

COULD THE NEET GROUP ENSURE AN INCREASE IN EMPLOYMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA?

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Abstract

In this scientific endeavor, the NEET group as a source of employment growth is addressed. Taking into account the economic and social consequences of the NEET group, national government institutions at the national level have been concerned with this category, developing and implementing various measures and policies to reduce their share in the total young population. In this context, a theoretical-conceptual analysis of the NEET group is performed, being presented the opinions of several authors. It also analyzes the composition of the NEET group, as well as the factors that influence it, highlighting both macro and individual factors.

Methodologically, the NEET rate was analyzed, as the main reference indicator that characterizes this group. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the NEET rate was analyzed by age category, gender, place of residence and the education level. Likewise, the NEET rate in the Republic of Moldova is analyzed compared to that registered in the EU Member States, in order to highlight the existing gaps.

Key words: *NEET group, labor market, employment, training, vocational training.*

JEL Classification: *I24; J16; J21.*

1. Introduction

Young people are a category of the population with an enormous potential that must be capitalized on effectively, through their contribution to the development of any country. Making effective use of young people's potential can be achieved through a rapid process of transition from school to work, avoiding, in this case, the situation of being unemployed. Even if the youth unemployment rate is higher compared to other age groups, this is why government institutions, through policies developed and implemented, try to reduce the size of this indicator, there is another category of inactive young people who are out of the educational process, employment and any vocational training program, known in the literature as the NEET group (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

Understanding young people's difficulties in the labor market justifies their consideration and inactivity, as their condition may be the result of systemic failures in their educational trajectory and the transition from high school or university to a paid job [10]. Given that the NEET group does not contribute to improving their further employability by investing in skills training and development, nor does they gain professional experience through employment, they are at risk of both social exclusion and exclusion from the labor market [8]. Moreover, the period in which the person is part of the NEET group can have long-term consequences on: future employment opportunities, income, psychosocial well-being and health, involving rather high societal costs [4]; [18]. In an ethnographic study by NEET, Russell found that "feelings of marginalization at work, home, and education" were widespread among participants [25].

The relatively high share of the NEET group in the total young population of the same age group has been a topic of research for many researchers, but also a concern of decision makers in each country. Given the economic and social consequences of the NEET group on society, decision-makers across Europe are looking for interventions to reduce the number of people in the NEET group [13]. Thus, the United Kingdom Government has sought to reduce the number of NEETs in both education and labor market strategies. At the same time, local authorities in the UK

have a statutory obligation to provide sufficient education and adequate training in their area, as well as to identify and monitor those who do not participate in these processes [14]. Government policies on the NEET group are geared towards the opportunity to continue their studies in university education, to improve the availability and quality of apprenticeships, as well as to increase the level of the national minimum wage for people under 25 [13]. However, previous research shows that people who form the NEET group are, for the most part, with a lower level of education. In almost all OECD countries, young people with a lower level of education represent the largest share in the NEET group. At the OECD level, people with lower qualifications represent 36% of the total NEET group [22]. In this context, Macmillan (2014) argues that people raised in poor households or in which no adult member works are generally more likely to leave the education system earlier, to become unemployed or to be part of the NEET group [15]. Therefore, a good education is the most effective way to avoid the NEET group. According to the OECD, young people with higher education represent only 15% of the NEET group [21].

The NEET Group has been a major concern of the European Commission, developing and implementing several actions aimed at reducing their number. One of the key actions of the European Commission has been to systematic monitoring the situation of young people who are not employed, do not follow an educational process or a training program, in support of policy development and mutual learning in this field [11]. In 2013, the Youth Guarantee Program was launched at EU level with the aim of supporting Member States in their efforts to reduce unemployment levels among young people, especially those who do not have a job, are not in education or training.

In the case of the Republic of Moldova, it should be noted that the NEET group is not yet a major concern for government institutions. NEET Group, as a statistical indicator, appeared in the official statistics of the Republic of Moldova, starting with 2012. By developing this paper, we aim to raise awareness of the importance of this indicator both economically and socially for the labor market in the Republic of Moldova.

2. Literature review

The NEET concept appeared at the end of the last century, being developed over the years. The NEET group has become known not only in academia but also in the political speeches by decision-makers because it targets an important category of the population. Currently, the term NEET is well known to the general public and is a useful indicator for monitoring the labor market and the social situation of young people [8]. The situation of NEETs is very varied and quite vulnerable, in most cases. The NEET group may include people who are in an extended transition from school to work. However, the lack of employment opportunities, due to a lower qualification or even a lack of it, makes those people demotivated to look for a job and, in this way, become inactive. The NEET group also includes people who are in transition between school and further education or temporary employment contracts, as well as those who do not want to work or continue their studies, giving priority to the care of young children or other relatives [31]. However, it should be noted that some researchers criticize the NEET construct because it includes young individuals with very different experiences, characteristics and needs [12]; [119]; [28]. At the same time, Bynner and Parsons (2002) highlight certain “levels” for becoming part of the NEET group, emphasizing that this group must include people who have had this status for at least 6 months [5].

There are different opinions about the characteristics of people who form the NEET group, According to Soetanto and Zhou (2010), in Japan and China the NEET group consists of 4 categories:

- people without skills and education, but who do not want a tough job and a low salary;
- people overprotected by their parents, and in their absence, they certainly encounter difficulties;
- people who have a strong desire to grow their own business because they do not want to be employed;

- people who have difficulties in integrating at work [3].

The NEET rate, as a statistical indicator, is calculated from the data of the labour force survey as a percentage of the population aged 15-29 (or 15-24) who is not employed and is not involved in education or training.

The NEET rate is an important indicator for a better understanding of the extent of young people's vulnerabilities. It is probably the best indicator to capture the magnitude of the multiple disadvantages of young people in terms of their participation in the labour market [10]. However, despite the ease with which the NEET rate can be calculated, some aspects of the use of the term have been criticized because it refers to a very heterogeneous population. Thus, there are situations when it is misused to identify disadvantaged and "problematic" groups, such as so-called "hard to reach" groups. When used in this way, it stigmatizes young people [27].

The NEET indicator was designed to measure the young population who, for various reasons, do not accumulate human capital through formal channels such as participation in the labor market or in the education process [10]. For this reason, the NEET group has a higher risk of poor employment and social exclusion.

3. NEET group diversity

In order to elucidate the young people from the NEET group, Eurofound (2012) proposes an alternative classification that includes the following categories:

- conventional unemployed;
- unavailable persons (young carers, young people with family responsibilities, sick young people or those with special needs);
- young people without commitments (young people who are not looking for a job or participating in an educational process and who are not forced to do so by other obligations or disabilities, discouraged young workers, as well as young people who pursue dangerous and associative lifestyles);
- opportunists (young people who are looking for a job or are in the process of training, but are looking for opportunities that would benefit them due to their skills and status);
- NEET volunteers (young people who travel or engage in other activities, such as art, music and self-study) [10].

The socio-demographic diversity of the NEET group led Eurofound (2012) to divide them into two categories: vulnerable and non-vulnerable. Vulnerable NEETs are at risk of marginalization, which largely lacks social and cultural capital. In contrast, non-vulnerable NEETs are richer in social and cultural capital and are less at risk of marginalization.

While some authors have characterized those in the NEET group as young people left behind or members of a lost generation [20]; [7] or as a group of lazy, passive individuals with behavioural problems and no skills, dreams or ambitions [1], Caroleo et al (2020) show that people in the NEET group derive, conversely, from a number of objective conditions, considering it one of the most vulnerable social groups [6].

Some researchers were interested in the length of time young people were in the NEET category. Thompson (2011) notes that the consequences may vary depending on the length of stay in the NEET group [30]. At the same time, Bynner and Parsons (2002) propose to analyze only those young people who have a duration of more than 6 months in the NEET group, and Tamesberger and Bacher (2014) analyze whether NEET status is permanent or temporary. Qualitatively, the NEET group has been described as an unwanted experience in which young people lose their sense of identity and move away from the contexts of education, training and work.

4. Factors influencing NEET status

NEET status depends on several factors that can be classified into two categories: individual and macro factors [6]. At the same time, Salvà-Mut et al. (2016) argue that the NEET group is the product of the interrelationship between several macro-, meso- and microsocial factors [26]. The authors argue that at the macro level, the NEET group is influenced by the size of spending on active employment policies, as well as dual learning systems, while at the meso level - by factors such as family, friends and community. Several researchers have analysed the personal characteristics that affect the NEET status. Thus, the risk of becoming NEET is closely linked to personal factors such as: a poor family [24]; early school leaving [29]; female gender, especially when associated with early pregnancy, disability, immigrant status or place of residence [10]. In particular, young people with a low level of education and lower qualifications face higher risks of exclusion from work [4]. To reduce the share of NEET, Caroleo et al. (2020) argue that one of the most important actions to be taken is to stimulate a higher level of education among young people [6]. According to MacMillan et al. (2012), this can be done by preventing early school leaving, acting on the first signals that can be summarized in higher levels of absenteeism and a non-prohibitive attitude of school [15]. According to the authors, this can be done by preventing early school leaving, taking the necessary measures at the first signs that can be summarized in higher levels of absenteeism and an attitude of not forbidding school attendance [15]. Some research also establishes a direct link between early school leaver and their employment in informal or illegal economic activities, as well as the association between unemployment and poor mental health, anxiety, depression and suicide [21]; [10]. At the same time, Thompson (2011) argues that NEET status is not limited to the most marginalized groups of the population, such as young offenders and the homeless, and this is not always a personal choice [30]. NEET status may be a result of the failure of hegemonic value systems to inspire, guide and empower young people, depending on their level of advancement during their professional life [9].

In addition, NEET status may be influenced by certain economic circumstances, as young employees tend to be more severely affected by economic fluctuations because they focus on certain areas of activity that are more sensitive to business cycles and temporary jobs. where layoffs are much easier ([16]; [20]; [7])

Also, the performance of young people in the labor market differs from one country to another and can be influenced by several factors. Pastore and Zimmermann (2019) consider that the difference in performance among young people is influenced, at the country level, by at least two factors:

- the institutions that govern the transition from school to work (including the quality of the education system and the integration between institutional and on-the-job training);
- labour market regulation (employment rules, safety nets and industrial relations systems) [24].

Therefore, the effectiveness of education systems and the proper functioning of the transition from school to work are necessary requirements for reducing the NEET rate [5]. According to Piopiunik and Ryan (2012), the types of measures in political interventions that influence the transition from school to work can be classified into: active labor market programs (ALMP), vocational education and training (VET) programs and apprentices [23].

Another factor that can influence NEET status is the minimum wage. This, in turn, can influence the functioning of the labor market and the inclination of young people to work. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the minimum wage is an important factor that determines young people not to work, as it is the lowest in Europe.

Other institutional factors in the functioning of the labour market include the union density that protects employees, as well as the tax burden that shows the extent to which the income tax discourages employment [2].

The registration of NEETs in public employment services is a key factor in stimulating their commitment, as it is the pathway to participation in a wide range of services. However, a considerable amount of evidence highlights the difficulties that public employment services have in reaching young people and the lack of trust that young people have in public institutions [10].

5. NEET group in the Republic of Moldova

In the Republic of Moldova, the NEET group has received less attention from both government institutions and researchers. In this context, we can mention that no concrete measures and actions have been developed by government institutions for this category. As a result, the share of the NEET group in the total population of the same age group is high in the Republic of Moldova, much higher than in the EU Member States. The official statistics of the Republic of Moldova analyse the NEET group, taking into account two age categories: 15-24 years and 15-29 years. Although, the NEET group appears in the statistics of the Republic of Moldova since 2012, in this paper we will refer to the indicators calculated for the period 2019-2021, because in 2018 changes were made in the methodology of population calculation, which we cannot make a comparison of the indicator given with the previous period. In table no. 1 presents the dynamics of the NEET rate in the Republic of Moldova in the period 2019-2021 from a territorial perspective.

Table 1. NEET rate by territorial aspect in the Republic of Moldova, in the period 2019-2021

NEET group	2019		2020		2021	
	15-24 years	15-29 years	15-24 years	15-29 years	15-24 years	15-29 years
Total	19.5	27.4	17.6	26.0	17.2	26.4
Urban	16.1	24.7	16.3	24.5	15.1	24.4
Rural	21.7	29.4	18.4	27.1	18.5	28.0

Source: Processed by the author based on statistical data of the Republic of Moldova

Although the share of the NEET group in the total population of the same age decreased during the analysed period, it remains at a high level in the Republic of Moldova. If the share of the NEET group aged 15-24 years decreased by 2.3 percentage points, in 2021 compared to 2019, then the one aged 15-29 years - decreased by only 1.0 percentage points. We also see a higher rate of the NEET group in rural areas compared to urban areas. In 2021, the NEET rate for 15 – 24year olds in rural areas was 3.4 percent higher than in urban areas. The same situation is characteristic for those aged 15-29.

Following the investigations, we find that the NEET rate among women is higher than that recorded for men. (Table 2).

Table 1. NEET rate by gender aspect in the Republic of Moldova, in the period 2019-2021

NEET group	2019			2020			2021		
	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females
15-24 years									
Total	19.5	16.5	22.8	17.6	15.6	19.7	17.2	14.1	20.4
Urban	16.1	12.5	19.6	16.3	13.1	19.7	15.1	9.7	20.3
Rural	21.7	18.9	24.9	18.4	17.2	19.8	18.5	16.7	20.5
15-29 years									
Total	27.4	19.4	35.5	26.0	19.6	32.5	26.4	18.8	33.9
Urban	24.7	14.4	34.0	24.5	16.4	32.4	24.4	14.6	33.4

Rural	29.4	22.7	36.7	27.1	21.8	32.7	28.0	21.9	34.4
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Source: Processed by the author based on statistical data of the Republic of Moldova

As shown in Table 2, the share of women in the NEET group in the total female population in the same age group is much higher than that of men. This may be due to the fact that women, compared to men, are more concerned with family responsibilities, especially the care and education of children. In such situations, the men are working abroad, providing an income for the remaining family in the Republic of Moldova. Thus, we note that in 2021, the rate of women in the NEET group aged 15-24 was 1.4 times higher than that of men, for the same age group. In the case of the NEET group aged 15-29, this gap is even larger, about 1.8 times in 2021. We also find that the rate of NEET women in urban areas was more than 2 times higher than that of men. In 2021, the NEET rate of women aged 15-24 was 2.1 times higher, while for the age of 15-29 - 2.3 times higher. In rural areas, this gap is smaller because the rate of NEET men in rural areas is much higher than in urban areas.

Of interest is the manifestation of the NEET group according to the level of training (Table 3).

Table 3. NEET rate according to the level of studies in the Republic of Moldova, in the period 2019-2021

NEET group (education levels)	2019		2020		2021	
	15-24 years	15-29 years	15-24 years	15-29 years	15-24 years	15-29 years
Total	19.5	27.4	17.6	26.0	17.2	26.4
Higher education (levels 6-8)	18.1	26.7	31.4	27.6	25.9	31.7
Short-cycle tertiary education (level 5)	29.0	33.4	28.5	36.6	28.8	34.0
Vocational secondary education (level 4)	43.1	42.1	37.6	37.3	35.8	38.5
Upper secondary education (level 3)	11.9	20.2	9.9	17.9	10.3	17.7
Lower secondary education (level 2)	19.5	27.2	17.6	26.3	16.8	26.1
Primary or early education (level 1)	4.7	10.2	1.7	7.4	5.8	10.8

Source: Processed by the author based on statistical data of the Republic of Moldova

Analysing the NEET rate according to the education level, we find a certain paradox. Although people with higher education have more opportunities in the labour market to evolve professionally, we notice that the NEET rate for this category has increased in the last 3 years. Compared to 2019, in 2021 the NEET rate of people with higher education increased by 7.8 percentage points for the age category of 15-24 years, respectively by 5.0 percentage points for the one aged 15-29 years. The NEET rate among people with secondary vocational education has decreased in the last 3 years in the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, we find that it remains at a high level in the Republic of Moldova, constituting 38.5%, in 2021. We also note a decrease in the NEET rate among people with upper secondary education and those with lower secondary education.

Comparing the NEET rate in 2020 (the year in which the Covid-19 pandemic crisis began) in relation to 2019, we find that it did not have an impact on this group. On the contrary, the NEET rate decreased in 2020 compared to 2019 for both the 15-29 age group and the 15-24 age group. Although in 2021 it increased insignificantly compared to 2020, the NEET rate was lower than in 2019. Analysing the information in Table 3, we find that the Covid-19 pandemic most affected

people with higher education, especially those with age 15-24. In 2020, it was 13.3 percentage points higher than in 2019.

The NEET rate in the Republic of Moldova, among people aged 15-29, compared to that recorded in the EU Member States, is much higher. Figure 1 shows the NEET rate in the EU Member States for people aged 15-29, in the period 2011-2020. In order to analyse the evolution of the NEET rate dynamics, the period 2011-2020 was taken, including 2019, to see how the Covid-19 pandemic crisis affected the NEET group in the EU Member States.

Comparing the NEET rate in the Republic of Moldova with that recorded in the EU, we find that it was about 2.2 times higher in 2019 and 1.9 times higher in 2020. Compared to the Netherlands, the country in which has the lowest NEET rate in all EU Member States, the NEET rate in the Republic of Moldova was almost 4.6 times higher in 2020. In 2011-2019, the NEET rate decreased in all EU Member States, with the exception of the Netherlands, which remained at the same level.

At the same time, it should be noted that the Covid-19 pandemic crisis has negatively affected the NEET rate. It increased in 2020 compared to 2019 in all EU Member States, except for Romania, which saw a decrease of 0.2 percentage points. Most of the NEET rate increased in Ireland, Latvia, Bulgaria and Greece.

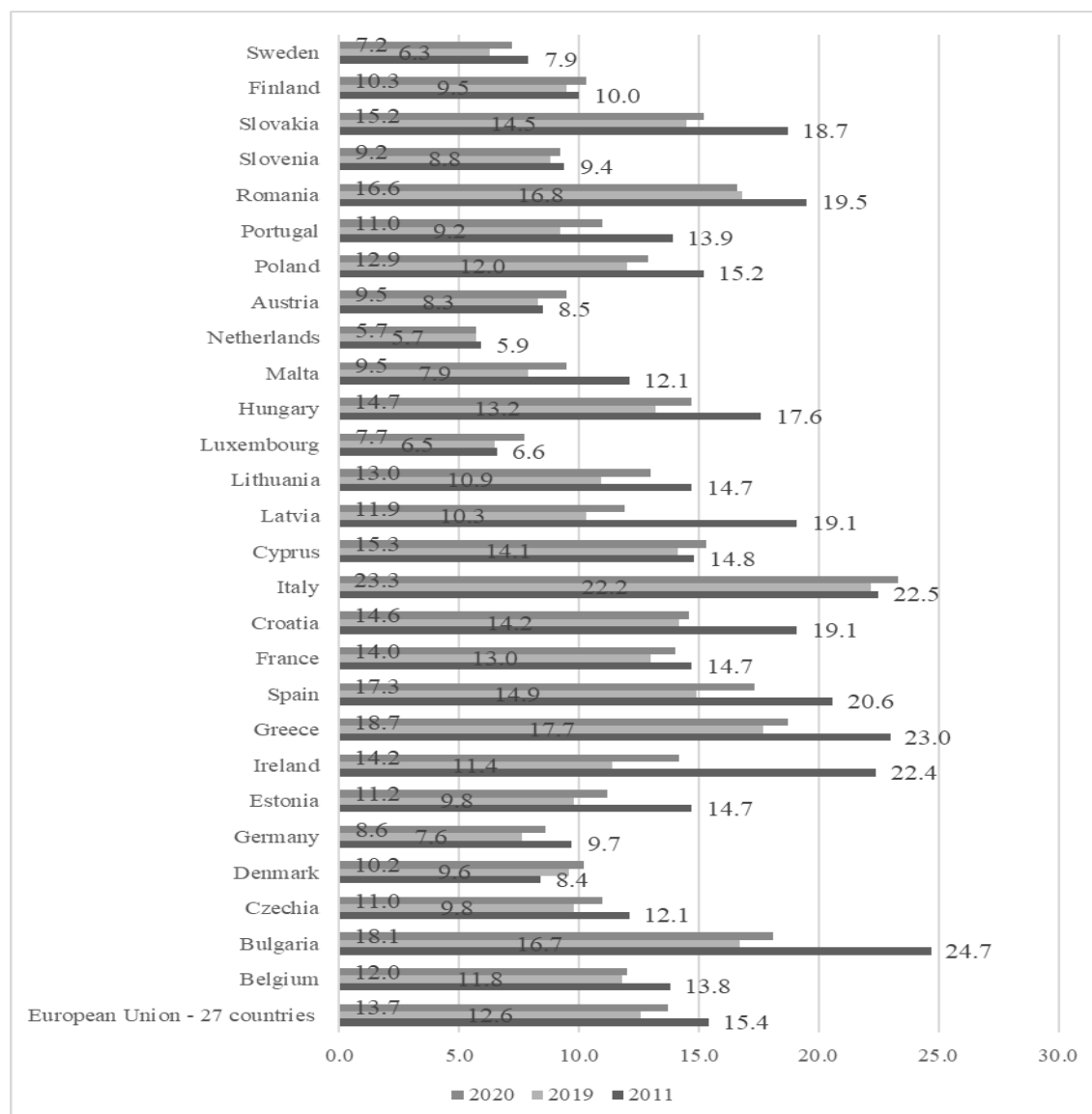


Figure 1. NEET rate in EU Member States in the period 2011-2020

Source: Processed by the author based on statistical data of the European Union.

6. Conclusions

For the Republic of Moldova, the NEET group is a category of the population that has received little attention from government institutions. Although it represents a fairly large share of the total population of the same age group, the NEET group could solve, to some extent, the labour shortage in the Republic of Moldova. Currently, more and more domestic employers are facing a quantitative and qualitative shortage of labour. Likewise, for many foreign investors, the labour market in the Republic of Moldova is no longer attractive due to the workforce shortage.

Investigations show that the NEET rate is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Lack of employment opportunities in rural areas discourages people from looking for a job or participating in a training program, which makes them inactive. The lack of employment opportunities in rural areas makes the NEET rate among men aged 15-24 almost 2 times higher than in urban areas in 2021. Likewise, the NEET rate of women aged 15-29 in urban areas is more than 2 times higher than that of men. There is also a significant difference in rural areas. This shows that women are more concerned with raising their children and other family responsibilities.

There is a big difference, over 9 percentage points, between the NEET rate among 15-24 years and 15-29 years. This is explained by the fact that people aged 15-24 are still in the education system, respectively the NEET rate for this age group is lower.

Paradoxically or not, in the Republic of Moldova, the NEET rate among people with higher education is high. Although they have more employment opportunities, people in this category prefer to be inactive. Low wages could be an impediment to people who prefer to be inactive rather than a low-paying job. Given the fact that young people have even more waging pretensions, they are waiting for opportunities that would allow them to take higher paid jobs or in the event of going abroad to work that would ensure them higher incomes.

The NEET rate in the Republic of Moldova is much higher compared to EU Member States. From the perspective of Moldova's accession to the EU, government institutions should develop policies aimed at the NEET group that would lead to its reduction. Considering that the employment rate in the Republic of Moldova is very low, a little over 40%, attracting the NEET group to employment will also lead to an increase in the employment rate in the Republic of Moldova.

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