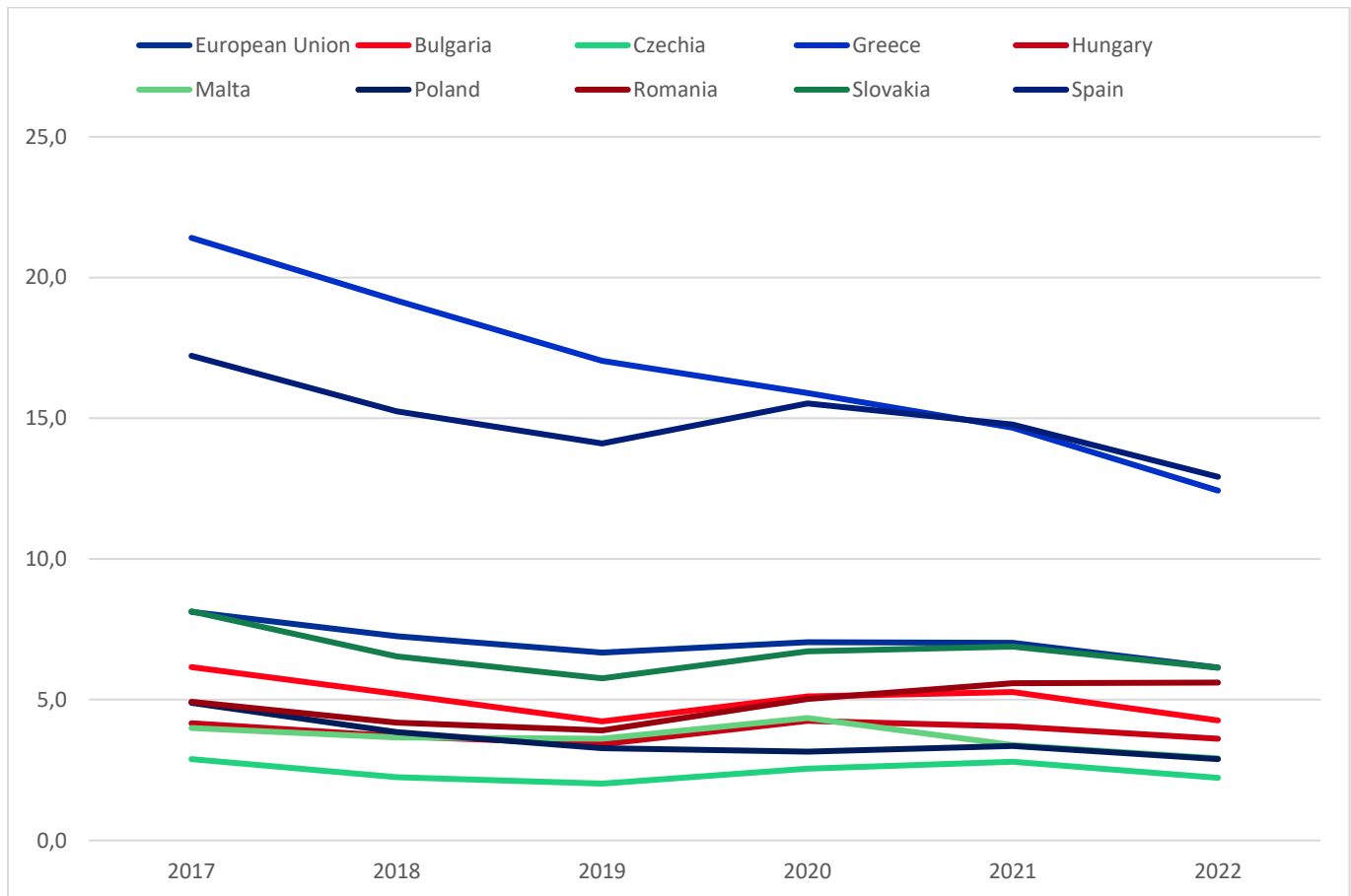


Source: World Bank, 2023

Throughout the period from 2017 to 2022, the unemployment rate in Europe also exhibited a notable trend of consistent decrease or minor fluctuations, even in the face of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 3). The collective efforts of European nations, including targeted employment initiatives and adaptive policy measures, contributed to the overall resilience of the continent's labour market.

Despite the generally positive trend, it is essential to recognize the persistent challenges faced by Greece and Spain, where the unemployment rates, although showing a decrease, remained notably higher than the European average. The unique economic dynamics and historical factors in these countries contribute to a continued struggle in achieving unemployment rates in line with the broader European context. However, it is important to notice how even in Greece and Spain, there has been a decrease in unemployment rates over the specified period.

Figure 3. Unemployment rate in Europe



Source: World Bank, 2023

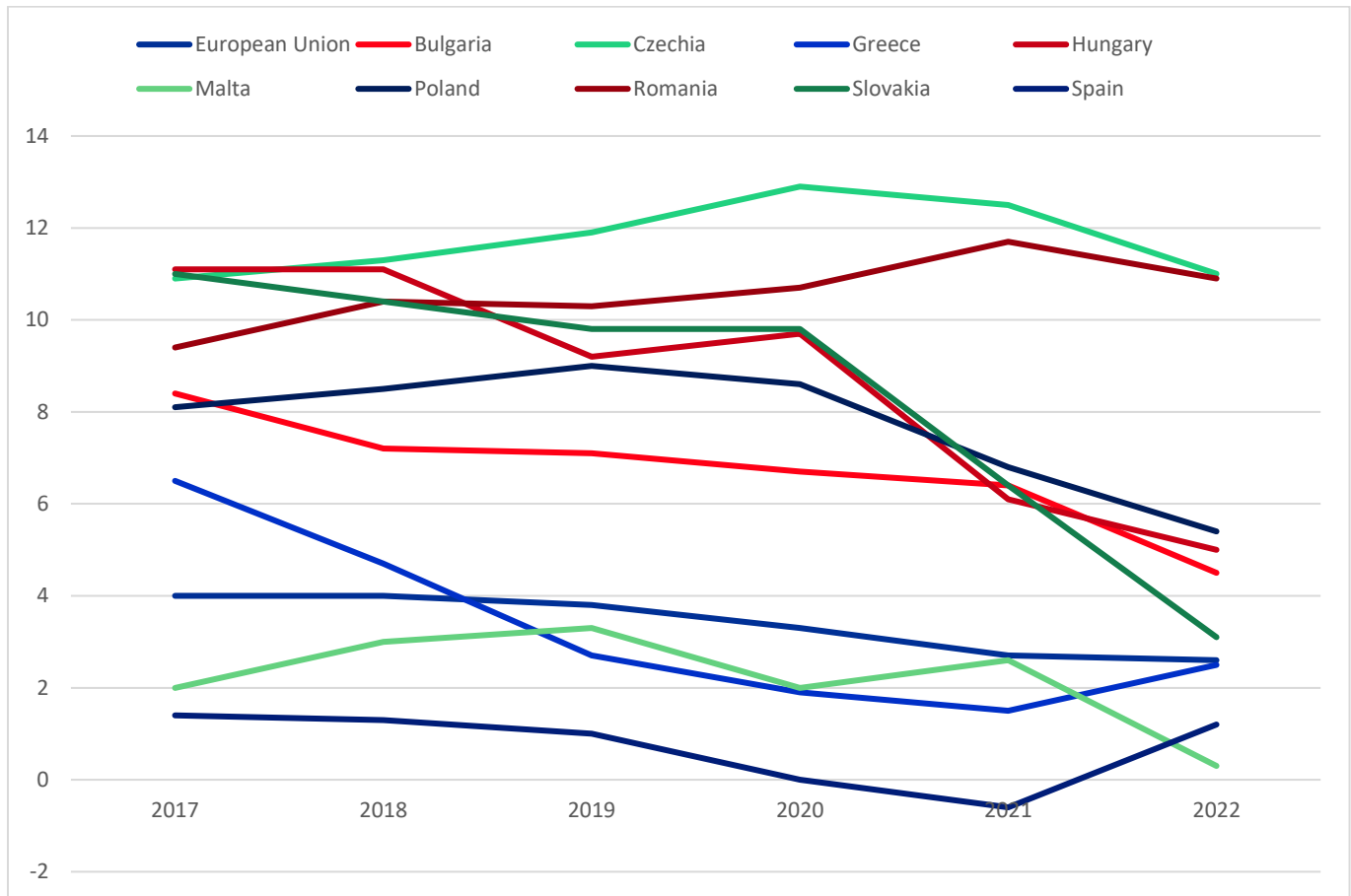
Changing gender gaps in NEET rates

From 2017 to 2022, a consistent pattern emerged across Europe, with more females than males being classified as NEETs. This gender disparity, while persistent, underwent notable changes within specific countries. In Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Greece, there was a decrease in the magnitude of the gender gap, signalling positive effects towards a more balanced distribution of NEET rates between females and males. Conversely, in Czechia, the gender gap in NEET rates increased during the specified period. This divergence shows the need for targeted interventions and a deep understanding of the factors contributing to gender-based disparities in NEET classification.

For the majority of European countries considered, the gender gap in NEET rates remained roughly stable between 2017 and 2022 (Figure 4). However, it is important to notice that the European Union average

witnessed an increase in the gender gap after the start of the pandemic. This shows the impact of external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on gender disparities within the NEET demographic.

Figure 4. Gender gaps (female – male) in NEET rates



Source: Eurostat, 2023

In the landscape of Europe from 2017 to 2022, key indicators reflected the region's adaptability and collective efforts in addressing socio-economic challenges. NEET rates, representing individuals aged 15-29, generally showed stability or slight decreases, with Spain as an exception experiencing an increase in 2020 amid the pandemic. Economically, Europe faced a noticeable downturn in 2020, especially in Spain, but rebounded in 2021, as seen in Malta's significant growth. Unemployment rates demonstrated an overall positive trend, with persistent challenges in Greece and Spain, where rates, though decreasing, remained higher than the European average. Examining gender gaps in NEET rates revealed a consistent pattern of more females than males being NEETs across Europe. While some countries showed a decrease in the gender gap, others experienced increases or stability.

As the area recovers economically in the post-pandemic period, it is important to notice the significant adaptability of the economic systems. Nonetheless, challenges persist in specific regions and demographics. In the aftermath of the pandemic, providing robust policy support for NEETs is important to ensure the recovery and future well-being of this demographic. Comprehensive policy support should encompass a multi-faceted approach, including enhanced educational and training opportunities, targeted employment programs, and strengthened social support systems. By fostering an environment that facilitates the reintegration of NEETs into the labor market and educational pathways, policies can play a substantial role in mitigating the lasting impact of the pandemic. Additionally, a focus on mental health and well-being, acknowledging the unique challenges faced by NEETs during the pandemic period, will be crucial in ensuring a sustainable recovery for this demographic.

2.2 Reskilling and upskilling

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, reskilling and upskilling initiatives emerged as crucial pillars for the empowerment and reintegration of NEETs into the evolving job market. The disruptions induced by the pandemic have accelerated digital transformations and altered the skill requirements across various industries. Reskilling, which involves acquiring new skills to adapt to changing job demands, and upskilling, the enhancement of existing skills, become instrumental in equipping NEETs with the competencies needed to return to employment or education in this evolving economy.

Given that many individuals have faced interruptions in their education or employment trajectories during the pandemic, reskilling and upskilling initiatives offer a pathway to bridge the gap between their current skill set and the evolving demands of the job market. For NEETs, they are crucially needed to leave their inactivity and return to the labour market. In this respect, reskilling and upskilling can be seen as investments in the adaptability of the workers, making them more competitive candidates for emerging opportunities. Digital literacy, remote work skills, and proficiency in technologies became focal points for these initiatives after the pandemic.

Figure 5. Decrease in the job vacancy rate between 2019 and 2020 in the three most affected sectors by Member State (percentage points).

Country	Sector 1		Sector 2		Sector 3	
Austria	Accommodation and food services	-1.1	Administration and support	-1.1	Information and communication	-1.0
Belgium	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-1.8	Accommodation and food services	-1.4	Construction	-1.1
Bulgaria	Accommodation and food services	-0.5	Real estate	-0.3	Administrative and support services	-0.2
Croatia	Administration and support	-1.5	Accommodation and food services	-0.8	Transport	-0.5
Cyprus	Administration and support	-1.5	Other services	-1.4	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.9
Czechia	Administration and support	-3.1	Professional, scientific and technical	-2.7	Construction	-1.3
Denmark	Information and communication	-1.3	Accommodation and food services	-0.2	Wholesale and retail	-0.2
Estonia	Information and communication	-1.3	Wholesale and retail	-1.0	Construction	-1.0
Finland	Transport	-1.1	Real estate	-0.8	Construction	-0.7
Germany	Administration and support	-2.8	Transport	-1.6	Accommodation and food services	-1.6
Hungary	Information and communication	-1.1	Accommodation and food services	-1.1	Construction	-1.0
Ireland	Professional, scientific and technical	-1.3	Finance and insurance	-0.8	Real estate	-0.5
Italy	Accommodation and food services	-1.7	Other services	-1.1	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-1.1
Latvia	Wholesale and retail	-2.0	Accommodation and food services	-1.9	Construction	-1.8
Lithuania	Accommodation and food services	-0.7	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.7	Real estate	-0.6
Luxembourg	Accommodation and food services	-0.8	Information and communication	-0.8	Education	-0.6
Malta	Other services	-3.2	Professional, scientific and technical	-2.5	Accommodation and food services	-2.1
Netherlands	Accommodation and food services	-2.7	Information and communication	-1.5	Transport	-1.2
Poland	Construction	-1.6	Other services	-1.1	Accommodation and food services	-0.9
Portugal	Accommodation and food services	-1.0	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.7	Transport	-0.6
Romania	Accommodation and food services	-0.5	Finance and insurance	-0.5	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.5
Slovakia	Construction	-0.9	Transport	-0.6	Public administration	-0.5
Slovenia	Accommodation and food services	-2.0	Construction	-1.5	Administration and support	-1.0
Spain	Information and communication	-0.5	Accommodation and food services	-0.3	Public administration	-0.3
Sweden	Accommodation and food services	-1.5	Information and communication	-1.5	Professional, scientific and technical	-1.1

Source: Eurofound, 2021

Uncertainty about the impact of the pandemic on NEETs

Policymakers, educational institutions, and businesses must collaborate to design and implement targeted reskilling and upskilling programs. These programs should not only address the immediate skill gaps but also create a culture of continuous learning, recognizing that the job market will continue to evolve. By placing reskilling and upskilling at the front of post-pandemic recovery efforts, there is an opportunity to empower NEETs with the tools and knowledge necessary to reclaim their role in the workforce, contributing to both their individual success and the broader economic development.

Figure 5 illustrates the decline in the job vacancy rate from 2019 to 2020 within the three most impacted sectors. While the data suggests an improving situation in job vacancies, potentially indicating the efficacy of reskilling programs, it is essential to emphasize the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic's impact on the composition of NEETs. Despite this, the available comprehensive data highlights shifts in the NEET population throughout 2020. The surge in NEET numbers across the European Union increases the likelihood that the new additions to the NEET category in 2020 were predominantly individuals facing short-term joblessness, particularly considering the segment of NEETs expressing a willingness to work (Eurofound, 2021).

Different landscapes across countries

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the landscape of adult learning and skill development underwent notable shifts across various European countries. In Bulgaria, online learning was well-received by students due to its benefits in terms of the way in which time is managed, nonetheless concerns remained related to the possibility of learning proper skills remotely, especially in fields such as the medical one; moreover, other negative feedback related to the lack of consistent communication and evaluations from instructors (Avramova et al., 2021).

Czechia witnessed a surge in digital transformation post-pandemic, with businesses exploring broader applications of digital technologies. The education system transitioned entirely to online learning for several months, assessing the resilience of digital infrastructure and public services. Despite initial technical challenges, newly launched portals and information technology systems became indispensable tools for managing the pandemic (European Commission, 2022).

In Greece, despite the availability of online courses, associated costs functioned as deterrents for many, particularly considering the financial constraints faced by NEETs. The digital divide became apparent, with individuals with prior digital knowledge adjusting more smoothly than those with limited digital literacy. However, this challenge unintentionally accelerated the digital learning curve for many, presenting an opportunity for broader digital inclusion.

Hungary, with over a million participants in adult education annually, faced significant challenges during the pandemic. Adult educators and training professionals addressed these challenges through digital transformation and online education, with compulsory courses shifting to online formats. While courses requiring personal attendance were temporarily suspended, general courses, including training and IT courses, adapted to an online delivery model (Hajdú, 2021; Bognár, 2022).

In Malta, the transition to online courses fell short of compensating for the decline in traditional training, resulting in a one percent drop in adult learning participation—the first decrease since 2010. The share of low-qualified adults remained stable, but the participation rate for this group saw a decline, indicating challenges in adapting to the new learning paradigm. Digital infrastructure limitations and a relatively

low percentage of adults with basic digital skills further impeded participation in Malta (European Commission, 2022).

Poland, alongside other nations, responded to the pandemic by placing a heightened emphasis on reskilling initiatives. Government bodies, private companies, and various organizations expanded their online learning and training programs to equip the workforce with digital, technical, and adaptability skills. The Polish government's commitment to providing digital skills training, especially to public employees in the initial stages of the pandemic, underscored an initiative-taking approach to addressing the evolving demands of the job market (Radulov, 2020; Vasile, 2021; Denk & Königs, 2022).

Romania faced a radical shift in remote work practices, with a remarkable increase from 0.6% to 24% of employees working from home in 2020. However, evidence or research on reskilling or upskilling initiatives for the Romanian workforce during the pandemic remains scarce, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving employment landscape (Statista, 2023).

Slovakia, characterized by low adult education participation, faced challenges exacerbated by the pandemic's impact on active labor market policies. With limited learning opportunities, particularly for those outside the labor market, the NEET 25+ category experienced a gap in further education opportunities during the pandemic (Habodászová & Studená, 2021; Adamčíková & Závarska, 2022).

In Spain, the intersection of NEET rates with educational levels became crucial. The pandemic revealed that the percentage of NEETs correlated with the level of training, emphasizing the importance of education in mitigating the impact of economic downturns. Over the last decade, Spain has made efforts to increase education levels, contributing to a decrease in NEET rates among the less educated population. Digital transformation and the emphasis on higher education completion further show Spain's commitment to fostering resilience in its workforce (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2023; INE, 2022; Eurostat, 2023).

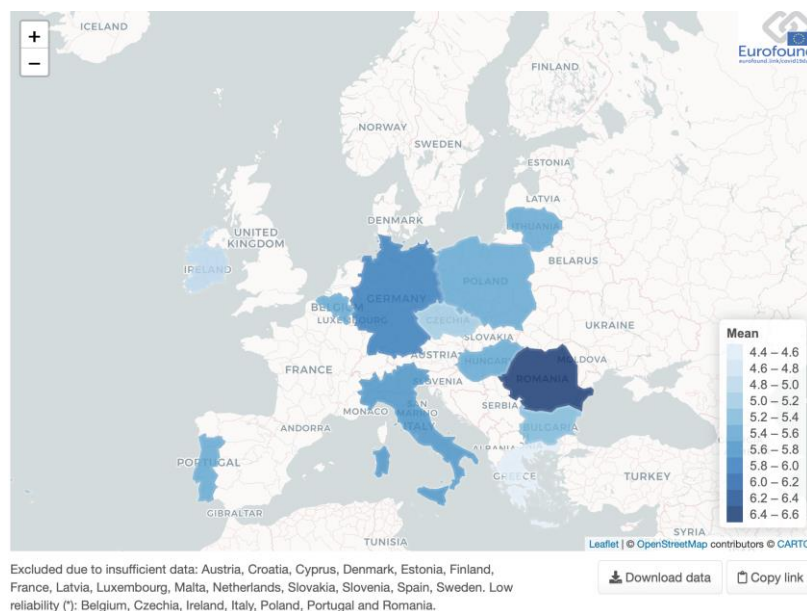
The evidence from the countries surveyed points at two main elements that should be highlighted. The first is how countries have managed to transition to digital and remote work at very different rates, showing how significant interventions should be implemented in this sense, by increasing the availability of online resources both for workers who have to move to remote activities and for the unemployed who wish to improve their skills to re-enter the labour market. Therefore, the transition to a less pronounced digital divide is crucial and should be implemented quickly, to prevent further difficulties and the widening of already existing gaps. The second element that should be highlighted relates to the participation in reskilling programs by the adult population, which are also quite different across countries depending on the policies implemented by each of them. It is paramount for governments to implement measures that advertise and stress the importance of reskilling for the adult population in

order to increase access to it and reduce the difficulties for those who found themselves unemployed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3 Mental health and well-being

Mental health has been of significant importance during the COVID-19-induced lockdowns and stay-at-home restrictions. Nonetheless, the impact of the pandemic on well-being may have been significant and long-lasting, given the strong impact that the pandemic itself has had on daily life and long-term opportunities, especially for disengaged individuals. It is worth noting how a survey conducted in 2021, in which people were asked “Overall, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days?”, people aged 18-34 scored below average (5.1 points) for the countries that took part in the assessment (Figure 6). Furthermore, this age group is the one with the lowest average, compared to 5.4 for 35–49-year-olds and 5.3 for people over 50. This indicates how the youngest generations are the ones with the lower life satisfaction compared to older cohorts; by the same token, it can be expected that disengaged people in this age cohort have been the ones suffering the most because of the pandemic, also due to the higher-than-average rate of older NEETs in Europe (Table 1).

Figure 6. Quality of life during COVID-19 (age group 18-34 years old)



Source: Eurofound, 2021

Table 1. NEET rates among young adults (aged 25-29)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<i>EU-27</i>	19.5%	18.4%	17.7%	17.2%	18.6%
<i>Czechia</i>	17.2%	15.3%	15.2%	15.8%	17.5%
<i>Poland</i>	18.9%	18.0%	17.2%	17.7%	19.4%
<i>Slovakia</i>	21.7%	22.1%	21.3%	20.7%	22.0%

Source: Nałęcz, 2021

Significant challenges related to mental health

Across diverse European nations, surveys conducted to gauge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the mental well-being of their populations. In Malta, a study focusing on individuals aged 13 to 25 underscored the significant negative impact on mental health experienced by all age groups (Azzopardi & Caruso, 2021). The age range of 13 to 18 exhibited a heightened vulnerability, with 29.5% reporting a negative impact, potentially attributed to increased time spent at home. Stressors induced by pandemic-related fears contributed to familial tension, particularly affecting younger family members. The study also revealed gender disparities, with a higher percentage of females (34.05%) experiencing a negative impact on their mental health compared to males (29.3%).

In Poland, profound implications on well-being emerged, marked by significant decreases in happiness and life satisfaction (Gawrych et al., 2020). The pandemic brought about alarming mental health challenges, as nearly one in four participants reported experiencing suicidal thoughts (Chodkiewicz et al., 2021). Coping strategies shifted, with 16% reporting an increase in risky alcohol consumption, highlighting the need for accessible mental health support. Notably, one in five participants reported symptoms of anxiety disorders, with a more pronounced effect observed among women, younger individuals, and those with preexisting mental health conditions.

Greece witnessed elevated anxiety levels across various demographic groups (Tountas, 2021). Students, young scientists, freelancers, and the unemployed all struggled with increased anxiety, with percentages ranging from 32.9% to 48.7%. Sleep disturbances also surged, affecting 22.3% of young respondents in the pandemic's aftermath. Young women reported higher rates of sleep disturbances (26.6%) compared to young men (18.2%), with the age group of 17-24 experiencing a notable sleep disturbance rate of 42.2%.

In Spain, a study on emotional well-being highlighted mixed sentiments within the population (CIS, 2020). While a majority felt active, good about themselves, and happy, a significant portion reported feelings of worry (30.8%), stress (19.2%), and loneliness (8.1%). The age group of 25 to 29 displayed similar trends, indicating a shared emotional landscape. Notably, young people reported slightly lower percentages for feelings of worry, stress, sadness, depression, and loneliness compared to the general population, displaying nuanced variations in emotional responses across demographics in Spain.

The evidence from the available studies points out at a significantly dire situation when it comes to mental health as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. While they do not necessarily refer to older NEETs only, the evidence points out at the need of immediate and important measures to reduce the mental health challenges emerged or exacerbated by the pandemic. Importantly, it is also crucial to highlight that more evidence is needed, given that long-term effects may emerge, as well as national or local tendencies may not be evident from large-scale studies (for instance, it could be important to evaluate how gender or age may relate to well-being during and after the pandemic).

3. Support measures

In the wake of the unprecedented challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of implementing comprehensive and tailored support measures for employment has become of significant importance. As the global workforce has to deal with the far-reaching economic consequences of the pandemic, it is the younger population that may face the most difficulties related to finding a stable and meaningful employment. This young group, in particular, has faced the burden of economic disruptions, with uncertainties casting a shadow on job prospects and career trajectories, together (in many cases) with disruptions related to the interruption of education in person.

Among the most vulnerable groups within this demographic are of course the NEETs, who may face even more challenges in the transition from education to the professional sphere and end up being left-behind and inactive in society. The economic downturn induced by the pandemic has not only deepened existing gaps between the NEET population and others, but has also highlighted the urgent need for targeted interventions to mitigate the impact on this specific cohort.

Investing in support measures that are specifically tailored to address the unique challenges faced by young people, especially NEETs, is a strategic move to fortify the foundation of the future workforce. The important effects of unemployment among young people are profound, extending beyond immediate economic concerns to also include long-term consequences such as skill atrophy, reduced employability, and a potential reduction of social cohesion. In addition to this, it is important to support the most disadvantaged also in their psychological well-being, given the long isolation brought about by governmental measures to reduce the impact of the pandemic.

3.1 Employment and financial support

In most countries, governments provided employment and financial support to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on workers, enterprises, as well as the unemployed. This has also been made possible by the European Union Recovery Instrument (also known as Next Generation EU), which provided economic support and relief to member states to help with the implementation of support measures after the pandemic (Council of the European Union, 2020). While in general measures aimed at mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic on labour markets as well as the economy more in general, within each country measures differed due to the specific local context, as well as the political landscape of each nation. Below, we describe in brief the main measures implemented by each of the countries taking part in the Lost Millennials project.

Bulgaria: In the country, significant support measures were implemented by the government, with firms and businesses being the main beneficiaries: in particular, out of 45 measures implemented in 2022, 14 assisted businesses (Eneva, 2022). These included compensations, which were extended both in time

and in the pool of beneficiaries after the initial implementation in the early months of the pandemic, aimed at preventing increases in unemployment due to the pandemic. Further programs were implemented to support employees and prevent economic hardships related to unemployment. Furthermore, compensations for parents (aimed at reducing the economic costs associated to school closures) were also put in place, especially targeting those parents who did not receive any other form of financial support (Eneva, 2022).

Czechia: the country responded to the pandemic with a comprehensive approach, introducing measures such as wage subsidies, tax relief, and loan guarantees to support businesses and retain jobs (Department of Communication, Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2021). The government, through different ministries and dependent units, manage to provide a wide range of support measures for many of groups of people, including entrepreneurs, self-employed, disadvantaged people, and unemployed people. The measures included Antivirus, Compensation bonus, and several COVID initiatives among which support for closed establishments, culture, rent, tourism, and sport (Department of Communication, Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2021), The government prioritized swift and direct financial aid to affected sectors, aiming to stabilize the labour market and protect incomes, with many targeted programmes during the pandemic.

Greece: The country faced the dual challenge of a health crisis and economic downturn. The government swiftly rolled out support measures, including financial assistance to affected businesses, tax relief, and income support for vulnerable groups. In particular, the Greek government launched "SYN-ERGASIA", a programme designed to be a response to safeguard businesses from the economic repercussions of the pandemic (Hellenic Republic, 2020). Importantly, the program included economic support for employees that had a contract put on hold as a consequence of the economic struggles brought about by the pandemic (TaxHeaven, 2020). In the country, most efforts were made to strike a balance between public health imperatives and economic stability.

Hungary: The government implemented a mix of fiscal and monetary measures to combat the economic fallout of the pandemic. During the pandemic, the government provided economic support with measures including wage subsidies, tax cuts, and business loan facilities (Túróczi et al., 2020). The government focused on sustaining employment while supporting the financial resilience of both individuals and enterprises. In the form of wage subsidies, mainly to the business sector, such as the sectoral wage subsidy scheme. Nonetheless, it should be noted how few measures have been taken to protect the most vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Malta: The country's government responded with agility, deploying several measures to safeguard jobs and stabilize the economy. Wage subsidies, business support grants, and targeted financial aid were instrumental in providing relief. The island nation recognized the importance of a multifaceted approach to address the diverse needs of its workforce and industries (KPMG Malta, 2020; Deloitte Malta, 2022).

The measures also included monetary vouchers and direct payments, in addition to grants for companies. It is worth stressing how specific measures were taken targeting Gozo, the smaller island of the country (KPMG Malta, 2020; Deloitte Malta, 2022).

Poland: The government adopted a multifaceted strategy, combining fiscal stimulus and monetary measures. The government introduced financial aid packages, including wage subsidies and support for self-employed individuals (Toplišek, 2022). Efforts were directed towards preserving jobs and supporting economic recovery across various sectors. In this respect, the measures implemented included wage subsidies, job retention schemes, unemployment benefits, and support for the self-employed. Yet relatively few measures targeted the unemployed (Ciesielska-Klikowska 2020).

Romania: The country implemented a range of measures, including fiscal incentives, subsidies, and financial aid to businesses (Dan et al., 2022). The focus was on sustaining employment levels and ensuring the financial well-being of the workforce. The government prioritised the most vulnerable segments of the population while striving for a balanced economic recovery (Radu, 2020). The interventions implemented in the country included measures dedicated to self-employed natural persons, measures dedicated to employers and legal entities, measures for companies paying tax on the income of micro-enterprises, as well as schemes to help to ensure the financial liquidity of small and medium enterprises.

Slovakia: The government responded to the pandemic by implementing measures to protect employment and businesses (Baliak et al., 2021). Wage subsidies, tax relief, and targeted financial aid were crucial in stabilising the economy. The government emphasised the need for solidarity and collaboration to address the challenges posed by the unprecedented crisis. The main package of support that was put in place by the central government aimed at helping businesses and employees through the "First Aid" scheme (Lalinsky & Pal, 2020). The evidence indicates how the scheme was successful in reducing firm closures (Kahanec, 2020; Belin & Veselkova, 2022).

Spain: The country faced one of the most severe economic downturns in the wake of the pandemic. The government rolled out ambitious financial aid packages, including job retention schemes, subsidies, and assistance for self-employed individuals. Spain's approach aimed at safeguarding employment while fostering a resilient economic recovery. Spain adopted different active labour market policies in response to the lockdown (García Clemente, 2023). Specific measures for unemployed people and other special groups included subsidies for the end of a temporary contract, unemployment subsidies for people who have exhausted their previous benefits, extraordinary subsidies for domestic workers, and extraordinary access to unemployment benefits. Yet, these measures were less effective for younger people (aged 19 to 30) than older cohorts (Izquierdo et al., 2022).

The evidence from the Lost Millennials project countries points at the evidence that while many support measures and labour market policies were implemented, their effectiveness or success may significantly depend on which target groups is considered. In fact, there is still not a large or substantial evidence on whether NEETs, and especially older ones, were effectively supported by the policies implemented during the pandemic, or whether there has been a significant improvement in their situation or a decrease in their numbers. In this respect, more evidence should be gathered from individual countries to have a clearer picture of the situation of (older) NEETs after the pandemic, aiming to design support measures specifically for them.

3.2 Reskilling and upskilling support

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical need for reskilling and upskilling initiatives across Europe. As the countries were challenged with economic difficulties and changing labour markets, they also responded with tailored programs to empower their workforce and allow workers to improve their skills for the post-pandemic conditions. In this section, we focus on the diverse approaches adopted by the nine European nations that are object of this report, showing their interventions aimed at developing the skills of their workforce in the wake of the pandemic.

In Malta, during the pandemic, initiatives aimed at the tourism sector included free e-learning courses and a Skills Development Scheme by Malta Enterprise. The Recovery and Resilience Plan emphasises climate and digital objectives, anticipating a 1.1% GDP boost by 2026 and the creation of 1200 jobs. Addressing digital challenges, the plan aligns with Malta's Digital Strategy 2022-2027, emphasizing the reduction of the digital divide and promoting digital skills. Poland responded to the changing labour market with online training programs, subsidised courses, vocational training, and youth employment programs. These measures aimed at equipping individuals with skills necessary for the evolving job landscape. Government support for entrepreneurs and consumers included retraining programs and fostering adaptability in the face of digitalisation, globalisation, and technological advancements.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary, adult educators transitioned online, but national-level initiatives for reskilling and upskilling were limited. The focus remained on preventing job losses, with employers implementing online training programs for their employees. Notably, the Second Chance Programme by the Ministry of Education targeted individuals beyond the average age group for their level of education. Greek universities demonstrated adaptability by swiftly transitioning 96.5% of courses online. The pandemic exposed challenges in vocational education, emphasising the need for practical experiences. The Recovery and Resilience Plan allocates significant funds to digital transformation, including transforming libraries into digital skill hubs. Efforts focus on bridging the digital divide and fostering a balanced educational approach.

In Czechia, the pandemic shifted the labour market dynamics, leading to increased unemployment and a decline in advertised vacancies. Government support included programs to help individuals retrain, develop new skills, or improve existing ones. While national-level support programs were scarce, local initiatives addressed the needs of various groups, including NEETs 25+. Romania's application of the Recovery and Resilience Plan dedicates a substantial portion to digital transformation. Initiatives include creating electronic ID cards for remote education and health care access, transforming libraries into digital skill hubs, and implementing the 'Second Chance Programme.' The plan aims to address the evolving labour market, focusing on vocational training, digital literacy, and supporting NEETs and vulnerable populations. Bulgaria lacks substantial evidence on the upskilling or reskilling programs implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic and aimed at the older cohorts of NEETs. In fact, Bulgaria retains a low level of digital skills compared to the European Union, and the participation in reskilling programs also remains very low (Terziev, 2020).

Slovakia's response to the pandemic included the continuation of community centres, particularly in marginalized Roma communities. These centres offered support and educational opportunities during the crisis. The Banská Bystrica Regional Municipality's 'Space' initiative, funded by the European Social Fund, provided comprehensive services, including career advice, non-formal education, and support for NEETs 25+. Spain's comprehensive approach involved legislative measures, such as the Royal Decree-Law 31/2020 and the Organic Law 3/2020, addressing education adaptation, evaluation criteria modifications, and vocational training reforms. The Recovery, Transformation, and Resilience Plan allocated funds for reskilling and upskilling, digital transformation, and innovation in vocational training. Spain also focused on digital skills through the National Digital Skills Plan, fostering inclusivity and addressing demographic decline.

In conclusion, the European nations have demonstrated a commitment to address the significant challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic through reskilling and upskilling initiatives. These efforts reflect a collective dedication to building a workforce capable of adapting to the evolving demands of the post-pandemic world.

3.3 Mental health support

As noted previously, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about profound challenges to mental health across Europe, as well as significant issues for the most disadvantaged populations. This had led governments to intervene with diverse responses to address these new emerging needs.

As in the case of reskilling and upskilling, also data related to mental health support are unfortunately very limited for Bulgaria – especially for the cohort of older NEETs which is the focus of the present report. Czechia witnessed significant developments in mental health care during the pandemic. The Ministry of Health mobilized traditional hotlines, introduced psychological support lines, and launched

comprehensive mobile applications. Volunteer projects, remote care in psychiatric outpatient clinics, and crisis centres were established to enhance mental health services. Recognizing the mental health impact of pandemic-induced measures, Greece responded rapidly as well. The Ministry of Health released comprehensive guidelines for psychological support tailored to various demographic groups. A dedicated psychosocial support hotline, developed in collaboration with the National & Kapodistrian University of Athens, offered a platform for dialogue and assistance to those facing severe mental health challenges.

Hungary, relying on civil society initiatives, provided psychological support, trauma-informed training, and various online tools during the pandemic. Initiatives like the National Crisis Management and Information Telephone Service and awareness campaigns against intimate partner violence aimed to help and raise public awareness. In Malta, mental health support initiatives targeted the general public and emergency doctors, emphasizing the importance of breaking the stigma associated with mental health. The government launched a 24/7 mental health helpline to meet the rising demand for mental health assistance, providing access to specially trained psychologists.

Poland implemented measures to mitigate the pandemic's negative impact on mental health, including expanding tele-health services, introducing crisis helplines, launching awareness campaigns, and increasing access to mental health professionals. These initiatives aimed to ensure continuity of care, immediate assistance, reduce stigma, and enhance overall mental health resilience. Romania transitioned its mental health systems from hospital to community-based services, offering preventive care, self-help groups, daycare centres, and more. The Ministry of Health's campaign, 'Mental health is a priority. Protect your mental health!', primarily targeted older people, their relatives, and professionals.

Slovakia acknowledged the pandemic's impact on mental health, prompting a focus on the 'Humane, Modern, and Accessible Mental Health Care' priority in the Recovery and Resilience Plan. Corporate support and national projects aimed to improve helplines and enhance mental health services, addressing the shortage of mental health care specialists. Spain approved two national strategies, the Mental Health Strategy (2022-2026) and the Youth Strategy 2030, both addressing mental health concerns. While the Mental Health Strategy aims to improve mental health across all age groups, the Youth Strategy emphasises promoting mental well-being, preventing suicide, and ending the stigmatisation of mental health problems among the youth.

4. Conclusions

The significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has generated significant and long-lasting transformations into the dynamics of the European labour market. This, in addition to challenges in general, may have been an even more difficult situation for older NEETs, aged between 25 and 29. This is because, as a generation already outside of education and the labour market, they may struggle with re-entering active society in a time of economic crisis. Given the unprecedented challenges brought about by the outbreak of the pandemic, which were not only limited to labour markets and overall economic stability, but also to mental health and well-being, European nations responded with a number of strategies to address the immediate concerns and lay a foundation for long-term recovery.

The dynamics of the labour market have changed substantially, and older NEETs may have faced disproportionate challenges. Nonetheless, a lack of reliable and comprehensive data on this demographic makes it challenging to draw definitive conclusions. Economic downturns, business closures, and evolving workforce demands created an environment of uncertainty, stressing the importance of adaptability for the reintegration of older NEETs into the workforce. As the country-level evidence indicate, this can be achieved through upskilling and reskilling programs, although it should be stressed how they need to be retained in the long-run, to prevent only a short-term positive impact.

Addressing the diverse challenges posed by the pandemic necessitated a comprehensive approach. The impact on mental health, particularly among vulnerable groups like NEETs, triggered quick and important responses from governments, ranging from dedicated helplines to the establishment of frameworks providing psychological support. At the same time, the provision of economic benefits and incentives, and recovery plans were implemented to prevent larger negative impact in the most struggling sectors. At the same time, reskilling and upskilling initiatives, digital transformation plans, and targeted mental health support programs were among the diverse interventions designed not only to tackle immediate concerns but also to prepare the workforce for the future changes in the labour market.

While these interventions have been overall effective during the pandemic, it should be stressed how the long-term impact remains relatively uncertain. This is because elements such as the adaptability of labour markets and the sustained well-being of the workforce may keep on changing as a result of the pandemic, in addition to their natural evolution. This stresses the great importance of policy monitoring, with a continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of policy interventions on the labour force and psychological well-being. In particular, policies need to be adaptive, responsive, and based on the evidence coming from the evolving economy. Policy monitoring, informed by sound data, is an important tool to design and implement inclusive and effective strategies.

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