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# NEET YOUTHS – TRAINING AND INCLUSION ON LABOR MARKET

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Sorin CACE<sup>1</sup>  
Daniela CÎRȚÎNĂ<sup>2</sup>  
Rodica DAVID<sup>3</sup>  
Corina CACE<sup>4</sup>  
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**Abstract:** *The NEET concept, an acronym for “Not in Education, Employment or Training” is used as of 2010 within the European Union for describing a category of youths with ages between 16 and 24 years, who are not professionally employed, nor pursuing any educational or vocational training program. Also as of 2010, on the political agenda of the European Union were included in the discussion the issues related to this category regarding the labor market addressing this, diminishing unemployment, and finding solutions so that as many as possible NEET young Europeans might be effectively employed. Romania’s goals must be updated with the purpose of integrating the situation of the young Romanian NEET, the gender perspective, and their needs of employment on the labor market in the future planning.*

*In this context, the paper presents statistics and national strategic documents, ways of monitoring and analyzing the prevalence of labor market vulnerability, as well as the quantification of issues that are met and/or are created by the young NEETs, because labor market exclusion most often than not results in financial difficulties and their extended dependence on family, which might slow down the process of personal development.*

**Key words:** *NEETs, social inclusion, education, employment*

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Researcher I, Institute for Quality of Life Research, Bucharest, Romanian Academy; Institute for Quality of Society Research, University” Constantin Brancusi” of Târgu Jiu, email: [cacesorin@gmail.com](mailto:cacesorin@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Univ. Prof. PhD, Institute for Quality of Society Research, University” Constantin Brancusi” of Târgu Jiu, email: [danielacirtina@gmail.com](mailto:danielacirtina@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Junior Researcher, PhD Student., Institute for Quality of Society Research, University” Constantin Brancusi” of Târgu Jiu, email: [david.rodica.mba@gmail.com](mailto:david.rodica.mba@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup> Prof. PhD, Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance, University of Bucharest, email: [corina.cace@gmail.com](mailto:corina.cace@gmail.com)

## Introduction

The sustained economic growth of the last years, cumulated with increased occupational opportunities and with an expanding waging policy, had as affect an increased standard of living among the population and the substantial diminishment of the AROPE indicator (the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion) indicator, also impacting the youths. Romania is in a permanent catching-up race for recovering the income gap separating it from countries in the western or southern European Union. The equivalent net median income for the age group 16 to 24 years (related to the purchasing power parity) doubled, since the accession to the European Union from 18% to 36% of the EU-15 average (European Commission. 2020)

After exiting the financial crisis that affected (as well) the economies of the European Union, both Romania and a large share of EU countries record sustained economic growth. It was reflected in increased occupational opportunities, as over the reported period (2014-2019) was noticed both an increase in the employment rate and a significant decrease of the unemployment rate. Over these five years (2014-2019), Romania succeeded in improving the participation on the labor market, the average number of employees increasing by over 650 thousand in this period (NIS, Tempo Online) and diminished the unemployment rate to a historical minimum (below 4%), which might be found only by the beginning of '90s. (Zamfir, Cace, 2020).

Regarding the Roma population, that is a more exposed on this segment, the national strategies of the member-states should pursue a specific approach, which according to the Basic Joint Principles regarding Roma Inclusion would contribute actively to the social inclusion of the Roma in society and to eliminating segregation where it persists. (Cace et al., 2014)

The strategies should integrate into the wider framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy and contribute to it and, consequently, they should be coherent with the national reform programs.

## Youths and labor market

The labor market situation among youths in Romania remains below the average rates of the European Union, save for the large numbers of NEETs. Within the European Union, there were identified seven categories – NEET youth subgroups. These are: the ones who lost their jobs, short-term unemployed, long-term unemployed, ill, or disabled individuals, those with family responsibilities, the discouraged, and those who have other reasons. In the framework of this typology, 'other reasons' represents a self-standing category.

According to Eurostat, the European NEET young population in unemployment in the year 2019 is by 5.9%, 6.3% for males, and by 5.5% for women (Eurostat Database, 2019). By comparison, in Romania, unemployment among young NEET is lower, and this difference is attributed to the distinction between youths seeking a job, and the inactive ones. Regarding the weight of inactive young NEET, the European average is by 10.5%; 5.9% for males, and by 15.3% for women. Romania monitors this dynamic

of the youths' inactivity depending on gender, and the total of inactive youths is by 15%, from whom 6% males, and 24.7% women. The main explanation for the disproportionately high weight of young NEET women in inactivity resides in the family dynamics. Nurturing the child plays an important role in substantiating this difference. In Romania, the difference between the share of young inactive women is 4 times higher than in the case of young men, suggesting thus cultural dissimilarities regarding labor and gender perspectives. The only European country with a comparable inactivity share among youths is Slovakia, by 24.8%. (Eurostat, 2020)

Regarding the analysis of the NEET group, the situation in Romania differs considerably against the EU average.

In the Eurofound Country Report Exploring NEETs Diversity and the Country Profile – RO, 2016, the analysis on NEETs subgroups showed that the highest share of NEETs in Romania is “other NEETs” by 28.5%, more than double against the EU average of 11.8%. The second group in size is “NEETs because of family responsibilities” by 21.8% (close to the EU average by 20.3%). NEETs in the category “short-term unemployment” represent 17.2% from total NEETs (compared with 25.5% at EU level), followed closely by 15.3% of the “long-term unemployed NEETs” (compared with 23.1% the EU average). By 13.5%, a considerable share of the NEETs is “discouraged in seeking a job” – „young people who have stopped looking for work because they believe that there are no job opportunities for them” (compared with the EU average by 5.9%). A 3.3 share are “NEETs because of illness or disability, less than half of the EU average by 7.1%. Finally, only 0.4% of the NEETs from Romania are “reentering education or labor market” (Neagu, Berigel, Lendzhova, 2021)

At the same time, the risk of social exclusion among youths in Romania follows a similar pattern to the general EU average, but it is considerably higher for all categories of NEETs previously exposed.

By analyzing the gender differences among the Romanian NEET youths, we might notice that young men are preponderantly grouped in the categories: short-term unemployment, long-term unemployment, and other reasons. In turn, the vast majority of the young NEET women from Romania calls on family responsibilities, as main reason for not being in the labor market, or in any form of education or vocational training.

An important pre-condition for implementing efficiently the social policies aimed at NEETs, is that youths are registered with the Public Labor Force Employment Services (PES).

The demographic evolutions corroborated with the socio-economic trends indicating the transition to a knowledge economy, and accompanied by the decline of traditional professions, impose evaluation and comprehensive forecast of the trends displayed on the labor market. Thus, among the young population emerge special issues generated by the specifics of this age group, affected by high unemployment rates, lacking experience, lacking required skills and qualifications for exercising the intended and/or required professions in the labor market (Eurofound, 2016). These elements have brought the issue of youths' insertion and evolution in the labor market to the attention

of national governments, and it was rendered concrete by measures intended to facilitate their transition to the labor market by adequate, lasting, and sustainable insertion, in the conditions of a dynamic economy, in permanent development and change (IRES, 2018).

At national level, the most important normative documents were synthesized in the framework of the National Strategy in the Field of Youths Policy for the period 2015-2020. Another strategic document has as target the youths in the framework of the Strategy of the National Agency for Labor Force Employment (A.N.O.F.M.) 2014-2020, where one of the specific objectives aims at youths' employment.

Another framework document is the Youths' Guarantee Implementation Plan 2017-2020, approved by the Romanian Government in July 2017, which is a strategic document in the field of youths' employment that will continue the measures and programs enforced by the Youths' Guarantee Implementation Plan 2014-2015, drafted as result of the Recommendation of the Council to the European Commission and the Member States regarding the establishment of the Youths Guarantee. (Petrescu, Neguț, Mihalache, 2021).

All measures in the framework of the "Youths' Guarantee" are supported by various forms of financial support, granted either to the future employees or to the employers. The most important measures of the program, as well as their responsibility sphere are measures falling in the responsibility of the Ministry of Labor, Social Protection, measures in the responsibility sphere of the Ministry of Education and Research, and measures in the sphere of responsibility of the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism.

At national level, a series of factors were identified that determine the high values of the unemployment rate among youths, as presented in the following table:

**Table 1.** Factors determining high values of the unemployment rate among youths

Youths' education level	The lowest employment rates are recorded in the case of youths with low educational levels, including here also those with upper secondary education
The number of early school leavers	It is high and leads to increased risk of becoming unemployed or inactive persons
Discrepancy between the skills and competences of youths and the ones demanded by employers	The results of a survey on this topic highlight that 49% of the youths' regard that only to a much lesser extent knowledge gained by following an educational institution meet the needs on the labor market. 69% of the youths' regard practical activities as insufficient. 85% of the employers consider that young graduates are trained by the education system at theoretic level, but not at the practical one;
Mistrust of youths in the efficiency of short-term vocational training courses, or in vocational reconversion programs	The fact that participating to these might ensure obtaining a job;

Lacking work experience	It makes the youths vulnerable to competition against other workers in the market, as 59% of the employers declare that cannot afford to employ lacking experience youths;
Youths are less motivated to work	They ask on hiring for too high wages and large part of them are not prepared to accept also different jobs according with the professional requirements and their basic training;

*Source: IRES, 2018, processing, p. 11-12*

The forecast realized by IRES reveals that the distribution of youths' participation to education and/or in the labor market shows once more the relatively high share of young NEETs (inactive, not included in education). As of 18 years age, the share of NEETs is by over 20%, and its persistence also at ages of over 30 years is worrying, fact that might perpetuate the inactivity state of an important segment of the working age population.

At the same time, the estimates regarding the effect of eliminating the gaps between Roma and the general population indicate that this leads to high economic benefits. If we assume that all these economic benefits generated for the Roma population do not affect labor force employment and the educational achievement of other groups, then the effects would have positive impact on GDP.

Another important aspect highlighted in the framework of this study is represented by the analysis of the youths' unemployment depending on their field of training, which is of major importance, if we consider the existing criticisms regarding the educational adequacy to labor market demand. It was noticed that the incidence of inactivity is by about 40% for youths who have only general skills or qualifications, and that graduating some specialized programs is associated to a significant decrease of inactivity incidence >15%.

It is estimated that there will be a transition of the labor force to professions requiring higher education and this makes plausible a significant decrease of employment for jobs like workers, technicians, and assimilated occupations and an increase in professional occupations.

Regarding forecasts for labor force in Romania, the size of the labor force is on continuing decrease from 8.8 million in 2020 to 8.2 million in 2030. This slight decrease by 6% is accompanied by a decrease by just 4% for the labor force aged 15 to 30 years. Among these, the most significant developments are noticed for the labor force aged 30-34 years, which decreases by 28%, and the age group 25-29 years, which registers a constant decline, materialized in a drop by 13%, over the period 2018-2030. By contrast, we observe a stability of the labor force for the age groups 15-19 years and 20-24 years over the entire forecast period. At yearly level, we remark a slight increase of the labor force for the age group 20-24 years over the period 2026-2030, which compensates the drop recorded at the level of 25-29 years age group. (IRES, 2018).

Among the serious and very serious issues identified by youths in this diagnosis, the most important for most of them are represented by the chance of having corresponding job and housing (though on a decreasing trend against 2018, these issues are still current).

The issue of access to decent housing for youths is complicated and self-perceived as such, according to the study from 2020. The access to corresponding housing is regarded as problematic by most young individuals (76%, summed up shares) (IRES, 2020). The weight is even higher in the case of young individuals over the age of 19 years (IRES, 2018, p.11). Even though most youths in the age group 14 to 19 years live with their parents and have not faced the issue of access to housing, more than three quarters of them regard as “problematic” the access to corresponding housing.

The situation of youths in Romania, and their expectations in 2020 are different from the ones of 2018. The estimation about “satisfaction with life” registered an evaluation on significant decrease in 2020, against 2018 for the levels regarding education and incomes.

The severe housing deprivation rate in Romania, though on significant decrease between 2014 and 2019, is still maintained much above the EU average (14.2%, against only 4% in 2018), and the youths are to a large extent affected by overcrowding of houses (EUROSTAT, 2020). At the same time, the weight of youths in the age group 18 to 34 years who live with their parents is significant in most European countries, the average value for this indicator exceeding 50% (Eurostat, 2020).

Regarding the Romanian educational level, it is perceived by most youths as being to a much lesser extent adjusted to the needs on labor market, or as not contributing to developing the required competences for facilitating the transition to a job (in the year 2018, 58% believed that the education system prepares them to lesser extent for life, whereas in 2020 this share increases to 75%).

As it is closely linked, education represents indirectly an indicator for the important factors in finding a job, 56% of the youths considering that vocational training is important in finding a job (on decrease by 10 percent against 2018).

Although youths speak about the inadaptability of the educational system, at the same time what they expect from a job is not the adequacy according to training, as instead prevails the higher remuneration. According to the IRES diagnosis, the correspondence to the field of studies and the nature of the activities developed on the job are less searched features in performing the job (IRES, 2018, 2020).

According to the CRPE 2019 Report, the Youth Guarantee (YG) 2017-2020 has a more complex structure, compared with the previous version and pursues a series of targets that consider preponderantly youths from vulnerable categories for diminishing the social exclusion risks and the ones of disadvantaged communities. Even though the program does not specify obviously for paying more attention to the Roma community, this fact is self-understood from the beginning, as most of the youths of Roma ethnicity from disadvantaged communities should be aimed by the YG program.

In 2014, the records showed that at European level more than 1 out of 2 youths of Roma ethnicity was included in the NEET category. (Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014)

The Youths Guarantee represented and are representing an opportunity for Romania, meaning that it might contribute substantially to the inclusion of NEET youths of Roma ethnicity, to diminish the cases of exclusion and discrimination. (County Employment Agency [AJOFM], 2020)

The main difficulties of the NEET youths of Roma ethnicity in continuing education and employment are: education and low level of schooling determined mainly by high school early leaving that creates major difficulties in relating to employers; limited support for continuing studying, or accessing labor market from both family and community, and discontinuous institutional support; poverty and lacking financial resources for continuing studying; lacking interest for gaining employment (the lack of a culture of work), and the low mobility for labor. To these are added some forms of discrimination and limited access to information and employment opportunities. (CRPE, 2019, p. 27-28).

At the same time, one of the conclusions of this report hints the need of increasing the capacity of the Public Employment Services to reach out to the youths at risk of marginalization, implicitly the ones of Roma ethnicity (to identify them and inform them), and following step, to implement complex and non-standardized measures to accompany them on the labor market based on an in-depth understanding of the individual and local context.

The youths perceive a series of difficulties in finding a job. The last report of 2020, shows that 80% of the youths consider that they have issues in identifying a job (for 36% from the interviewed ones, it represents “an issue”, and for 44% it is “a very serious issue”) (Ministry of Youth and Sports [MTS], 2020)

The youths feel the need to be supported in finding a job. More than half (52%) from the 96% who identify the need of some centers for youths, believe that these centers should support them mainly with information in finding a job. The main services, based on the needs and interests of the youths that the centers for youths should provide are on one hand information, guidance, and counselling for gaining a job, and on the other hand training, skilling, and upskilling courses for vocational specialization.

The youths are aware that the transition from education to work represents a difficult stage in which the youths often need support (assistance, advice) in the difficult endeavor of seeking a job (NIS, 2016) The youths feel the need of improving their portfolio of competences and skills demanded for adjusting to the dynamic on the labor market. Next to the perception regarding the precarious supply of jobs for youths, from the quoted report results the insight about a relatively poor adjustment of the school to labor market demands. 44% of the interviewed youths consider that school trains them to a lesser extent to be able to develop their own business (MTS, 2020).

The interaction of youths with the labor market is made harder also by the fact that the supply of alternatives to full time employment for an undetermined period, such as

part-time employment, or temporary employment are very precarious in Romania. While the average weight of the active age population working part time in EU countries varies around 18%, for this interval of reference, in Romania, this share decreased constantly from 8.5% in 2014 to 5.8% in 2019 (Eurostat, Labor Force Survey)

In the case of temporary employees, the differences are even higher from 1 to 1.5% in Romania, to over 15% as EU member-states average for the entire considered period (Eurostat, Labor Force Survey)

An indicator of the precarious job supply, but also regarding the educational offer at local level, is the fact that one third of the youths interviewed for the 2020 Barometer declare that they are working or learning in another locality than the one where they live, and 5% from them live on a temporary basis in the locality where they learn or work (MTS, 2020)

The external mobility is also relatively high, especially at the level of intention. Even though only 3% of the interviewed youths declare that they have been to studies abroad, 20% express the intention of studying abroad, and 39% stated their intention of working temporarily abroad (MTS, BOPT).

The perceived lacking chances of having decent living conditions (the share drops from 84% in 2018, to 80% in 2020) (MTS- BOPT) and a corresponding job (the share drops from 84% in 2018, to 76% in 2020) (MTS -BOPT) are actual hindrances in the decision of setting up a family. Almost half of the youths (49% in 2020, against 56% in 2018) (MTS, BOPT) regard as problematic the required conditions for setting up a family, these being correlated with the access to decent housing and access to a job.

## Conclusions

In the current socio-economic context, the main reason of social exclusion of the youths is represented by the lacking opportunities on the labor market for both youths with higher education and for those with upper secondary education. The lack of jobs, an issue signaled by the authorities and the members of the society, determines that youths, especially the ones lacking labor market experience (and here are mainly represented young graduates), become a category that is even more vulnerable in the Romanian society (Ionescu, 2017).

The youths who are not enrolled in a form of education encounter a major issue regarding the opportunities on labor market. They cannot develop professionally from the perspective of the jobs that are supplied for them in the holiday periods, preponderantly during summer the supplied jobs are for unskilled individuals and have a seasonal character.

At the same time, a risk related to the type of such workplaces refers to lacking legal employment forms. The employment rate among youths in the age group 15 to 24 years is low and this is a group where are found the fresh graduates of upper secondary and higher education, and NEETs as well.



Employers prefer skilled individuals to the detriment of youths, who in a large share do not have experience in the labor market. According to the studies in the field, employers are compelled to supplement the studies of the youths with special courses. There are two ways of interpreting this fact: employers are discontent with the training provided by the education system to the youths; the demands/needs of the employers are rather specific and specialized courses are necessary (Ionescu, 2017).

Thus, the discrepancy between the skills/competences of the youths and those demanded by the employers represents one of the main reasons for the high unemployment rate among them.

The role of education is seen as an extremely important one in developing any society. According to the data presented in the Strategy Europe 2020, “a quarter of all students have poor reading skills, one out of seven youths abandon studies and training too early. About 50% achieve an average skilling level, but this is not enough for meeting the demands of the market. Less than one person out of three from the population with ages between 25 and 34 years has an university diploma (OECD, 2020)

Lacking opportunities in the labor market is in an interdependence relationship with the role of education, and of the education system in skilling the youths.

The status of NEET is also, dynamic, even if, as a whole, it is possible to have unchanged figures, as many persons within this group change at a swift pace, because they either find a job or continue studying. Nonetheless, there is also a ‘core group’ that does not change in time, and that might be faced with numerous obstacles on entering the labor market. Perhaps the most alarming statistic is the one about the weight of the Roma youths with ages between 16 and 24 years who have no job, and are not following any form of education or vocational training (NEETs) (Eurofound, 2016)

For youths, but not only for them, another factor generating vulnerability is represented by the absence of social and/or institutional support rendered concrete in supporting families or social networks.

Romania’s objectives need to be updated with the purpose of integrating the NEET situation, the gender perspective, and the employment needs of the young labor force in the future planning. The continuing low level of youths’ participation, especially of the young Roma men and women in the labor market, and the high levels of involvement in the informal economy require developing different approaches for achieving the employment targets of the labor force for ensuring Roma inclusion.

Moreover, the gender dimension has to be consolidated especially among the Roma population, because among the NEET youths, the gender disparity increased somewhat in these years (European Commission. 2018). The specific sensibilizing and communication campaigns might approach the gender stereotypes from an early age and encourage young women to choose from a wider range of educational and employment paths. Young women might be supported by counselling, guidance, and mentoring ensuring thus that they are aware of both their potential and rights. Among these measures is counted encouraging and approaching gender stereotypes in educational and professional choices. The Romanian education system should be

involved more in training youths for the labor market, especially for those types of jobs available in the labor market. Another aspect of the Romanian legislation consists in the lacking actual monitoring and assessment system regarding the quality of the programs of studies offered to the youths.

For Romania, the goal for all Roma children to finalize compulsory education remains very relevant. For youths, migration represents ‘a backup plan’ in case that Romania fails in fulfilling its goals, especially from the economic viewpoint. The main risk factor for youths is the lack of a long-term job, and this factor threatens the social inclusion of youths (Neagu, 2020). Moreover, among the most important factors of vulnerability to social exclusion of the youths in the labor market were identified the following: low skilling level, inadequacy of skilling to labor market demands, passivity on labor market, precarious financial situation, low level or lacking social support, insufficient or absent institutional support.

In the case of NEET youths, exclusion in the labor market results most often in financial difficulties and extended dependence on the family that might slow down the process of personal development (European Commission, 2021). Irrespective of wage, the benefits of work transcend the financial level, and joblessness has negative effects at individual level: vulnerability and inferiority feelings, uselessness, even depression, decrease in self-esteem, and in the satisfaction with life.

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