

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE YOUTH GUARANTEE PROGRAM IN ROMANIA¹

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In 2014, European countries began implementing the Youth Guarantee Programme (YGP), one of the European Commission's most important initiatives designed to combat the issue of youth unemployment. This led to a decrease in the number of young NEETs over the subsequent 6 years. Based on data concerning the extent and size of the NEETs phenomenon at the European level, the number of NEETs who benefit from various measures, and data regarding programmes for NEETs financed by ESF, this paper presents an overview of the YGP implementation in Romania during the 2014–2020 period. It does so by identifying the main challenges and barriers that prevented the achievement of the proposed results. In that regard, the main barriers in the implementation of YGP in Romania are related to the lack of coordination of measures between institutions; a lack of flexibility in registering young NEETs; low levels of partnership with local authorities, companies, and NGOs; delays in funding measures; and a lack of centralised monitoring data in order to provide a picture of progress and thus necessary improvement measures.

Keywords: NEETs; rural; youth; employment; education; Youth Guarantee.

INTRODUCTION

In order to combat youth unemployment, in 2013, the European Union proposed a new policy initiative called the “Youth Guarantee Programme” (YGP). This was an EU flagship initiative which aimed to reduce youth unemployment and increase social inclusion for vulnerable young people. According to the YGP: “Member States should ensure that, within four months of leaving school or losing a job, young people under 25 can either find a good-quality job suited to their education, skills and experience or acquire the education, skills and experience

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required to find a job in the future through an apprenticeship, a traineeship or continued education” (European Commission 2014). The YGP aimed to address two main issues that affect the labour market inclusion of NEETs: the school to work transition, and the support for employment. This involved a major shift from passive labour market policies to active ones. For the European Commission (EC), the YGP’s implementation represented a structural reform in each member state that included reinforcement of the public employment services (PES) and educational system (European Commission 2014). Reform of the PES involves a better personalisation of the employment services offered so that they respond more effectively to the needs of the young person, and also offer more proactive tools to identify and activate the NEETs. As the tailored made measures could involve support for employment, training, or education in order to be easily included on the labour market, a specific reform is in the area of school to work transition. This involves improvement in vocational education (initial and continuous), apprenticeship, internship/traineeship, and professional training opportunities (in terms of curricula, specialisations, links with the labour market etc.)

The YGP was considered an investment from the EC due to the very high “long-term costs of unemployment to the economy, to society and to the individuals concerned, such as increased risk of future unemployment and poverty” (European Commission 2014, 3). At the same time, this was also an innovative active labour market policy due to the wide variety of measures proposed which included: (a) education programmes better adapted to the labour market requirements – *e.g.*, initial vocational education, entrepreneurship courses; (b) remedial education school dropout measures – second chance education, or other routes to re-enter education and training; (c) apprenticeship, traineeship, or internship schemes; (d) entrepreneurship and self-employment guidance; (e) training programmes; (f) labour market intermediation services; e) active labour market policies – direct employment creation, hiring subsidies, employment/labour mobility and start-up incentives (European Council 2013).

It also included measures for the PES development, namely: PES staff training; development of specialised youth services; data gathering systems; and study visits etc. Partnership and cooperation between relevant public and private actors were encouraged by the YGP, including companies; employment services; education and training institutions; career guidance services; trade unions; and other specialised youth services (*i.e.*, non-governmental organisations, youth centres and associations). In order to be more effective, the YGP promoted the necessity of early intervention and activation.

Each member country developed a Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan with proposed measures for implementing the YGP at national level, funding sources for each measure, and roles of public or private institutions. In 2013, the YGP proposed as target group NEETs between 15 and 24 years old. However, some countries have increased the age range of young people to 15–29 years old. These are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland, Portugal, and Spain.

Starting with 2014, Romania implements the YGP: that includes various measures to tackle NEETs' problems. This paper presents an overview of the YGP implementation in Romania during the 2014–2020 period and does so by identifying the main challenges and barriers that prevented the achievement of the proposed results.

The paper draws on extensive research of the Youth Guarantee Programme implementation process in Romania, using a mix of research methods including secondary data analysis, social document analysis, and public policy analysis. The analysis of the YGP's implementation in Romania involves a secondary data analysis of the Eurostat data on NEETs, of administrative data regarding the number of NEETs that benefit from various measures (from PES, Ministry of Education), and data about programmes for NEETs financed by the ESF. The document analysis is comprised of the following sources: the YGP report for Romania (2020); YGP monitoring reports at EU level (*i.e.*, European Commission Staff Working Document *The Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment Initiative three years on*, 2016; European Commission, *Data collection for monitoring of Youth Guarantee schemes: 2016, 2017, 2018*; European Commission, *The Youth Guarantee in Light of Changes In The World Of Work: Emerging Challenges Related to Young People's Transition into the Labour Market*, 2018); YG monitoring reports for Romania (2015, 2016, 2017); evaluation reports on the implementation of Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) in Romania (2015, 2019); and various other reports on the YGP in Romania (Toderita *et al.* 2019). The document analysis aims to identify the challenges and main barriers in the implementation of the YGP in Romania. The policy analysis comprises the EU policy document which defines the YGP (European Council, 2013) and the two YG Implementation Plans in Romania (for 2014–2015 and 2017–2020). The first section of the paper presents the NEETs' situation in Romania compared with the EU average; the second section examines the institutional and policy framework of the YGP's implementation; and, finally, the third section discusses the challenges and barriers in the YGP's implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth unemployment represents one of the main challenges of the European Union due to its economic and social impact (*e.g.*, lack of social support, lack of social insurance, being more vulnerable to physical and mental problems, feeling of shame and low self-esteem, and increased likelihood of experiencing periods of unemployment at later ages etc.) (Brandt and Hank 2014; Gregg 2001; Vancea and Utzet 2017; Shore and Tosun 2019). Although the percentage of young NEETs has decreased from 15.4% in 2010 to 13.7% in 2020, this remains a problem for many EU countries such as Italy, Greece, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia (Eurostat 2021, edat_lfse_29). In the context of an economic crisis, it became more visible,

and since 2010 EU decision makers have examined new solutions for more efficient engagement of youth in the labour market. Youth Not in Employment, Education and Training (NEETs) refers to people aged 15–29 who are hardest-to-place and most disadvantaged youth within society (Carcillo *et al.* 2015). This concept has mostly been used after 2010 and represents a tool which describes young people's vulnerabilities both in terms of labour market engagement as well as social exclusion (Eurofound 2016).

The NEETs concept defines a heterogeneous population characterised by a common feature (namely, not engaged in education or labour market), but with a lot of specific needs and characteristics. According to EUROFOUND (2016), there are seven categories of NEETs: 1) re-entrants: those who will soon leave the NEET category as they have already found a job or an education opportunity; 2) short-term unemployed: those who are unemployed for less than 12 months; 3) long-term unemployed: those who are unemployed for more than 12 months; 4) unavailable due to family responsibilities: those who are NEETs due to family responsibility (children, adults, other family responsibilities); 5) unavailable due to disability: those who are unavailable due to their own illness or disability; 6) discouraged workers: those who are NEETs because they do not look for a job as they do not think there is job for them; and 7) other NEETs: those who have not specified their reasons of being NEETs. Given all these categories of NEETs, public policy measures should address their specific needs and characteristics to be effective.

In the analyses which examine NEETs within the Romanian context, the urban-rural divide is presented as major source of inequality and marginalisation (Neagu *et al.* 2021; Țoc 2020). The Romanian rural areas accumulate specific socio-economic factors which expose a large part of the population (especially young NEETs) and specific areas to marginalisation and exclusion. To that end, there are many associated disadvantages related to access to public services, mobility (limited public transport, necessity of a personal car), and lack of information and employment opportunities (Teșliuc *et al.* 2016; Sadler *et al.* 2015). In rural areas, NEETs face multiple forms of discrimination in terms of access to education, to employment services, and labour market opportunities. Rural NEETs involvement in subsistence agriculture, or in household work, makes them more exposed to the risk of poverty and family dependency (Simões *et al.* 2017; Petrescu *et al.* 2020; Neagu 2020).

The YGP, the EU flagship initiative that aims to address the issue of NEETs, has achieved different results in different EU member states due to factors related to the PES capacity of implementation, but also to cooperation/partnership between actors involved in the programme's implementation (Trein and Tosun 2021). The varieties of public-private coordination of the YGP represent one of the main factors which lead to different results in the implementation of the YGP in EU members states. In mixed market economies, the inclusion of private actors in the implementation of the YGP is less encouraged due to the public institutions' central role in labour market implementation. In countries with a higher spending

on active labour market policies, a restrictive public-private coordination in YGP implementation is adopted. Emerging market economies (*i.e.*, those found in Central and Eastern Europe) develop new structures for public-private coordination of the YGP due to the high number of NEETs given that this implies increased pressure on the government to expand the public-private coordination in order to successfully implement the YGP.

NEETs IN ROMANIA

Over the last decade, the share of the NEETs population in Romania has been slowly decreasing for all age groups, but this tendency has not been consistent enough to produce a significant improvement of the general situation (*Table no. 1*). Almost 15% of the young population aged 15–24, and 16.6% of the population aged 15–29, is neither in employment, nor in education and training. These values are above the European mean and as such place Romania between the countries with the highest proportions of NEETs (alongside Italy, Greece, Spain, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Croatia).

In the age group 15–19 years, which mostly corresponds to the upper secondary education, the share of NEETs population in Romania registered a value of 10.1% in 2020 (9.1% for boys and 11.3% for girls), the second-highest value in the EU after Italy (where this indicator reached 11.1%). There is an important fluctuation of the values pertaining to this indicator (12% in 2015, 9.4% in 2017, and 10.5% in 2019), which demonstrates the unpredictability of this phenomenon. For the age group 20–24 years the share of the NEETs population (19.4%) is almost double compared to the 15–19 age group (10.1%). In the category 25–29 years the gaps between Romania and EU become significantly lower: 20.2% in Romania vs. 18.6% in the EU.

Table no. 1

Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (%)

Age		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
15–24	EU-28	13	13.2	13	12.5	12	11.6	10.9	10.5	10.1	11.1*
	RO	17.5	16.8	17	17	18.1	17.4	15.2	14.5	14.7	14.8
15–29	EU-28	15.4	15.9	15.9	15.4	14.8	14.2	13.4	12.9	12.5	13.7*
	RO	19.5	19.3	19.6	19.9	20.9	20.2	17.8	17	16.8	16.6
15–19	EU-28	7.0	7.0	6.7	6.5	6.3	6.1	6.1	5.8	5.7	6.3*
	RO	10.4	10.3	10.1	10.4	12.0	11.1	9.4	9.2	10.5	10.1
20–24	EU-28	18.3	18.8	18.7	18.0	17.3	16.7	15.5	15.0	14.4	15.7*
	RO	23.2	22.1	22.9	23.1	24.1	23.6	21.0	19.9	18.9	19.4
25–29	EU-28	19.9	20.7	21.0	20.4	19.7	18.8	17.7	17.1	16.6	18.6*
	RO	23.4	24.0	24.1	24.6	25.3	24.7	22.2	21.5	20.8	20.2

Source: EUROSTAT [edat_lfse_20].

* For the year 2020 the data are referring to EU-27.

A particularity of the situation in Romania is expressed in the gender gap observed: 14.1% for male and 20% for female. A possible explanation of this notable discrepancy may lie in the gender differences in terms of early school leaving, or in terms of access to the labour market. It should also be noted that in the category 15–24 years, the large cities have a lower share of NEETs compared to the European mean (7.1% compared to 10.3%), whilst in the rural areas the ratio is inverted (11.7% in the EU and 19% in Romania).

Table no. 2

Young people (15–24 years) neither in employment nor in education and training by degree of urbanization (%)

Degree of urbanisation		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Cities	EU-28	12.5	12.5	12.1	11.5	11.1	10.7	10.1	9.9	9.7	10.3*
	RO	10.8	10.7	10.5	10.9	10.7	8.6	6.9	7.0	8.2	7.1
Towns and suburbs	EU-28	12.2	13.1	13.1	12.7	12.3	11.8	11.3	10.6	10.4	11.5*
	RO	:	17.8	19.4	17.8	20.3	19.7	18.0	16.2	16.6	15.5
Rural areas	EU-28	14.6	14.3	14.3	13.8	13.2	12.7	11.8	11.2	10.6	11.7*
	RO	21.5	21.2	20.6	21.0	21.5	21.2	18.5	18.1	17.5	19.0

Source: EUROSTAT [edat_lfse_35].

* For the year 2020 the data are referring to EU-27.

THE YOUTH GUARANTEE IMPLEMENTATION IN ROMANIA

The YGP began to be implemented in Romania in January 2014. It was based on an Implementation Plan for 2014–2015 which was subsequently updated for the 2017–2020 period. Between January 2016 and July 2017 (18 months) there was no plan for the implementation of the YGP in Romania which affected the achievement of the results due to delays in the implementation of the proposed measures (MFE 2019). The programme addressed young people between 15 and 24 years old who lost their job, or who did not find a job after graduation, and was intended as a useful instrument for tackling youth unemployment. According to the programme requests, the young people should be registered through the PES structures and, within 4 months from registration (after leaving school or becoming unemployed), they should receive a good job offer tailored to their skills and qualifications, or a proposal for continued education, or an apprenticeship or internship offer. The coordination of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Plan in Romania is made by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and delivered through the public employment service (called the National Agency for Employment) since most of the proposed measures are related to inclusion of young people in the labour market. Depending on the public institution responsible with the implementation process, the measures of the Youth Guarantee Programme can be grouped into three main categories:

a) Measures under the coordination of the Ministry of Labour (namely, supporting the apprenticeships, stimulating youth mobility, supporting youth people's entrepreneurial initiatives, various training courses and career guidance);

b) Measures implemented by the Ministry of Education (via the continuation of three national programs: Second Chance, Professional Scholarship, and Money for High School);

c) Measures implemented by the Ministry of Economy (developing entrepreneurial initiatives amongst young people and stimulating the start-up initiatives of young people).

The measures proposed in the Romanian Youth Guarantee Plan 2014–2015 focused on two main directions: 1) early intervention and activation; and 2) support for labour market integration. Early intervention and activation measures aimed to reform the national PES in order to quickly identify and provide counselling for NEETs, to keep young people in education, and to stimulate those who dropped out of school early to return to education and training (*i.e.*, the second chance for the primary and lower secondary level programme). In order to keep young people in education, scholarships were provided for those studying at vocational schools (*i.e.*, the social inclusion programme – *Professional Scholarship*) and high schools (*i.e.* the social inclusion programme – *High school money*).

Support for labour market integration measures have been geared towards improving young people's access to employment and training, as well as to encouraging employers to become more involved in employment and vocational training. The included measures were: subsidies for employers for hiring young graduates and young people at risk of social exclusion; subsidies for employers to provide apprenticeships to young people and internships for higher education graduates; vocational counselling; labour market mediation and job coaching for young people at risk of social exclusion; professional training; and mobility stimulation programmes (public grants for young people that were employed in a different municipality than that where he/she lives).

Measures designed to develop young people's entrepreneurial skills and facilitate their access to finance (in order to stimulate the establishment of micro-enterprises by young entrepreneurs) were also an important component of the YG.

In the implementation plans of the YGP, commencing from the measures proposed at European level, the Romanian authorities identified the already existing policies at the national level in the fields of employment, education, and entrepreneurship. Thus, most of the measures initially proposed in the national implementation plans of the YGP had been already implemented. The national implementation plan for 2017 also introduced reform measures aimed at creating youth advisory councils and community youth centres, however it remains unclear what exactly has been achieved in this area.

A problematic aspect regarding the analysis of the data on the implementation of the measures provided in the National Implementation Plan of the YGP is the scarcity of public data. In 2015, the European Commission

published the Indicator Framework for Monitoring the Youth Guarantee, which was revised in 2017 (European Commission 2017). The national monitoring data for the Youth Guarantee does not comply with the specifications of the European guide, which are limited due to the inability to track people who are no longer directly related to the employment service or education system. This leads to the loss of about two thirds of the data, and thereby hinders any significant interpretation of the results (MMPS 2019).

According to the YG monitor, the data for the period between 2014 and 2017 shows that the implementation of the Youth Guarantee has improved to some extent: the proportion of beneficiaries who accepted an offer within the 4 months target period increased from 35.4% in 2014, to 40.2% in 2017. Nonetheless, in Romania the data also indicates a decrease in the percentage of young NEETs included in the YGP within Romania, from 18.5% to 14.1%, a percentage well below the European average of over 40% throughout this period. The number of those entering the program in Romania decreased by over 80,000 people between 2014 and 2017: this was partly due to the lack of a coherent plan by which to implement the YGP in Romania for the period January 2016–July 2017. According to European Commission monitoring data, the most unattractive measures in the period 2014–2017 were traineeships and apprenticeships (*Table no. 3*).

Table no. 3

Youth Guarantee scheme implementation in Romania, main indicators

		2014	2015	2016	2017
EU average – YG participants as a proportion of the NEET population		40.7%	45.4%	42.5%	40.5%
YG participants as a proportion of the NEET population		18.5%	16.7%	14.2%	14.1%
Entrants	Total (15–24)	191,571	174,364	129,733	110,120
Stock	Total (15–24)	71,356	66,188	53,537	45,714
Exits	Total (15–24)	167,494	153,898	141,503	114,211
Timely exits by destination	Positive	54.9%	60.8%	80.8%	89.6%
	Negative	0.0%	0.0%	4.4%	0.6%
	Unknown	45.1%	39.2%	14.8%	9.8%
	Employment	89.7%	88.4%	89.1%	89.5%
	Education	10.3%	11.6%	10.7%	10.2%
	Apprenticeship	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%
	Traineeship	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
Still in the YG preparatory phase after	4 months	29.4%	34.5%	65.7%	66.5%
	6 months	15.2%	23.3%	41.7%	50.0%
	12 months	0.0%	15.2%	25.1%	32.4%
Positive and timely exits from the YG preparatory phase		35.4%	47.8%	25.9%	40.2%

Source: European Commission, data collection for monitoring Youth Guarantee schemes 2015, 2016, 2017.

The main results of the YG implementation for the period between 2014 and 2018 include: 27 YG Centres for supporting NEETs; public policy reforms (apprenticeship law, law on traineeships/internship for higher education graduates, and improvements at the law on the unemployment insurance and employment stimulation law); apprenticeship and traineeship grants; a database on non-registered NEETs with around 100,000 entries (until 2017 were registered 67,702 NEETs in PES database); the assessment of skills and competences acquired both non-formally and informally; and 326 young people having developed a start-up (MMPS 2017; European Commission 2020).

To be closer to young NEETs, 27 pilot Youth Guarantee Centres were established throughout the country: this was achieved by the PES working together with partners from the business sector, trade unions, NGOs, and professional associations/foundations. 22 centres were established in the South region, and 5 in the North region. Within them, 6,475 young people were identified and registered (3,775 in the south and 2,700 in the north) and were provided with integrated packages of active measures (MMPS 2017). Given the large number of NEETs, these centres are insufficient and fail to reach young NEETs in rural communities, or vulnerable areas of the urban environment. Although rural NEETs rates are higher, the Romanian Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan nevertheless has a very low focus on rural NEETs. There is no specific measure dedicated to rural areas and rural NEETs, but they are addressed to all young people in Romania.

The passive attitude of the PES (which waited for the young NEETs to come to the public services during in the first phase of the implementation of the program) proved to be ineffective. Information activities regarding the YGP and the services offered were carried out, particularly in high schools, vocational schools, or universities but not for those who were no longer included in the education system. During the first 5 years of the YG implementation, vulnerable groups were under-represented and progress in reaching out these categories was limited (Meirosu *et al.* 2020). However, over the last two years, in order to be able to enrol as many young people as possible in the program and reach the most vulnerable amongst them, mobile teams have been set up; their role has been to explain to the young NEETs the advantages of enrolling in the program.

A recent report of the European Commission (2020) shows that despite some limited progress in implementing the Youth Guarantee, the core elements remain to be done. With regards to positive aspects in the last few years, the European Commission (2020) mentions the start of the INTESPO project as a model for youth activation, as well as improvements of the training programs and the legislative framework. In terms of challenges, the insufficient adequacy of the public programs, the poor partnerships between public institutions and employers, and/or lack of an effective evaluation and monitoring mechanism can also be mentioned.

Public Private Coordination

The partnership approach required by the YGP at the European level (and assumed through the implementation plans at a national level), was only partially achieved in Romania, especially in relation to the conditions surrounding the financing delay for these measures. Despite the lack of public actors with the capacity to successfully tackle the NEETs' problems, the private actors were not encouraged to become involved in the YG implementation. The pilot programs carried out included trade unions and employers' confederations, but to a small extent. The projects through which young NEETs were identified and counselled were carried out by public institutions, and these were coordinated by the PES. The non-governmental sector appreciates that the lack of partnerships with public and private organisations (and which provide services for young NEETs) or with local authorities has led to a very low level of implementation of YGP measures in Romania (Toderita *et al.* 2019). Sustained actions carried out in partnership with local public authorities would have been necessary, at least for the rural environment, where the share of young NEETs is the highest.

Human Capital Operational Programme (HCOP) funded project (YEI and Social European Fund funding), for training providers, employers' organisations, trade unions, NGOs, companies (employers), and local public institutions were put out only at the end of 2020. The purpose of these projects is to increase the employment rate of young NEETs, but also include activities to identify young NEETs in the territory and register them in the PES database, information and communication campaigns, evaluation and certification of professional skills, training, mediation, and support in the labour market, supporting entrepreneurship amongst young people. During the summer of 2021, the 106 winning projects were announced. The results were: 55 for the South-West Oltenia, South-East and South-Muntenia regions; 49 for the Centre, North-East, North-West and West regions; and 3 for the Bucharest-Ilfov region. Their implementation commenced in September–October 2021 and is planned to terminate at the end of 2023 (MIPE 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

The belated implementation of Priority Axis 1 has delayed the implementation of the YG and prevented a rapid response to the urgent issue of NEETs within Romania. The delayed and limited implementation of the Priority Axis 1 was mainly caused by the belated launch of project calls, changes of the intervention logic in 2016, by introducing national schemes, and because of the overestimation of public institutions absorption capacity.

Labour Market Integration Measures

In Romania, the main reform pillars proposed for the YGP's implementation were: (1) the improvement of the unemployment insurance and employment stimulation law (Law 76/2002), (2) the amended apprenticeship law (Law

279/2005); and (3) a new traineeship and internship law (for higher education graduates) (MMJS 2013; MMPS 2017).

Public policy reform, deliberately undertaken to try and ensure a successful implementation of the YGP in Romania, focused particularly on the field of employment. This reform was started between 2014 and 2015 but continued into 2017 in order to improve the implementation process and increase the attractiveness of these measures for the business environment as well as young NEETs. Thus, Law no. 76/2002 (on the unemployment insurance system and employment stimulation) was amended to include the categories of beneficiaries of services provided the young NEETs and young people at risk of social marginalisation (*i.e.*, young people in the protection system, young people without family support, with disabilities, victims of human trafficking, and those who have committed crimes). Moreover, the range of activation measures for placing these young people on the labour market has been diversified in order to become more attractive (*e.g.*, mobility packages, employer subsidies, incentives for insertion for young people who are employed etc.) The training and counselling component has become mandatory for all those looking for a job.

The two other public policies (namely, Law no. 279/2005 on apprenticeship at work and Law 335/2013 on internships for higher education graduates) were amended in 2017 and 2018 respectively. This was done in order to increase the level of subsidies granted and thus become more attractive both to jobseekers who do not have a qualification, and also to employers who complain about the lack of qualified staff. In the case of higher education graduates, the amount of subsidy granted to employers who employ these young people increased from 750 lei/month (approximately 165 euros) to 1,350 lei/month in 2017 (approximately 300 euros), and again to 2,250 lei/month in 2018 (approximately 450 euros). For employers who employed young people in apprenticeships, the subsidy was increased from 300 lei/month to 1,125 lei/month in 2017, and 2,250 lei/month in 2018. Despite these changes, except for subsidies for employment of these young people (they increased from 1,318 in 2017 to 8,190 in 2020), the attractiveness of traineeships and apprenticeships is not very high. However, after the increase in the level of subsidy granted for apprenticeship contracts, their number increased almost 150 times (from 384 apprenticeship contracts in 2017 to 5,684 in 2019). At the same time, the number of these contracts increased as a result of the support given to companies which employ apprentices through projects financed via European funds. The number of traineeship contracts for university graduates decreased between 2018 and 2020, from 100 to 26. Furthermore, the number of students employed during the holidays (at a maximum of 60 days / year) has decreased by more than half in 2019 compared to 2018. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the number of young NEETs integrated on the labour market in the period 2017–2019 rose from 26,043 to 31,485 (*Table no. 4*).

Table no. 4

Main indicators of NEETs employment or support for employment, 2017–2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Young NEETs involved in active employment measures		74,313	76,236	72,206
Young NEETs on the labour market	26,043	27,373	31,485	30,299
Subsidizing the employment of young NEETs	1,318	2,165	7,557	8,190
Subsidies granted to employers who employ higher education graduates based on the Law no. 335/2013 on professional internships for higher education graduates		100	45	26
Subsidies granted to employers who employ pupils and students during holidays (maximum 60 days/ year) based on Law no. 72/2007 regarding the stimulation of the employment of pupils and students		1,925	814	183
Subsidies granted for apprenticeship programs at work based on Law no. 279/2005 on apprenticeship at work	384		5,684	3,317

Source: PES annual reports of the of implementation of the Employment Program 2018, 2019, 2020; MMPS, 2019 for 2017 data.

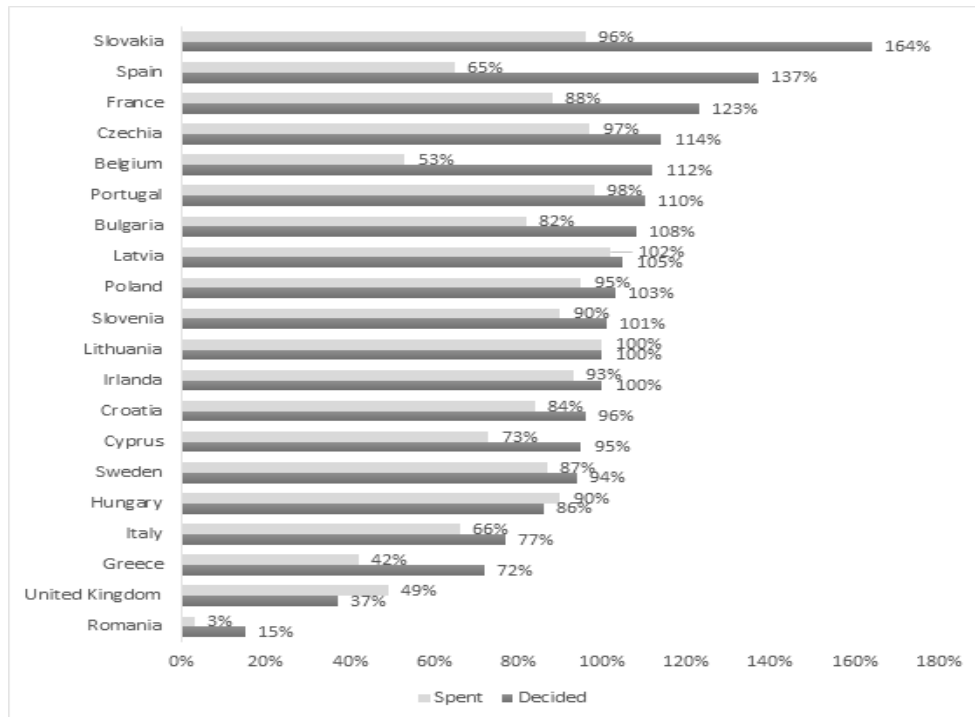
YG implementation measures in the area of youth labour market integration were supported by the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI). This was launched to provide support to young people living in regions where youth unemployment was higher than 25% in 2012 (for the Youth Guarantee Plan in Romania, 2014–2015), or 2016 (for the Youth Guarantee Plan in Romania 2017–2020). In Romania, the regions with youth unemployment rates higher than 25% were the Centre, South–East and South Muntenia regions (in 2012), and South-West Oltenia, South-East and South Muntenia (in 2016). Typically, the YEI funds the provision of apprenticeships, traineeships, job placements, and further education leading to a qualification.

Romania ranks last in Europe with the lowest percentage of resources allocated from the total budget of the YEI program (15%), as well as the lowest percentage spent (only 3%) (Figure 1). Romania is also at the end of the ranking in terms of the number of participants who completed the YEI program: only 2,047 (in 2019), at a great distance from Bulgaria, for example, which reports a comparatively much larger number of 37,805 participants. Only 1,014 of them successfully exited the program (*i.e.*, were employed), and 6 months after the implementation process only 647 persons remained in employment².

²<https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/funds/yei>.

Figure 1

**Implementation by country of YEI – total cost of selection and spending as % of planned.
Period covered: up to 30/06/2021**



Source: Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD)

According to the evaluation report of the Youth Employment Initiative, the interventions within the Priority Axis 1 of the HCOP contributed to a very small extent to the sustainable integration of NEETs young people in the labour market. This is because the number of supported young people represents only a small part of the final target of the program. The proportion of beneficiaries who were employed was higher in the interventions financed by Axis 1 of the HCOP than in the projects financed by SOP HRD. Thus, 31.72% of the young people who benefited from training courses, and 24.35% of the total beneficiaries, were employed at the end of the project. This is opposed to only 12.11% of the beneficiaries of the training programs, and 10% of the total beneficiaries of the pilot projects financed from SOP HRD (MEF 2019).

Educational Measures

The main measures in the field of education included in the national implementation plan of the YGP were: The Second Chance Program; the High School Money Program (for high school students from vulnerable families); the Vocational Scholarship Program (for vocational students); and the development of vocational education (especially that of the dual system). These measures aim at better school participation, but also at an improvement of the transition from school to the labour market.

The “Second Chance” program is addressed to young people and adults who (for various reasons) did not complete primary or secondary education. Between 2013 and 2020, over 30,000 people enrolled in courses for the primary education cycle, and almost 70,000 enrolled in secondary education (*Table no. 5*). Between 2013 and 2020, the number of beneficiaries of the High School Money program decreased to one third, partly due to the tightening of the conditions for granting this scholarship. At the same time, the number of students benefiting from the Professional Scholarship program increased almost 5 times between 2013 and 2019. Amongst the causes of this increase are the introduction of vocational education in the dual system starting in 2016, as well as the conducting of a larger number of information and communication campaigns (*Table no.5*).

Table no.5

YG scheme measures on education main indicators, 2013–2020

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of students enrolled in the “Second Chance” program – primary education level	3,665	3,434	3,552	4,489	4,440	4,777	4,932	4,532
Number of students enrolled in the “Second Chance” program – secondary education level	6,458	6,481	7,141	8,396	8,891	9,664	10,982	10,884
Number of students benefiting from the “High School Money” program	98,586	79,876	60,660	33,057	46,091	33,500	32,586	
Number of students benefiting from the “Professional Scholarship” program	22,393	49,287	67,520	83,247	90,125	90,396	100,693	

Source: Ministry of Education, SIIR.

After 2015, “Second Chance” type programs were funded through HCOP. Despite the participation incentives, which included both money and educational materials, as well as counselling and assistance services, the number of young

people in the eligible categories who showed interest in these programs was, however, below expectations (MIPE 2021d). The available data shows some relevant aspects regarding the evolution of the number of beneficiaries. Thus, if the number of students enrolled at the secondary education level decreases over the years, the number of those enrolled in high school courses increases significantly. At the same time, there is a significant difference between counties, the number of participants ranging from less than 30 people in Vaslui to almost 1000 in Galati (MIPE 2021d). At the same time, it is notable that over 50% of the beneficiaries of the program are people over the age of 24, which demonstrates a high impact amongst the adult population.

Dual education was introduced in 2016 but was effectively implemented during the 2017–2018 school year (CEDEFOP 2019). Furthermore, in 2018 the notion of dual education was included in the legislation through additions to the National Education Law. This form of education involves stimulating the enrolment of children at the end of the eighth grade into vocational schools that offer specific programs developed in partnership with various economic agents. The students enrolled in this form of education receive a professional scholarship from the Romanian state, in the amount of 200 lei and additional scholarships granted by the partner companies in the organisation of dual education. The number of students who chose to enrol (in the ninth grade) in the vocational training programs offered through dual education was constantly growing: 2,568 students in the 2017–2018 school year; 4,244 students in the 2018–2019 school year; and 6,970 in 2019–2020 (Ministry of Education 2020, 95). At the same time, there was a significant increase in the number of economic agents involved in initial vocational training through dual education, from 227 companies in 2018 to 769 in 2020 (Ministry of Education 2020, 95).

Despite obvious progress, such as the introduction of this form of education and the constant evolution in terms of the number of students enrolled, the share of dual education remains low. Only 3% of eighth grade graduates end up choosing this training path, a percentage too low in order to discuss the real impact of dual education amongst young people in at-risk categories in relation to the phenomenon of NEETs.

CONCLUSIONS

The main factors which contribute to maintaining the high levels of the unemployment rate and specifically the youth NEETs rate, are as follows: (1) the low level of education and training of young people at the time of transition into the labour market; (2) the mismatch between youth qualifications and skills required by the labour market; (3) the low impact of apprenticeship and internships schemes; (4) the high expectations of young people from a job (*i.e.*, salary, work environment, other benefits); and (5) the limited number of job offers.

Beyond this, there exists rather poor coordination between the ministries and the subordinate agencies responsible for the implementation of the various measures provided in the National Implementation Plan of the YGP. The deficient co-ordination of the four ministries directly involved is also reflected in the lack of data regarding the implementation of the measures provided in the national plan.

At the same time, many of the information and communication measures have been implemented in high schools, vocational schools, and universities, where the most excluded NEETs are extremely difficult to reach. For them, the approach should have been changed to include more flexibility, and for the intervention to be carried out by local authorities and organisations providing social/educational services, or those active in the youth area. The introduction of mobile teams after 2017 has proven to be much more effective in bringing the YGP message to young people in vulnerable environments.

Amongst the reasons why the implementation of YGP in Romania did not go according to initial expectations, we can also include the following: poor adaptation of proposals for measures in the European program *vis-à-vis* national realities; delays in allocating European funds dedicated to measures for young NEETs; poorly developed partnership with employers, non-governmental organisations carrying out youth activities and local public authorities (MFE 2019; Toderita *et al.* 2019; MMPS 2017).

The Commission's 3-year assessment of the YG and YEI noted that key challenges in relation to implementation of the YG include improving the coverage of non-registered NEETs and increasing the take-up and impact of apprenticeships and traineeships (European Commission 2018). The lack of a Youth Guarantee covering 2016, but also the first part of 2017, also contributed to the lack of progress in this area (MFE 2019).

The absence of the implementation plan of the YGP between January 2016 and July 2017 led to delays in the implementation of the proposed measures, especially in relation to the employment component. The main cause of the lack of the implementation plan during this period was the rethinking of the approach to registration of young NEETs in the context of financing these measures, mainly from European funds. Delays in finalising the HCOP have made it impossible to finance projects for young NEETs. Furthermore, it is difficult to monitor the results of projects financed from European funds in the absence of accurate data. Their monitoring is the responsibility of the MIPE: moreover, the PES that coordinates the implementation of the YGP does not have access to this data until it is made public. In the context of starting the projects only in September–October 2021, it is most likely that the existing gap with other EU countries will not be reduced quickly.

Unlike other emergent economies from Eastern Europe, Romania did not develop a public-private coordination mechanism for the implementation of the YG and focused mainly on public actors' involvement in the process. Private actors

began to be encouraged to get involved in the YG implementation after the poor results obtained from public institution in this area. The implementation arrangements at the national level have, of course, affected the results obtained in various EU countries in relation to the YG implementation process. Thus, unlike Romania, most of the countries with higher NEETs rates developed public-private coordination mechanisms which, demonstrably, helped them to reach more NEETs.

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In 2014, statele europene au început să implementeze programul Garanția pentru Tineret, una dintre cele mai importante inițiative ale Comisiei Europene în domeniul șomajului în rândul tinerilor, ceea ce a dus la scăderea numărului tinerilor NEETs în următorii șase ani. Pornind de la date privind amploarea fenomenului NEETs la nivel european, numărul tinerilor NEETs care beneficiază de diferite măsuri și programele pentru NEETs finanțate prin Fondul Social European, lucrarea prezintă o privire de ansamblu asupra implementării Garanției pentru Tineret în România în perioada 2014–2020 și identifică principalele bariere și provocări care au împiedicat atingerea rezultatelor propuse. Dintre acestea, menționăm lipsa de coordonare inter-instituțională, lipsa flexibilității în ceea ce privește înregistrarea tinerilor NEETs, nivelul redus al parteneriatelor între autorități publice, companii, ONG-uri, întâzieri în primirea finanțărilor, lipsa monitorizării centralizate în vederea determinării progresului și a măsurilor de îmbunătățire necesare.

Cuvinte-cheie: NEETs; rural; tineri; ocupare; educație; Garanția pentru Tineret.

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