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Francisco Simões · Emre Erdogan *Editors*

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IN SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY



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Chapter 4

Rural Dimension of the Employment Policies for NEETs. A Comparative Analysis of the Reinforced Youth Guarantee



Claudia Petrescu, Ruta Braziene, Òscar Prieto-Flores, Mariano Soler, Anastasia Costantini, Bianca Buligescu, Daiva Skuciene, Antonella Rocca, Federica Pizzolante, Luca Koltai, Mateusz Smoter, and Sylwia Danilowska

Abstract In 2020, the European Commission relaunched the Youth Guarantee (YG) Programme, its flagship policy for youth unemployment since 2013. This action aims to renew the European Union efforts on promoting the employment of those below 30 years old in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. All EU member states adapted this EU directive to their national policies releasing their own national strategies. One of the novelties of this transnational policy initiative is its emphasis on targeting youth living in rural, remote, or disadvantaged areas. This book chapter analyzes how different EU countries are adapting this policy at the national level and how they integrate the rural dimension in the proposed measures.

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Commonalities and differences in approaches and types of actions to be implemented across countries will be discussed.

Keywords NEETs · Policies · Youth Guarantee · (Un)employment · Disadvantaged areas

4.1 Introduction

A new EU Youth Strategy was adopted in 2018 setting out a framework for cooperation with Member States on their youth policies for the 2019–2027 period. The strategy focuses on three core areas of action, centered around the words ‘engage, connect, empower’. The COVID-19 pandemic had a serious impact on the implementation of apprenticeships and training as well as on youth employment according to the study developed by Eurofound (2021) on this topic. To support the economic recovery from the pandemic, on the 1st of July 2020, the European Commission launched a Youth Employment Support package (European Commission, 2020b) to further support youth employment for the next generation. More specifically, the European Commission put forward a proposal for a Council Recommendation on ‘A Bridge to Jobs—Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee’, to improve the 2013 Recommendation, introducing new measures that facilitate the green and digital transition for young people, and fostering vocational education and training and apprenticeship. In addition, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, proposed by the European Commission in March 2021 and followed by a declaration at the Porto Social Summit in May 2021, introduced new, ambitious targets for young people, such as reducing the rate of young people Not in Employment, nor in Education or Training (NEET) from 12.6% (2019) to 9% by 2030.

The relaunch of the Youth Guarantee (YG) Programme as a reinforced program by the European Commission is an initiative that aims to renew the efforts on promoting the employment of those below 30 years old in the aftermath of COVID-19. The Reinforced Youth Guarantee (RYG) scheme provides EU Member States the opportunity for all young people under 30 years of age to access employment, education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within 4 months of either leaving education or becoming newly unemployed. This framework was reinforced for better responding to younger generations’ needs during the pandemic period. The RYG is aiming at dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic’s effects on European youth unemployment and social inclusion and to prevent another youth employment crisis. The renewed supportive mechanism has broadened the target group, currently including young people from 15- to 29-year-olds. The predominant operative ambition is to set up solid national schemes in which young people can have direct and straightforward access to work, education, or training offers (European Commission, 2020b).

COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch (Eurofound, 2020), an initiative developed by the Eurofound to map policy measures introduced in the EU member states to cushion the social and economic effects of the latest sanitary crisis pandemic on businesses,

workers and citizens, organized a database for describing the responses of governments and social partners to the COVID-19 crisis. Despite the fact that there were more than 2700 different measures proposed since 2020 (income support, direct subsidies, active labor market measures, working conditions protection, etc.), young people were not always covered by the social protection measures.

Young people's situation in the labor market is particularly affected by socioeconomic crises. The 2008 financial crisis and the current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has a negative impact on youth employment levels and young people's working conditions, job search, and employability, making them an even more vulnerable group in the labor market (ILO, 2021; Eurofound, 2021; OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2020a). Youth joblessness has been a recurring consequence of recessions, as young people have lower levels of job security and are at greater risk of job loss. In particular, the COVID-19 crisis hit socially vulnerable groups of young people (NEET youth, unemployed young people, or young people in non-standard employment such as temporary workers, workers in atypical employment, etc.) (Eurofound, 2021; ILO, 2021, 2022; McKinsey, 2020; Simões, 2022). Indeed, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, youth employment declined in many European countries. The analysis of labor market statistics and surveys indicates a significantly larger rate of job loss among young people than among people aged 30 or over (Eurofound, 2021). The major job losses are in sectors that employ a large proportion of young people with insecure contracts (Eurofound, 2021).

As RYG's measures should be transposed at the national level, it represents a good starting point to understand the objectives of the national policies in the youth employment area, but also of the integrated approach followed by each country to tackle the NEETs issues. By the end of 2021, some countries had presented RYG implementation plans (e.g. Lithuania,¹ Italy, Poland,² Spain³) or had introduced measures related to RYG in the national strategies for employment (e.g. Romania⁴). As not all countries had implemented the RYG plans until June 2023 (e.g. Hungary), it is difficult to have a clear picture of the proposed measures and how the programme have been transposed and adapted from the EU level to the national/local contexts.

Despite all these constraints, our chapter aims to offer a better understanding of the measures dedicated to youth from rural or other disadvantaged areas within RYG. Specifically, this chapter aims to identify how different EU countries are adapting the Reinforced Youth Guarantee in their national contexts and how they

¹ Action Plan for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee Initiative in Lithuania (2021). <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/7a882e72672811eb9954cfa9b9131808>

² Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan in Poland, Ministerstwo Pracy i Polityki Społecznej (praca.gov.pl)

³ Servicio Publico de Empleo Estatal (2021). Youth Guarantee. Retrieved from <https://www.sepe.es/HomeSepe/que-es-el-sepe/comunicacion-institucional/noticias/detalle-noticia.html?folder=/2021/Junio/&detail=Plan-de-Garantia-Juvenil-Plus-2021-2027>

⁴ Romania. Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (2021). The national Strategy for Employment 2021–2027. https://mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/MMPS/SNOFM_2021-2027.pdf

integrate this rural dimension in the proposed measures. Commonalities and differences in approaches and types of actions to be implemented across countries will be analyzed.

4.2 Conceptual Framework

This chapter draws on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of personal development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Specifically, our work focuses on analyzing the general policy framework that has a significant impact on youth employment at the EU level. The bioecological model highlights the prominent role that contextual factors at different levels play in mediating an individual's specific developmental pathway (Lőrinc et al., 2020). The RYG policy framework is, thus, part of the macrosystem of the bioecological model, constituted by structural conditions and political factors of young rural NEETs integration in school, apprenticeship, or employment pathways.

According to the Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), young adults' transitions to adulthood and integration in the labor market are influenced by multiple systems, including the microsystem (e.g., family poverty level, school infrastructure problems, peers influence), mesosystem (e.g., home-school partnership), exosystem (e.g., community type, extended family, neighborhood, media, social services, local politics, local labor market), and macrosystem (e.g., rural culture, education system, public policy, attitudes and values, laws, political system, economic system) (Iruka et al., 2020; Lőrinc et al., 2020).

Our analysis aims to identify how the public policy framework addresses the transition to the labor market and what measures tackle rural youth issues in six EU countries (Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Spain). Moreover, this chapter is based on the results of the report *Employment and Employment Services for Rural NEETs: Initiatives for Tackling NEETs' and Rural NEETs' Employment Issues* (Petrescu & Prieto-Flores, 2023) and the policy report *Youth employment Support Services and Advancing Green Job Opportunities* (Petrescu & Costantini, 2023) developed within the Work Group 3 Employment Services and Employment in Rural areas of the COST Action Rural NEET Youth Network.

4.3 Characteristics of Youth Living in Rural, Remote, or Disadvantaged Areas in Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Spain

In many countries, rural young people who are in the NEET condition face problems associated with social exclusion, lack of opportunities (e.g. education, health, infrastructure, public transport, labor market conditions) or low socio-economic status.

The most common risk factors affecting this group of vulnerable young people include socio-economically disadvantaged environments, low level of education and school problems, lack of adequate housing, financial problems, learning difficulties, dissatisfaction with school; socio-emotional disorders, delinquency, health problems, homelessness, and drug or alcohol abuse (Mauro Ellena et al., 2021; Petrescu et al., 2022; Simões et al., 2017; Sadler et al., 2015). Sparsely populated, rural areas have the highest rates of NEETs, while densely populated, urban areas—where there are typically more jobs, better physical infrastructure and quality of public transport, and higher average educational attainment—have the lowest (Eurostat, 2023; Mukherjee, 2012; Petrescu et al., 2022; Simões et al., 2017; Sadler et al., 2015).

The annual Eurostat report about young people aged 15–29 in the NEET condition (Eurostat, 2023) indicates that there are considerable differences between NEET rates in urban areas (cities), towns and suburbs, and rural areas. The Eurostat data on NEETs by the degree of urbanization during the last decade (2013–2021) indicates that the share of this group of young people in rural areas is larger than in urban areas in many countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, Letonia, Poland, etc.) by 10%, 15% or 20% and well above the EU-27 average level. The average results for EU-27 countries show the lowest NEET rate occurs in cities, slightly higher in towns and suburbs, while in rural areas the rate is the highest in the above-mentioned countries. The most unfavorable position of young adults from rural areas is observed in Italy and Romania. Italy is one of the countries with the lowest differences among rural/urban areas. Poland is among the countries where the NEET rate in the group of people aged 15–29 is close to the EU average. In 2021, it amounted to 13.4% in Poland compared to 13.1% in the EU27. Rural areas and towns displayed higher NEET rates than cities across all age subgroups. The difference is especially visible in the 25–29 age group, in which the NEET rate gap between cities and rural areas reached almost 11 pp (11.1% in cities vs. 21.8% in rural areas). The gap has been quite stable for over a decade, which means that rural areas and small towns did not converge with cities. The COVID-19-related growth of the NEET rate is more visible in rural areas (Romania, Hungary, Spain, Lithuania) as well as in towns and suburbs (Spain) than in cities (see Fig. 4.1).

Rural NEETs face several barriers that have been mentioned before (limited access to labor market due to lack of transport opportunities, low education level, lack of information and employment opportunities) making it difficult for them to enter the job market or pursue education and training (Petrescu et al., 2022; Sadler et al., 2015; Simões et al., 2017). Young people in rural areas usually have lower levels of education compared to their urban counterparts. This can make it more challenging for them to find employment, particularly in fields that require specialized knowledge or training.

Education is very important for youth integration into the labor market being one of the trigger factors for becoming NEET. Leaving education early can also have significant consequences for the individual, as well as for society, in the long term such as an increased risk of poverty and social exclusion, poverty in work due to low-paid jobs, low self-esteem, mental health issues, alcohol and drug abuse etc.

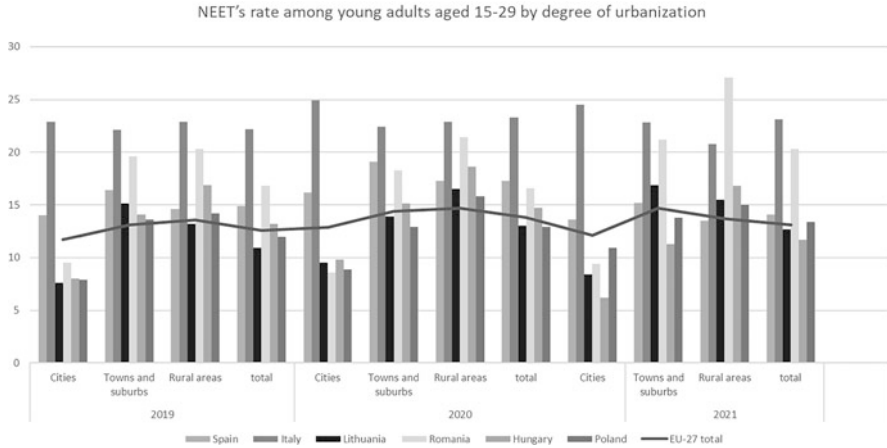


Fig. 4.1 NEET's rate among young adults aged 15–29 by degree of urbanization, 2019–2021 (%). Source: Eurostat—Labour Force Survey [EDAT_LFSE_29]; data extraction on 27.05.23

(Burlina et al., 2021; EUROFOUND, 2016; Lawy et al., 2010; De Luca et al., 2020; Madia et al., 2022; Smoter, 2022). The European Union Council set a target that the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 9% by 2030 (Council of the European Union, 2021). In 2022, an average of 9.6% of early leavers from education and training was identified within the EU and the early school leaving rate differs considerably in selected countries. Among the countries included in our analyses, the highest early school leaving rates in rural areas are observed in Romania (24.5%) and Hungary (19.7%) (see Fig. 4.2).

4.4 The Reinforced Youth Guarantee Programme in Hungary, Italy, Spain, Romania, Poland, and Lithuania and the Integration of Rural, Remote or Disadvantaged Areas Dimension

The YG scheme is the EU flagship initiative launched in 2013 targeting the transition of NEET youth to employment, education or training. To monitor the progress of YG at the national level, each country delivers yearly fiches⁵ providing information about the implementation of the program at the national level. As for EU27, the coverage of NEETs by the YG is 40.3% in 2020, but this percentage differs considerably among countries. In the countries analyzed in this chapter, the highest YG coverage is observed in Lithuania (65.9%) and Poland (42.8%) and the lowest

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?advSearchKey=YGYEI&mode=advancedSubmit&catId=1307&doc_submit=&policyArea=0&policyAreaSub=0&country=0&year=0

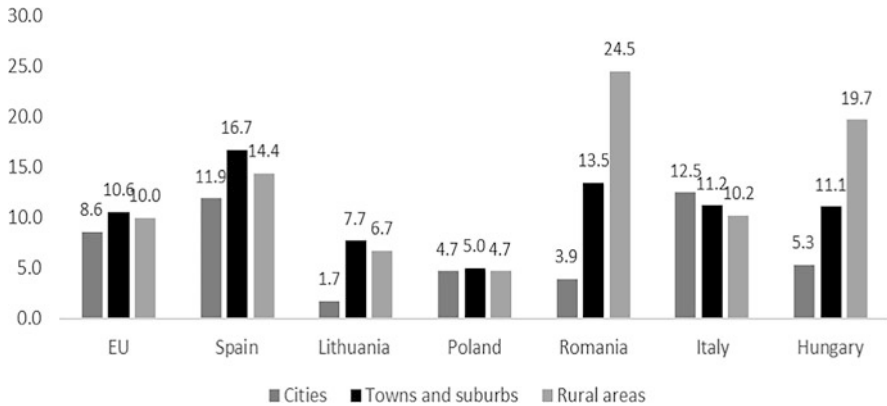


Fig. 4.2 Early leavers from education and training by degree of urbanization, 2022 (% of population aged 18–24). Source: Eurostat—Labour Force Survey [EDAT_LFSE_30]; data extraction on 23.04.2023

coverage is reported for Hungary (2.6%), Italy (11.2%), and Romania (8.9%). The take-up of a training, apprenticeship, or employment offer within 4 months also differs by country. The highest take-up offer is in Hungary (89.9%) and the lowest in Spain (9.1%) in 2020 (see Fig. 4.3).

Considering the success of the YG measures in EU countries and following the COVID-19 pandemic impact on youth employment, the European Commission relaunched the RYG aiming to create employment opportunities for young people or to increase the space for employment opportunities by improving skills and competences, including upskilling and reskilling. In the context of the twin transition (digital and green), RYG includes measures to learn or improve digital and green competencies and skills of young people. Each country from our analysis included these measures in their RYG national plans/strategies (approved or in the process to be approved like in Hungary) for learning or improving digital and green competencies as mandatory for young people covered by the policy.

The most important active labor market instruments considered in the RYG at the EU and national levels are apprenticeships and traineeships, given the previous results achieved through their implementation (Broeck et al., 2017). These are considered by the RYG in the analyzed countries as important policy instruments both for facilitating the transition of young people to the labor market and for involving the business sector in this process of increasing youth employment by addressing their skills needs (Petrescu & Prieto-Flores, 2023).

Given the main challenges in the implementation of YG and the need to increase youth employment, the European Commission proposes a new approach to tackle youth problems that includes four stages: mapping, outreach, preparation, and offer. At the same time, RYG mainstreams the individualized and integrated approach as the best option in dealing with NEETs due to the diversity of national, regional, or local socio-economic contexts and their categories and characteristics. The one-stop-

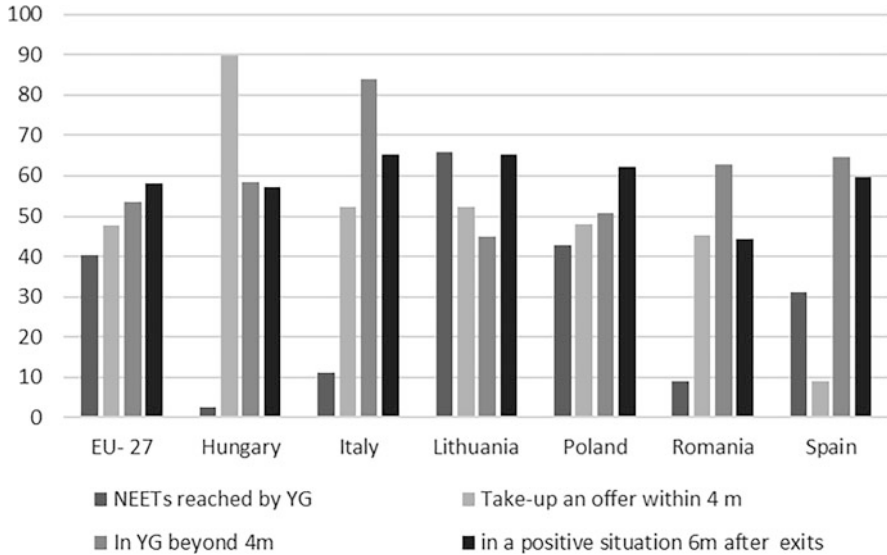


Fig. 4.3 NEETs reached by the Youth Guarantee at EU and national level (%). Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1161&langId=en>. Notes: (1) However, a number of countries do not report on 25–29 age group (among which Hungary), (2) For Hungary when the denominator of the coverage indicator is restricted to the 15–24 age-group, then still only a 5.3% of young NEETs are reached by the YG

shop model is promoted as one of integrated service provision for NEETs by RYG which proposes also preparatory training (with digital, green, language, entrepreneurial, and career management skills) before taking up an offer. Also, better coordination and partnership between policy areas (employment, education, youth, social and gender equality) is a condition for NEETs integration into the labor market and in society. All these measures for the EU level are transposed at the national/regional level but the national plans for implementation of RYG should be adapted to the national context and needs. In the countries covered by this chapter, these measures are included in the national plans/strategies.

The development of the RYG at national level and the specific measures for NEETs from rural, remote, or disadvantaged areas were based on a combination of empirical evidence, stakeholder consultations, and best practices from other countries and regions (Petrescu & Pietro-Flores, 2023; Petrescu & Costantini, 2023). As countries implemented several policies aimed at reducing youth unemployment in the past, the evaluations of these policies were used to inform the development of the RYG. These evaluations provided insights about the strengths and weaknesses of previous policies and identified areas where improvements were needed.

By 2021, some of the countries covered by this chapter have already presented RYG implementation plans (Lithuania, Spain, Poland) or included RYG measures in the national strategy of employment (Romania). In Hungary, the National YG Implementation Plan dated 2014 is still in place (Government of Hungary, 2014)

and the original measures have been extended to a wider age group in 2022 (Bördös et al., 2022).

4.4.1 The Reinforced Youth Guarantee for Rural NEETs: A Country by Country Analysis

Like many other EU countries, **Spain** presented the first YG Implementation Plan on 19 December 2013 (European Commission, 2020b). The last program called “Youth Guarantee Plan Plus 2021–2027 for decent work for young people” was approved on 9 June 2021 with a total budget of 4.950 million euros divided into different programs (SEPE, 2021). The pillars of the Plan focus on (a) improving the employability and entrepreneurship of young people, based on personalized guidance and monitoring of users in all support actions; (b) training aimed at acquiring skills and improving the professional experience, taking into account the needs to transform the production model; (c) improving employment opportunities through targeted incentives, especially for people who need special consideration; (d) promoting equal opportunities; and (e) upholding entrepreneurship and promotion of business initiative and improvement of management (SEPE, 2021). Some of the specific measures included in this plan are flexibility and agility of management and entrepreneurship for young people affected by the health crisis, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This program grants microcredits for young people who cannot access ordinary credit to obtain financing, without the need for guarantees. Microcredits could be used by young people to develop a business or to continue their education. In addition, the plan promotes the reinforcement of professional career guidance. To address gender inequalities, the plan also proposes some measures for women with family responsibilities or in other vulnerable situations. The plan emphasizes the need of personalized itineraries for various categories of vulnerable young people (with disabilities, early school leavers, migrants, LGBTQI etc.).

Spain is among the countries that have presented specific measures to support NEETs from rural, remote, or disadvantaged areas (“Youth Guarantee Plan Plus 2021–2027 for decent work for young people”). Regeneration of rural and urban spaces in decline is seen as a key action to recover these environments and to open a window of opportunity to generate youth employment. The orientation for the regeneration of rural and urban spaces is a measure aimed especially at young people with creative initiative who seek to carry out actions with a social purpose. All of this will allow for a double impact: job creation and response to the housing demand of vulnerable people. The generational succession measures in rural areas are aimed at giving generational relief in traditional jobs. The enhancement of the historical, natural, and cultural heritage, the recovery of trades, and the generation of job opportunities are encouraged through the promotion of workshops, employment workshops, and mixed Employment-Training programs. The Employment-Training programs will include professional experience in companies in the intervention

territories, with special attention to training and employment within the framework of rural tourism. The Redes Taller Joven program will facilitate mobility within the national territory based on the interests of young people with specific help that will improve their opportunities.

In **Lithuania**, the new action plan for the implementation of the RYG initiative was approved in 2021. The aim of the new plan is “to ensure that all persons aged 15–29 who are not in employment, education or training receive an offer to work, continue learning (including professional training in the form of an apprenticeship, practice or an internship)”. During the implementation of the plan, services are provided to inactive and unemployed young persons aged 16–29. The new RYG action plan implementation proposes that most of the attention should be paid to persons with medium and limited employment opportunities, who display low motivation levels, are already long-term unemployed, or are at risk of becoming unemployed without additional help. Since the long-term unemployed are one of the most vulnerable groups in society and they are particularly at risk of becoming socially excluded, the first priority should be to prevent individuals from becoming long-term unemployed.

The Lithuanian RYG plan lacks specific measures targeting NEET young people from rural, remote, or disadvantaged areas. In comparison to the previous plan, the Reinforced Youth Guarantee initiative in Lithuania includes the provision of professional guidance services and monitoring the number of inactive young people in all its municipalities.

Italy is advancing in the implementation of the RYG scheme, which is comprehensive and based on a partnership strategy, combined with a strong profiling methodology that aims at a personalized approach and the development of successful individual pathways. Still, the Italian levels of unemployed youth and NEET rates are the highest in the EU, and large disparities across the northern and southern regions persist.

Geared to national, regional, and local circumstances, the RYG is based on building partnership-based approaches which may be less strong in rural areas. Nevertheless, the problem of rural youth is mentioned more in the public debate, but it is still not very well represented in the policy measures. As the Italian context is characterized by many small villages and rural areas, specific measures which take into account all the characteristics of these areas should be implemented.

The new RYG implementation plan in **Poland** was approved in 2022 and relies on four pillars—Public Employment Service (PES), Voluntary Labor Corps (VLC), central and regional projects, and a loan program. Based on the diagnosis of the situation of young people in the labor market, five priority groups were identified in the RYG: those aged 15–17 who dropped out of school or have neglected compulsory schooling or education; persons aged 18–29, registered as unemployed; NEET youth; people who are unemployed or looking for a job, people finishing their education or university graduates; people who have left foster care; women under 30 raising children.

As in many other countries, rural NEETs were not identified as a priority group in Polish RYG. However, within the RYG, a strong emphasis will be put on improving

strategies that allow PES to reach out to individuals living in rural and remote areas. This is the main change compared to the YG plan from 2014–2020 and this will affect mainly NEETs from rural areas. The outreach activities within the RYG strategies will be based on the following (a) improved cooperation with local grassroots organisations that work with young people on a daily basis; (b) mobile information points that will provide PES services in remote areas; (c) information campaigns in local media and social media; (d) stronger cooperation with job advisors in local schools; (e) more services offered via online meeting platforms; and (f) presence of PES outreach teams in local events (sport, cultural, other local events). These activities will be carried out both by PES and VLC employees. Besides, NEETs from rural areas will be eligible to use various Active Labor Market Policies (ALMPs) and services provided by PES within the RYG. Importantly, the YG in Poland has directed EU funds to finance various projects within the RYG. In the upcoming years, the crucial measure of the Polish RYG will be the European Funds for Social Development Programme (FERS) (a new initiative dedicated to social inclusion in the European Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2021–2027). The modernization of the PES is planned in FERS (e.g., developing uniform quality standards for the functioning of PES and VLC, or ensuring effective coordination of activities aimed at young people), within the framework of the rules set out in the reinforced YG and the long-term unemployed. Professional activation covering unemployed young people and those in a difficult situation on the labor market will be implemented as well.

In **Hungary**, the RYG was transposed into a national plan but it has not been approved yet. At the same time, very little information is currently available on the spatial characteristics of YG implementation.

Overall, nearly half of those covered by the program (a slightly higher proportion of the long-term unemployed) live in more disadvantaged rural settlements or sparsely populated areas of Hungary. Looking at the drop-out rate of the target group, the Equinox (2018) impact evaluation study showed that some groups, such as women and disadvantaged people, are less likely to complete the program successfully (although the effect is not significant) and that those living in large cities have a higher drop-out rate than their rural counterparts, while higher educational attainment significantly increases the chances of successful completion. Importantly, two-thirds of participants of the apprenticeship program live in rural areas (Koping-Tárki, 2021).

In **Romania**, the RYG is part of the National Strategy of Employment 2021–2027. The measures/actions included in the National Strategy for Employment for 2021–2027 for young people are (a) the development of prevention systems by strengthening partnerships between institutions with competencies in the field of employment, education, and social protection and other entities to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET; (b) the establishment/development of youth centers/clubs at the community level; (c) mapping, informing, preparing, and providing the offer itself (integrated packages of activation measures for young people, including NEETs); (d) improving the tracking system of the situation of NEETs after integration into the labor market or into the education or training system;

(e) developing volunteering among young people, including NEETs; and (f) ensuring that young people, including NEETs, acquire transversal skills, with a focus on basic digital skills, career management, communication, and teamwork skills, as well as social and green entrepreneurship skills.

There are no specific measures for NEETs from rural areas even if the urban-rural gap is mentioned in the context analysis of the Romanian National Strategy of Employment 2021–2027. As in other countries (e.g. Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary etc), the percentage of rural NEETs is higher in Romania and also other categories of NEETs are more prevalent in the countryside (long-term unemployment, young people with disabilities, young people with family responsibilities). The National Strategy of Employment 2021–2027 recognized all these problems and NEETs different profiles in the context analysis, but their specific needs are supposed to be addressed not through dedicated policy measures, but through individualized intervention. The Romanian approach is not, therefore, to propose specific policy measures, but to provide young people with the resources after mapping their needs, because the individualized intervention should tackle all NEETs issues and be tailored to each individual. According to the Strategy objective focusing on NEETs, the integrated packages of activation measures may include counseling, mediation, subsidies, vocational training/internships/internships, skills assessment, enrolment, and support for participation in flexible second-chance programs, including vocational training modules, provision of personalized support services (training allowances to cover training-related expenses—transport, meals, etc.), subsidizing the costs of obtaining a driver’s license, internship, apprenticeship, mobility allowances, employment allowances.

4.5 Conclusion

Due to the COVID 19 pandemic the overall unemployment rate increase in Europe and affected to a high extent young people (Eurofound, 2021). Pandemic related measures led rural youth to be among the groups that were more likely to lose their jobs and to have limited access to education. Despite all the challenges in implementing YG, this initiative has positively influenced the national policy framework in the field of youth employment (Petrescu et al., 2021; Petrescu et al., 2022). The RYG continues the implementation of the measures proposed by the YG and is the public policy that defines the intervention framework for increasing youth employment at EU and national level.

The European Commission intended to provide an effective response to youth unemployment through the RYG and also to introduce new perspectives and new opportunities for working with NEETs. Although the European Commission requires Member States to adapt these measures from RYG to the specificities and needs of young people at national level, the transposition of the measures into national policy is sometimes limited and there are no specific measures for certain categories of young people/NEETs or for those from rural or vulnerable areas. This

is worthwhile to note given that according to official data (e.g., Eurostat) a higher number of NEETs live in rural or remote/vulnerable areas including in several of the countries covered by our analysis.

The evidence supporting the national RYGs/strategy for NEETs further justifies the proposed measures to a large extent, but there are still no specific measures for young NEETs in rural areas (although they are the most numerous). The analysis of RYG demonstrates that from all the countries analyzed Spain is the only country where there are specific measures dedicated to NEET youth from rural, remote and disadvantaged areas. In Lithuania, Spain, Romania, Poland and Italy some measures have been issued for specific categories of NEETs such as long term unemployed, young people with disabilities or those who have family responsibilities (young mothers with children, young people that take care of other family members etc.).

Rural NEETs are not defined as a priority target group within the RYG and no measures dedicated to this group have been introduced in most of the countries included in our analysis. The good side of the RYG is that the outreach activities seem to have gained priority. This is important from the rural NEETs' perspective as it may bring them closer to the public employment services. Also, some of the priorities (e.g., increasing the number of affordable and good quality early childcare institutions) may help to overcome barriers that young mothers from rural areas face, given that limited access to social support services is a great challenge, especially in rural areas. However, the official key indicators are missing to properly monitor the labour market situation of rural NEETs. This should be improved.

Finally, at the national level, the RYG policy framework includes measures for creating the institutional and structural conditions for NEETs employment and social integration. Specifically, national RYGs propose to tackle the barriers to labor market that NEETs face in all vulnerable areas, including in rural ones. These included limited job opportunities and limited access to educational and vocational training programs, making it hard to acquire the skills and qualifications necessary to compete in the labour market; limited access to public transportation, which can make it challenging for these young people to travel to nearby towns and cities for work, education, or other needs; or limited access to public childcare institutions which makes it difficult for young parents to reconcile work with family obligations.

4.5.1 New Research Developments

NEETs are defined mainly by age, employment and education (Arnett, 2007; Mascherini, 2019; Mauro & Mitra, 2020; Yates et al., 2011). An extensive research work is dedicated to youth employment and to policy frameworks addressing this issue. All this research work produces evidence for the improvement of the youth employment policy framework, including Youth Guarantee. Considering all the new developments of the EU and national policy framework on youth employment, in the following period there is a need, however, for new research avenues.

- **Impact evaluation for the RYG in each country.** Evaluations should be conducted regularly at the national and EU levels, and researchers should pay more attention to the urban-rural or regional disparities. Impact evaluation could analyse the individual and structural changes determined by RYG at national level.
- **Research on the new green and digital competences of young people.** This line of inquiry must include rural areas. The new integrated packages for NEETs cover training for green and digital skills, but it is important to see how these skills are applied.
- **Analysis of the active labour market policy instruments and their relevance in various EU contexts and for different NEETs categories.** The research of the ALMP instruments is important for the development and improvement of new policies.

4.5.2 Policy Implications

The analyses of RYG framework at national level shows the following improvements at policy level:

- **Prioritise the most vulnerable groups.** Many evaluations in various countries found that job seekers with better opportunities in the labour market are more likely to be included in programmes. The initiative should focus on the more vulnerable youth groups.
- **Address geographic disparities.** Flexibility should also be increased from a territorial perspective; remote, rural and peripheral authorities should be able to tailor the national program to local level context.
- **Tailored measures for different NEETs categories.** RYG proposes various measures for specific categories of NEETs (long term unemployed, people with disabilities, young people with family responsibilities, migrants etc). The individualised packages should be based on a needs analysis of NEETs and provide specific measures for various categories of NEETs. PES should be more flexible and implement these individualised packages.

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