

A REALIST EVALUATION OF THE USE OF EUROPEAN FUNDS TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN NEET SITUATION IN ROMANIA

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In 2023, Romania recorded the higher percentage of young people (15–29 years old) in EU who were neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET): 19.3%. Almost no progress was made between 2014 and 2023, despite substantial funding available within the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020, over EUR 430 million, the existence of the EU Youth Guarantee policy framework and the commitment of the Romanian Government to address the problem. The article presents a realist evaluation approach and builds upon the findings of the evaluations of the Human Capital Operational Programme, focusing on explaining the limited sustainable results delivered for young people in the NEET situation. It asks what contextual factors and mechanisms contributed to the programme results and what is explaining the shortcomings in achieving the planned targets. Findings underline that limited outcomes are explained by substantial delays, associated with political instability and institutional capacity issues, legislative bottlenecks, the limited flexibility of funding management, restrictive or too ambitious requirements from projects, the limited adaptation of support provided to the needs of young people in the NEET situation, especially to the needs of young women.

Keywords: young NEETs; Youth Guarantee; Human Capital Operational Programme; Realist evaluation; gender gap.

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, Romania had the higher percentage of young people (15–29 years old) in EU who were neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET): 19.3% of the total population of that age group (Eurostat 2024). This is almost the same percentage as in 2014, when the figure was 19.9%. Romania has also one of the highest gender gaps for the young NEETs, as the percentage of young women in this situation increased from 23.5% to 24.8%. The share of young NEETs among the young people in Romania was not constant, it decreased before 2020, reaching 16.3%, but it rose again in the context of the pandemic. However, for the period 2014–2020, Romania was one of the few EU Member States that did not improve

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the situation of young NEETs and the only one who started with a rate higher than 15% and failed to make progress (Eurostat 2024).

These figures are striking as Romania benefited from EUR 433.7 million from the European Social Fund and the Youth Employment Initiative fund, in the Human Capital Operational Programme, for the period 2014–2020, in order to support the implementation of the Youth , the EU policy aiming at ensuring a job, education or training offers for any young people in the NEET situation, as reflected directly in the programme document, in the last version approved by the European Commission (Human Capital Operational Programme 2023). According to the 2021 census results, the population of young people of 15–29 years old was about 15.5% of the total population (Romanian Census 2021), representing approximately 3 million people, of which up to 590 000 were in the NEET situation. This leaves an average allocation of 730 Euro/person in the NEET situation for the implementation of the Youth. Additionally, funds have been allocated by Erasmus+ fund and other secondary sources to support interventions aiming at improving the situation of young NEETs (Consiliul Economic și Social 2023, 35–38).

There is already extensive literature explaining risk factors of a young person becoming a NEET, including structural factors, such as living in a country with unfordable labour market conditions and low effectiveness of employment policies in general (Caroleo *et al.* 2020, Dietrich 2013); institutional factors, regarding the availability of institutional support encouraging or discouraging young NEETs to assume responsibilities (Assmann and Broschinski 2021); but also individual factors, such as the existence of a disability or illness, early school leaving and low education or qualification levels, having children or being a single parent, living in a remote area, a rural area or a small city, being migrant from a third country (non-EU), having parents with low education levels and/or who experience unemployment, coming from a poor family (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Carcillo *et al.* 2015; Caroleo *et al.* 2020; Contini *et al.* 2019; Eurofound 2012; Mascherini 2019). However, the general expectation after using billion of Euro at EU level to support employment, education and training for young NEETs, was that some of the risks will be addressed and diminished. While this happened in some countries (Scandurra and Cefalo 2025; Duarte *et al.* 2020) and it is visible in the general statistics reflection youth unemployment and the rate of young NEETs (Eurostat 2024), this impact was not achieved in Romania.

Young NEETs in 2023 were not the same people as the young NEETs in 2014, and the rate of unemployment continued to be limited at 5.6% for people over 30, in 2023 (National Statistics Institute 2024). Thus, most of the young NEETs from 2014 eventually secured a job. But considering the large financial allocation to support young people in the NEET situation, and the lack of impact at large scale, as showed by the Eurostat data, this article examines the design, the

implementation and the results of the Human Capital Operational Programme supported interventions targeting young NEETs.

METHODOLOGY

The article builds on the findings and conclusions of the Human Capital Operational Programme evaluations conducted in 2019, 2020 and 2023 and examines the existing data using a realist evaluation approach. The realist evaluation is a particular approach within the larger theory-based evaluation methods. Compared with other evaluation methods, such as the statistical analysis, the counterfactual or the experimental design, the theory-based evaluation methods are not measuring, but aiming to explain in detail the results of a policy, programme, or project and how the results are obtained. Theory-based evaluation is an “umbrella” term for evaluation methods that are focusing on the programme theory of change, represented by the design features explaining how the inputs and activities carried out are generating changes, or, in other words, outputs, outcomes and impact level results. The theory-based evaluation methods are making explicit the assumptions and causal links between the inputs and activities of a programme and its results. Based on these assumptions, the theory-based evaluation methods are assessing how and why the outcomes and impacts are achieved, not whether and how much a programme achieves its results (Weiss 2010).

Among the theory-based evaluation methods, realist approaches “assume that nothing works everywhere or for everyone, and that context really does make a difference to programme outcomes” (Westhorp 2014). More specifically, the realist evaluation is a specific variant of theory-based evaluation, grounded in critical realism, which emphasises that outcomes are generated through the interaction between mechanisms (the underlying processes that make an intervention work) and contexts (the conditions that enable or constrain these mechanisms) (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Westhorp 2014). In order to explain the programme working and results, the realist evaluation uses, thus, a “context–mechanism–outcome” configuration. The context represents the exterior factors, positive and negative, present and available for the implementation of a programme. The mechanisms represent how participants respond to the intervention in the programme in the given context (Punton, Vogel and Lloyd 2016). The realist approach, therefore, is not about identifying universal causal effects but about understanding the “what works, for whom, under what circumstances, and why” (Pawson *et al.* 2005). In this sense, realist evaluation adds explanatory depth to the broader theory-based evaluation family by offering a structured way-through the context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configuration – to explore variations in programme effectiveness across different implementation environments.

Therefore, the article is looking to explain why and how the programme – the Human Capital Operational Programme – did not generate the expected results, in

line with the objective of the Youth, for a large number of young people in the NEETs situation. The article also explores the gaps of the Youth Guarantee, as a public policy in Romania, using the “context–mechanism–outcome” configuration.

The article is based on an analysis, using the conceptual framework and approach, of the information published by the Romanian Government on the implementation of the Youth Implementation Plan and the Human Capital Operational Programme implementation. The main source of data and primary analysis are the evaluations of the Human Capital Operational Programme conducted in 2020 and 2023 (Ministry of European Funds 2020b; Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023). The evaluations are complemented with the review of literature and other analytical reports produced by international organisations and the Economic and Social Council of Romania. Additionally, interviews with five youth policy experts have been conducted. They complement the findings of the evaluations and supported the analysis in identifying additional contexts and mechanisms that may explain what worked, for whom, under what circumstances, and why, as well as what did not work, for whom, under what circumstances, and why, in the implementation of the Youth in Romania.

EXPLAINING THE RESULTS AND FAILURE OF THE YOUTH IN ROMANIA: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON REALIST EVALUATION

The Youth and its Implementation Plan in Romania

The European Council adopted in 2013 the Recommendation on the Youth (Recommendation 2013/C 120/01), and the policy was “reinforced” by a new Recommendation in 2020 (Recommendation 2020/C 372/01). According to the recommendations, the Youth requires the EU Member States to commit “that all young people receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education”. The “reinforced Youth” extended the upper age limit for the young people targeted from 25 years to 30 years, acknowledging that the school-to-work transitions of young people are complex and longer in the recent years, considering the opportunities, but also the challenges generated by the green and digital transitions.

Each Member State developed a Youth Implementation Plan and started the implementation of the EU policy, using the dedicated fund provide by the EU budget: the Youth Employment Initiative, targeting regions with more than 25% young unemployment rates and the European Social Fund.

In 2014, the first Youth Implementation Plan was adopted in Romania, for the period 2014–2015 and its funding was ensured by the European Social Fund under the Human Resources Development Sectoral Operational Programme 2007–2013, implemented until December 2015 (Ministry of European Funds

2020a). The second Youth Implementation Plan was adopted in 2017 and covered the period 2017–2020. No extension of this plan was adopted. However, the main measures included in this plan have been supported by the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020, whit projects implemented up to December 2023 (Ministry of European Investments and Projects 2023). The main support measures included in the Youth Implementation Plan and funded by the EU were (Ministry of Labour and Social Justice 2017):

- The identification and registration of young NEETs in the database of the National Employment Agency;
- The promotion of vocational training programmes;
- The “Second Chance” programmes for the return to education of young people who were early school leavers
- Educational counselling of young people;
- Apprenticeship and internship programmes;
- Subsidies granted to employers of young NEETs;
- Career counselling and guidance;
- Mediation of the relationship between the employer and young people in search of a job;
- Vocational training;
- Certification of professional skills obtained informally and in a non-formal settings;
- Granting activation, employment and installation bonuses;
- Stimulating youth entrepreneurship.

The Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020 included two priority axes (the main programme components linked with its general objectives) with dedicated budget for the implementation of these measures (Human Capital Operational Programme 2023):

- Priority Axis 1 – “Youth Employment Initiative” – financed from the Youth Employment Initiative, for projects carried out in regions with a youth unemployment rate above 25%
- Priority Axis 2 – “Improving the situation of young people in the NEETs category” – financed from the European Social Fund, for projects carried out in regions with a youth unemployment rate below 25%. This Priority Axis also included a large project implemented by the National Employment Agency, aiming to identify and to register the young NEETs in a dedicated database.

Except for the project latter mentioned project, the two Priority Axes funded similar interventions, laid down by the Youth Implementation Plan, but in different regions (Human Capital Operational Programme 2023).

The Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020 undergone multiple modifications, the most significant taking place in 2020. These modifications included the extension of the target group for Priority Axes 1 and 2 from young people aged 15–25 years old, to young people aged 15–30 years old, following the

extension of the target group for the “reinforced Youth”. Moreover, measures aiming at supporting the “Second Chance” programmes (educational services for early school leavers) was integrated in the plan for the Priority Axes 1 and 2, after being initially planned in connection to other interventions in schools (under Priority Axis 6 of the Programme). The budget of Priority Axis 2 has been diminished substantially, not because of an important decrease of the needs for funding targeting youth unemployment and early school leavers, but because, until 2020, Romania did not use most of the initially allocated budget (Ministry of European Investment and Projects, 2023).

The Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020: planned approach and implementation

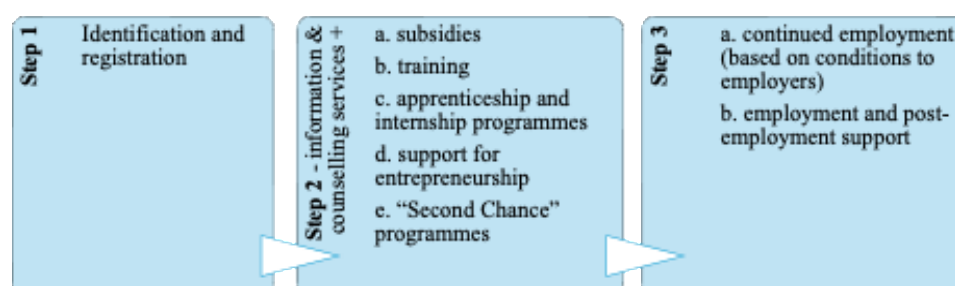
The general design of the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020 (Human Capital Operational Programme 2023) included three main steps in supporting young NEETs with five alternative routes. The first step was supposed to be the identification of young NEETs and their registration in the database of the National Employment Agency. Only the young people registered in the database were eligible for support in the second step. This second step involved information and counselling services, and additional activities under one of the different routes:

- a) for young people that could find a job and were not facing important obstacles to employment, the National Employment Agency provided subsidies to the employers, to incentives them, as well as employment and mobility bonuses to young people;
- b) for young people that needed additional competences, training was provided, together with information and counselling services;
- c) for young people ready to assume more responsibilities, but also in need of additional competences, apprenticeship and internship programmes were planned;
- d) for young people interested in starting an independent activity, support for entrepreneurship was provided;
- e) for early school leavers, the “Second Chance” programmes were provided.

The third step was represented by measures to sustain the results achieved in the second step, including: (a) conditions for employers to maintain, at least one year after the subsidies were paid, the contracts of the young people employed; (b) employment and post-employment support for young people after graduating trainings, apprenticeship and internship programmes. However, the third step was not planned for young people in the fourth and fifth routes, and this could affect the sustainability of the support provided.

Figure 1

**Support planned for young NEETs under the Human Capital Operational Programme
2014–2020**



Source: Authors elaboration, based on the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020.

Overall, the programme aimed to increase the employment level of young people but also to enhance their level of competences, their preparedness for employment, their motivation and proactivity in searching for a job or enrolment in an education programme.

According to the EU Regulation for the management of EU structural and investment funds (Regulation no. 1303/2013), the programme planned within the multiannual financial framework 2014–2020 could be implemented in the period 2014–2023, with three additional years (2021–2023) allowed by the regulation for the full implementation of the planned operations and for full absorption of allocated funds.

The implementation of the Priority Axes 1 and 2 have been managed by the Managing Authority of the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020 through a total of 21 calls for projects, including both non-competitive calls, having as sole beneficiary the National Employment Agency, and competitive calls, opened for the County Employment Agencies, training providers, universities and non-governmental organisations. One non-competitive call was launched to fund the registration of young NEETs at the National Employment Agency and 12 other non-competitive calls were launched to fund other projects led by the National Employment Agency for the employers', employment and mobility subsidies schemas, as well as the apprenticeship and internship programmes (Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

The calls resulted in a total of 265 contracted projects with a total contracted budget of EUR 595 million (representing 134% of the allocated budget). Over-contracting was used to ensure a high absorption rate and the total value of payments reached EUR 410 million, representing 94.5% absorption rate when the programme implementation ended at the end of December 2023 (Ministry of European Investments and Projects n.d.).

Main context elements in the “context–mechanism–outcome” configuration

Political instability in the period 2014–2017, including several changes of the Government and the leadership of the Ministry of Labour coordinating the National Employment Agency led to delays in preparing the intervention for the project funding the registration of young NEETs in the database of the employment agency. The Agency changed several times its planned identification and outreach strategy for the young NEETs. In this context, the non-competitive call was delayed until 2016 but cancelled and relaunched in 2017 after modification of some funding criteria. The project eventually started in October 2017 and achieved its target by the end of the programme implementation period, in 2023. However, the delays generated challenges regarding the identification and outreach of the target group, represented by young NEETs, for all the other supported projects (Ministry of European Funds 2020b).

Considering the identification of the young NEETs, the Recommendations of the European Council on the Youth, and existing studies (Eurofund 2016) distinguish several sub-groups of young NEETs, including the short-term and the long-term unemployed; inactive and/or unavailable young NEETs due to disability, illness or family responsibilities; discouraged young NEETs that are inactive due to subjective and hard to observe reasons. The outreach and registration plan for young NEETs, eventually developed by the National Employment Agency, included a profiling step (National Employment Agency 2019) that classified registered individuals into four categories, ranging from “easy to employ” to “very hard to employ”. However, this profiling system was not designed specifically for young NEETs but applied to all job seekers (National Employment Agency 2018a). As a result, its adaptation to the specific characteristics and needs of young people was limited. Interviews with youth policy experts confirmed that the young people relationship with their families, including family support for their education, or the existence of lack of encouragement to continue studies and/or to look for a job was not taken into account. Additionally, young people entourage (circle of friends) and their influence, as well as young people social media behaviour were not considered, although they are important for young people motivation, plans and aspirations.

Considering the delay in the preparation and start of the registration of young NEETs at the National Employment Agency, no other calls have been launched before 2017. When eventually launched, at the end of 2017, the calls for projects including for training, qualification and other active employment measures for young NEETs had very few applicants (Ministry of European Funds 2020b).

One important context element for the calls launched at the end of 2017 is the fact that, according to the EU Regulation no. 1303/2013, some of the programme indicators had targets to be achieved in December 2018. In this context, the

Managing Authority of the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020 aimed at ensuring the achievement of the targets set for the end of 2018 through the calls launched in 2017. This led to very demanding conditions for funding the projects to be implemented by the County Employment Agencies, training providers, universities and non-governmental organisations. For example, the mandatory minimum performance required for projects included the employment of at least 50% of the young participants and the qualifications of at least 80%. Moreover, in 2017 the outreach activities were not eligible, meaning that projects aiming at providing training, information, counselling, apprenticeship and internship programmes depended on the results of the project started by the National Employment Agency in October 2017 (Ministry of European Funds 2020b). This was contrary to recommendations of the evaluation of the youth employment initiative piloted before 2016 (Ministry of European Funds, 2016). The demanding funding conditions explain the low number of applications submitted. On the other hand, the contracted projects had limited performance, not achieving their targets, because they have been planned for a too short period of time, as most projects had a duration of one year or less, until the end of 2018. Considering the time needed to mobilise the target groups and the legal provisions for vocational training modules (lasting several months), it was impossible for the selected projects to provide certification for competences and jobs for a large number of young NEETs (Ministry of European Funds 2020b).

Lessons learned from the calls launched and projects implemented until the end of 2018 were used to plan new calls, that resulted in projects contracted at the end of 2020 and in 2021, therefore heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The experience from 2017–2018 also made applicants for funding more prudent, especially regarding the results they aimed to achieve, represented by the qualified and employed young NEETs in the projects target groups. Moreover, the pandemic prevented beneficiaries from fully implementing the main activities of the projects, including trainings, apprenticeship and internship programmes. While some of the planned activities, such as information and counselling sessions or the theoretical part of the training session could be done online, the practical exercises in training sessions, apprenticeship and internship programmes have been delayed and only implemented on a large scale in 2022 and 2023 (Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

Moreover, the Romanian law limited the implementation and results of apprenticeship and internship programmes and the interest for and results of the “Second Chance” programmes (the programmes providing educational services to early school leavers). The evaluations of the Human Capital Operational Programme show that apprenticeship and internship programmes were not supported by the legislation with attractive financial incentives for the host employers. The law on apprenticeships and the law on traineeships provided for RON 2,250/month for each apprentice or trainee, covering both the on-the-job

training costs and the payment for the apprentices or trainees. The Human Capital Operational Programme did not extend the financial benefits for the host employers, therefore the National Employment Agency faced important challenges in finding interested host employers for apprenticeship and internship programmes. Additional factors identified by the programme evaluations are the inappropriate organisational structures of employers and the absence of a recent tradition of apprenticeship and internship in Romania, therefore the limited preparedness of employers to implement such measures (Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

Regarding the “Second Chance” programmes, projects aiming at the reintegration of young NEETs in education have been contracted only in 2020, after several calls that proved to be rather unattractive or not adapted to the needs of schools and organisations able to implement the funded measures. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed initially the implementation of activities in schools. Moreover, the legal framework required “Second Chance” programmes for the secondary education cycle last at least three years. This period exceeded the implementation period of most projects contracted and supported by the Human Capital Operational Programme (Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

In addition to the contextual factors related to the Human Capital Operational Programme implementation, more structural contextual factors are important for the programme results but have not been analysed in-depth by the programme evaluations. As mentioned in the introduction, Romania has the highest gender gap for young NEETs in the EU. Eurostat data shows that the gap grows with age. The differences between younger women and man are smaller, but after the age of 24 the gap increases (Eurostat 2024). The urban–rural divide is also important: women in rural areas have fewer opportunities, fewer services of childcare or transport) and they face traditional gender norms (Bálint, Telegdy and Lázár2023).

Traditional gender norms in Romania often assign the majority of household and care giving work to women, with Romania registering one of the largest gender gaps in care responsibilities in the EU. Although the score for time allocated to care activities in the Gender Equality Index improved significantly between 2022 and 2024, during the implementation of the Human Capital Operational Programme this indicator was repeatedly identified as the area of gender equality with the greatest need for improvement (Gender Equality Index 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024).

Women’s lower participation in the labour market in Romania is strongly influenced by traditional gender roles that assign them primary caregiving responsibilities, compounded by limited childcare, weak work–life balance policies, and unequal access to education and training, similar with the situation of Mediterranean countries (Ferrera 2010). These cultural and structural factors are present in Romania as well and they are contributing to the gender gap in the

young NEETs rate together with the structural inequalities in the labour market (OECD 2025b), the limited access to childcare and migration patterns where men frequently engage in circular economic migration throughout the year, while their partners remain at home to manage domestic responsibilities (Mihai and Nițu 2024). Interview with youth policy experts confirm that young women are more likely than young men or older women and men to be inactive on the labour market (not actively seeking employment) because of childcare or domestic duties. Experts also underline the role of social and family pleasure and expectations, in some rural communities, about early motherhood, and prioritizing family over work or continued education, in the case of young women.

Main mechanisms in the “context–mechanism–outcome” configuration

The case studies presented by the Human Capital Operational Programme evaluations conducted in 2020 and 2023 provide information on the mechanisms, including young people choices, reasoning and decisions, that influenced the results of the EU supported projects targeting young NEETs.

The National Employment Agency profiled young people registered in the NEET data base using four categories, qualitatively described, placing young people on a progressing scale from easy to employ to very hard to employ (National Employment Agency, 2018b). In this context, the calls for projects supporting youth entrepreneurship only targeted young people relatively easy to employ (the first two out of four categories), and other calls conditioned the activation and inclusion of hard or very hard to employ young NEETs. Although this led to the participation of a large number of long-term unemployed and young people with low education levels in projects, the programme evaluations are not showing a particular adaptation of services provided to the profile and needs of young people in the target groups (Ministry of European Funds 2020b; Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

The first effective mechanism leading to the employment of young NEETs represented a combination of sufficient initial training of the young people in the target groups and pre-existing intrinsic motivation for employment. In the case of these young people, they were able to identify the opportunities to get registered at the National Employment Agency and they found a job at employers that have been incentivised with subsidies. An additional factor supporting the employment and job retention was the relevance of practical activities during training programmes and the capacity and interest of the young people to learn new skills. But the evaluations show that the most important supporting factor for this mechanism was the employers’ motivation to keep the young people employed. Case studies in the evaluations show that the salary values were not important in these cases and did not contribute to the decisions and motivations of young people

to work and to keep their job (Ministry of European Funds 2020b; Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

However, in these cases, the contribution of the EU funded projects to the results is estimated as low by experts, because most of the highly motivated young people were any way active in searching for a job, even without the support of EU funded projects. On the other hand, the existing research shows that the NEET situation is associated with previous unemployment situations (Rahmani, Groot, Rahmani 2024), therefore providing young people with employment as soon as possible has both immediate and long-term positive effects.

Another specific mechanism mentioned by the evaluations is the one leading to emigration decisions of the young participants. In some cases, young people proactively identified the opportunities for training and formal certification of their skills, supporting their prior decisions to emigrate. In other cases, they decided after gaining a high demanded qualification, such as welding, and this decision was influenced by their peers: other young people with an earlier plan to emigrate (Ministry of European Funds 2020b).

Another important mechanism for results was visible for the young NEETs supported for entrepreneurship. These young people were generally motivated and confident that they could use the competences developed through the trainings and their previous skills. Moreover, the evaluation conducted in 2023 also shows that a small number of participants in other activities, such as the “Second Chance” programmes, proved to have entrepreneurial initiative. A limited number of young people identified the opportunity proactively and enrolled in the “Second Chance” programmes in order to get the formal diploma they needed to register their business and to access funding from other sources, such as funding for gardening from the Rural Development National Programme supported by the National Agriculture Policy (Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

However, the support for entrepreneurship worked, according to the programme evaluations, for young people already ready to start a business or already managing their own business informally and had limited impact on other young people. This is confirmed by recent analysis, showing that tailored support to groups under-represented in entrepreneurship (including young women for example) is very limited, although Romania has several programmes supporting start-ups and young or new entrepreneurs (OECD 2025a). In this context, the OECD’s 2024–25 assessment note on Romania recommends “inclusive entrepreneurship action plans for the larger target groups (e.g. women, youth)” (OECD 2025a).

Other mechanisms were at play in the case of young NEETs who received a job offer and even got a job but lost it or gave it up. In most cases, as reflected by the survey among participants in projects, conducted within the evaluations, young people resigned for several reasons: the salaries were not attractive, the commute schedules were difficult, the working conditions were perceived as very difficult

for young people, young people were not able to communicate well with their managers and coworkers and/or to manage their time and the balance between their work and their life. Additionally, a small number of young people resigned in order to continue their education, when they have been admitted to tertiary education (Ministry of European Funds 2020b; Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

For these cases, the evaluations found several mismatches between the expectations of the targeted young people and the entities using EU funds to provide them with support. These mismatches add to the mechanisms identified and explain for whom and in what circumstances the programme did not work. The Human Capital Operational Programme evaluations show a miss-match between the expectations of young NEETs, and the expectations of their employers and the institutions, firms and organisations implementing projects. With few exceptions, the employers and the entities implementing projects expected young NEETs to be motivated to learn and work, and to have some basic horizontal skills related to communication, time management and teamwork. On the other hand, young NEETs expected flexible work programmes and higher salaries than those that employers were willing to pay (Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023). Interviews conducted to complement the evaluations findings show that activities planned in the framework of the Human Capital Operational Programme did not address this expectation mismatch directly and explicitly. Although information and counselling services provide to young people included information about what was reasonable to expect, the youth policy experts interviewed agree that counselling services were not provided for long enough time to ensure a good expectation management. Moreover, information and counselling of employers concerning the youth-specific expectations was very limited in project, including the apprenticeship projects, where more activates were dedicated to employers.

The last category of young people targeted by the projects supporting young NEETs were young women, beneficiaries of the “Second Chance” programmes, with family and household responsibilities and with no intention to continue their studies after the programme or to take a job. In these cases, the EU funded projects ensured their progress in education but, after they received the support, they remained out of education, employment and training, inactive from the perspective of education or the labour market (Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

On the other hand, existing studies show that intervention under the Youth Guarantee, as well as other, complementary, initiatives are rarely considering the gender dimension and are not particularly adapted to young women’s needs (Bálint, Telegdy and Lázár 2023). Although the Human Capital Operational Programme included activities that could have specifically supported young women in the NEET situation, such as accompanying measures and complementary childcare services, the evaluations based on interviews with

programme authorities and project promoters indicate that the limited time between the launch of the calls and the end of the programme made it impossible to implement these measures (Ministry of European Funds 2020b; Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023). Additional interviews with youth policy experts conducted to document this article show that much more support was needed. The absence of this support explains the lack of a specific mechanism to improve the gender gap in the case of Romanian young NEETs.

Another mechanism that limited the programme outcomes is the mismatch between the needs of the youth targeted and the services provided. Specifically, in the context of short implementation periods, some EU-funded projects identified and enrolled participants, aiming at providing them with a job offer, although these young people had already decided to continue their education and were preparing themselves for university admission. In these cases, the young people were not in need of any support, and they were only targeted in order to achieve project mandatory results, but this strategy did not contribute to the programme impact (Ministry of European Funds 2020b; Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

Main outcomes in the “context–mechanism–outcome” configuration

As a result of all the context elements presented, although the programme implementation period was planned to cover 10 years, between and 2014–2023, the projects supporting young NEETs for employment, training or reintegration in education have been mainly implemented in 2018 and in the period 2022–2023. These projects offered young people in the NEET situation opportunities for training, provided job offers and counselling to answer the existing offers, provided training and counselling for the development of entrepreneurship skills and a start-up capital for a business.

The projects have been less successful in providing apprenticeship and internship programmes and school certification after the graduation of a “Second Chance” programmes, due to legal provisions, but also due to the lack of institutional tradition and preparedness for these programmes. Moreover, although some post-employment services have been initially planned to support young women with family responsibilities, they have not been implemented, generally due to the limited time available for projects implementation.

The existing data on the implementation of the Human Capital Operational Programme show that most contracted projects, except the ones affected by legislative bottlenecks – the projects supporting apprenticeship and internship programmes and the “Second Chance” programmes – achieved or surpassed their target regarding the number of participants, trained and certified participants, and even the number of employed participants at the end of the support provided.

Nevertheless, the number of projects funded, in the context of the mentioned delays and the COVID-19 pandemic, have been insufficient to achieve the overall programme targets (Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023). The programme did not achieve the aimed results reflected by the indicators, for most of the indicators set for Priority Axes 1 and 2, as presented in *Table no. 1*.

Table no. 1

Indicators measuring the performance of the support planned for young NEETs under the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020

Indicator	Programme target	Achieved by Mach 30, 2023	Achievement rate by Match 30 2023
INDICATORS FOR THE REGISTRATION ON YOUNG NEETS IN THE DATABASE OF THE NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT AGENCY			
Inactive young NEETs supported to register with the public employment service	176 612	149 552	84.68%
Inactive young NEETs supported to register with the public employment service	141 290	170 000	95.34%
GENERAL INDICATOR FOR ALL FUNDED INTERVENTIONS			
Unemployed young NEETs supported by the programme	135 125	72 235	53.46%
Unemployed young NEETs supported to reenrol in education in “Second Chance” programmes	22 537	2 921	12.96%
Unemployed young NEETs who have completed a “Second Chance” programmes	11 284	248	2.20%
INDICATORS OF THE YOUTH EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE – PRIORITY AXIS 1 OF THE PROGRAMME			
Unemployed young people in the Youth Employment Initiative supported projects until their finalization	67 293	9 193	13,66%
Unemployed young people who receive an offer of work, participation in a continuing education programme, apprenticeship or traineeship upon finalization of their participation in Youth Employment Initiative supported projects	29 440	6 309	21,43%

Unemployed young people who, at the end of the participant's status, are undergoing an education/training programme, are in the process of obtaining a qualification or are employed, including as self-employed	42 058	2 251	5.35%
Long-term unemployed young people participating in the youth employment initiative supported projects until their finalization	13 459	1 136	8.44%
Long-term unemployed participants who receive an offer of work, participation in a continuing education programme, apprenticeship or traineeship upon finalization of their participation in projects	5 888	957	16.25%
Long-term unemployed participants who obtain a qualification, or who are in employment, including those who are self-employed, upon finalization of their participation in projects	8 412	649	7.72%
Persons who obtain a job within six months of the finalization of their participation in projects	29 440	4 334	14,72%
Persons who start a self-employed activity within six months of the finalization of their participation in projects	438	68	15.53%
INDICATORS OF THE OTHER EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND SUPPORTED PROJECTS – PRIORITY AXIS 2 OF THE PROGRAMME			
Unemployed young NEETs who found employment, including self-employed young people	15 303	16 864	110.20%
Unemployed young NEETs who, upon finalization of their participation in projects, acquire a qualification	32 812	2 175	6.63%

Source: Evaluation of interventions in the field of employment supported by the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020, Report for 2022 (Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023).

Very low values have been achieved, compared with the programme targets, for the following indicators:

- the number young NEETs reintegrated in formal education in “Second Chance” programmes and who have completed these programmes;
- the number of young NEETs participating in the Youth Employment Initiative supported projects until their finalization;

- the number of young NEETs participating in education, training, apprenticeships or traineeships programs due to the Youth Employment Initiative support;
- the number of participants in the Youth Employment Initiative supported projects employed or starting an independent activity at the end of the interventions;
- the number of long-term unemployed young people participants in the Youth Employment Initiative supported projects;
- the number of participants in the Youth Employment Initiative supported projects acquiring a qualification.

On the other hand, some unplanned outcomes should be mentioned. These include the development of horizontal skills among young participants in training and counselling activities, such as communication, time management and teamwork, useful for them in any circumstances, including during their studies and afterwards in their jobs. Other unplanned outcomes include the increased valorisation of education and training by the young people that participated in activities and their willingness to participate in similar programmes (Ministry of European Funds 2020b; Ministry of European Investment and Projects 2023). Such unplanned outcomes are confirmed by other evaluations and projects targeting young NEETs (Bálint, Lázár and Telegdy 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

Although Romania benefited from over EUR 430 million in EU funds to operationalize the Youth, by 2023 the NEET rate for young people aged 15–29 remained essentially unchanged compared to 2014 (Eurostat 2024). Using a realist evaluation approach, this study moved beyond aggregate performance indicators to explore the interaction between programme design, contextual factors, and participant responses. The objective was not simply to assess “whether” the programme worked, but to understand what worked, for whom, under what circumstances, and why, and equally what did not work, for whom, and why (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Westhorp 2014).

A combination of context factors and mechanisms related to the individual situation of young people can be used to explain the limited results of the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020. The identification and registration of young NEETs – a fundamental precondition of the support for all other projects – was delayed until the end of 2017. Therefore, most projects providing services and support activities to young NEETs, were implemented in a very short window of time, in 2018 and in the period after the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2022–2023.

Additionally, restrictive project requirements limited the number of interested project promoters. Initial calls for projects had overly ambitious performance requirements and did not include outreach activities. This discouraged applicants

and led, eventually, to a relatively small number of funded projects. Although the projects had good results, they were not sufficient to meet the programme targets.

Moreover, legislative bottlenecks regarding the apprenticeship and internship programmes and the “Second Chance” programmes made the projects hard to implement and, therefore, unattractive for institutions and firms that needed to provide young people with valuable learning experiences.

On the other hand, despite Romania having the largest gender gap in young NEETs in the EU, the youth implementation plan and the Human Capital Operational Programme included very few gender-sensitive measures. In the context of delays and the COVID-19 pandemic, these measures have not been implemented as planned, therefore leaving structural barriers faced by young women largely unaddressed.

In this context, the main mechanism that led to outcomes was the intrinsic motivation to learn and to work of certain young people in the target groups of projects. However, the young NEETs that were already motivated to learn and to work were not the ones most in need of support.

Despite the generous budget and an Implementation Plan approved by the Government and supported by multiple Ministries, limited flexibility in planning the programme delivery, delays determined by the limited capacity of the National Employment Agency to adapt its services to young people, and the lack of tailored interventions to address young women and other hard and very hard to employ young people, have affected the programme impact. In particular, the profiling of young NEETs carried out by the National Employment Agency did not lead to activities and services particularly adapted to the needs and situation of the hard to employ young people and the structural barriers faced by young women, and did not generate mechanisms with potential for sustained results in their case.

Although the Human Capital Operational Programme included planned measures such as accompanying childcare support, the evaluations and interviews confirmed these were not implemented as planned, due to short timelines. This omission reveals a fundamental misalignment of the interventions to the needs, as the largest structural driver of the gender gap in the NEETs rate in Romania was precisely the one least addressed by the programme.

From a realist perspective, this illustrates how the mechanism of young women’s withdrawal from labour market participation due to childcare and family duties interacts with contexts: weak childcare infrastructure, cultural conservatism and limitations of the implementation arrangements (including mainly delays) to reproduce outcomes.

In conclusion, the fact that despite generous EU funding through the Human Capital Operational Programme the NEET rate in Romania remains very high underscores a broader lesson: resources are necessary but not sufficient. While similar interventions supported by the European Social Fund worked in other countries (Scandurra and Cefalo 2025; Duarte *et al.* 2020), they had limited impact

in Romania, as showed by this article. Without institutional capacity, gender-sensitive design, legislative alignment, and realistically planned mechanisms, financial investments do not translate into impact. From a broad realist perspective, the Romanian case illustrates the importance of analysing how interventions interact with context. It shows that what works in one setting may fail in another, not because the policy is flawed per se, but because the contextual conditions and participant mechanisms differ.

This analysis shows the importance of aligning the funding opportunities, institutional capacity of the main stakeholders (in this case the National Employment Agency), and adapted answers to the needs of young people in the NEET situation in the target groups of the EU programmes. Crucially, future Youth cycles must integrate gender-sensitive design and monitoring to address structural inequalities.

Future research should deepen comparative realist evaluations of Youth implementation across Member States, to identify cross-cutting mechanisms and context factors. This would enrich both academic understanding and policy learning.

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În 2023, România a înregistrat cel mai mare procent din UE al tinerilor (15–29 de ani) care nu erau nici încadrați în muncă, nici în educație și nici în formarea profesională (NEET): 19,3%. Aproape că nu s-au înregistrat progrese între 2014 și 2023, în ciuda finanțării substanțiale disponibile în cadrul Programului Operațional Capital Uman 2014–2020, care a avut un buget de peste 430 de milioane de euro, a existenței politicii publice a UE privind Garanția pentru Tineret și a angajamentului Guvernului României de a aborda problema. Articolul prezintă analiză bazată pe metoda evaluării realiste și se bazează pe constatările evaluărilor Programului Operațional Capital Uman, concentrându-se pe explicarea rezultatelor durabile limitate obținute pentru tinerii în situația NEET. Articolul întreabă ce factori și mecanisme contextuale au contribuit la rezultatele programului și cum se explică deficiențele în atingerea obiectivelor planificate. Constatările subliniază că rezultatele limitate se explică prin întârzieri substanțiale, asociate cu instabilitatea politică și problemele de capacitate instituțională, blocajele legislative, flexibilitatea limitată a gestionării finanțării, cerințele restrictive sau prea ambițioase pentru proiectele finanțate, precum și adaptarea limitată a sprijinului acordat la nevoile tinerilor din situația NEET, în special la nevoile tinerelor femei.

Cuvinte-cheie: tineri NEET; Garanția pentru Tineret; Programul Operațional Capital Uman; Evaluare realist; decalaj de gen.

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