

THE SPECIFICS OF THE NEETS POPULATION IN ROMANIA WITHIN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

BĂLAN MARIANA

UNIV. PROF. PHD., “HYPERION” UNIVERSITY - BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

e-mail: dr.mariana.balan@gmail.com

UZLĂU CARMEN

ASSOCIATE PROF. PHD. SR III, INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMIC FORECASTING,
ROMANIAN ACADEMY

e-mail: carmen_uzlau@yahoo.com

RADU BRÎNDUȘA

ASSOCIATE PROF. PHD. SR III, INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMIC FORECASTING,
ROMANIAN ACADEMY

e-mail: bmradu@yahoo.com

Abstract

The young in the NEET group represent a social category specific to today's society, characterized by increasing inequalities between people, precariousness and insecurity. The issue of young Romanians in the NEET scenario, in terms of their relation to the formal education system, respectively to the alternative forms, specific to non-formal education, is a particularly sinuous one, with a vast range of nuances and a sufficiently consistent casuistry. The interest for this category of population is even greater in Romania, because the share of NEETs is the highest in the EU-27: 19.4% in 2024 (significantly above the EU average of 11%). In fact, this share is up by 0.1 percentage points compared to the previous year. This percentage is hiding multiple realities: early school dropout, lack of real job opportunities for the youth, gap between skills acquired in school and labour market requirements, labour migration or lack of coherent policies for youth integration into economy. This paper presents a brief analysis on the phenomenon of the NEET youth in Romania's specific context, both at regional and at national level. The risk factors for the inclusion of young people in the NEET category in urban and rural areas, the challenges that young generations face in the transition to adult life, and the regional disparities in the NEET rate are identified and analysed.

Keywords: young NEET; risk factors; regional disparities; vulnerabilities.

Classification JEL: E24, I21, J21, J82

1. Introduction

Analyses carried out in relation to labour market, at the level of both the EU and the Member States, have shown that they are increasingly insecure, with a higher share of workforce employed on temporary, part-time or occasional contracts (so-called zero hours). Most employees who have this type of contract are often relatively young. Most times, it could be the first job for a person trying to transition from education or vocational training to the labour market. However, as the business cycle is changing, such people are often particularly vulnerable because they can be the first to leave the workplace (as they compete with other job seekers who have more experience).

In the debate about diagnosing the labour market integration and marginalization problems faced by young Europeans and the policies to be implemented, the concept of NEET has become increasingly popular (Eurofound 2012; Serracant 2013; ILO 2015; Mussida and Sciulli 2018). The

phenomenon is characterized by a relevant heterogeneity, as the NEET concept includes young people in different conditions and states.

Young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) have become a target population for policy making in Europe.

The NEET concept has been widely used as an indicator for youth-oriented policies regarding employment, education, training and also social inclusion in the 28 EU Member States since 2010.

In the EU Member States, in 2024, the percentage of young NEETs aged between 15-29 years varies, with the highest rates recorded in Romania (19.4%), Italy (15.2%), Lithuania (14.7%) and Greece (14.2%), and the lowest rates: 4.9% in the Netherlands and 6.3% in Sweden.

Large NEET rate variations in Member States are influenced by a number of factors: differences in the education system and access to vocational training, as well as adapting them to labour market needs or to technological changes; high unemployment rates involving also higher NEET youth rates (this aspect being influenced by general economic conditions and labour force occupancy policies); social and cultural expectations regarding the education and career of young people vary from country to country and the social pressure on them can influence their choices and the risk of becoming NEET.

Economic and social inequalities also lead to significant disparities in the access to education and employment opportunities. In this context, young people from disadvantaged or limited environments become potential NEETs. International and domestic migration can affect the distribution of workforce and access to opportunities in different regions of a country, thus becoming risk factors for young people to become NEETs.

The particularities of the rural environment in terms of youth participation in education are mainly related to difficulties in continuing secondary education, namely early school dropout, especially in the case of the young coming from poor families.

Over the past twenty years, the NEETs population in Romania has steadily increased, often placing Romania in the first places in the EU-27 in terms of the share of this population from the young population.

The causes are both of individual nature (lifestyle, socio-family origin, expectations and aspirations) and of socio-economic nature: accessibility of the education system, development of lifelong learning, correspondence between education and labour market demand, particularities of the Romanian labour market, socio-economic policies supported by central and local authorities, etc.

The approach to young NEETs in Romania must be carried out in the specific country context, taking into account the risk factors and their vulnerabilities to enter this category. The paper aims to carry out a brief analysis of the structure, size and characteristics of young NEET in Romania, at national and regional level.

2. Literature review

In the current context, the interest towards the problems of young NEETs has seen a significant increase in recent years, leading to the emergence of a considerable number of scientific papers aimed at analysing the vulnerabilities of the young susceptible to becoming NEETs, as well as at identifying policy measures aimed at facilitating their transition to adult life.

Considering the importance and size of this population category, the European Commission has developed indicators and a specific methodology for collecting data and calculating the number of NEETs in Europe since 2010.

The methodology developed by the European Commission uses the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) to position young people from different age groups based on education levels. This has been a remarkable development for the EU not only to focus on unemployed young people but to accept the notion of NEET as the target of its political actions.

Young people who fall into this category have different features and needs, which makes it more difficult to design and to implement effective policy measures.

The chosen perspective is motivated by the fact that the applicability of the NEET concept is not simple, on one side because the concept as such has been criticized as ambiguous or as incapable of capturing the challenges in the real life of young people, and on the other side, it is assumed that “it was born out of administrative convenience rather than out of sociological consistency” (Ralston et al. 2022, p. 59).

Research has revealed that global trends and socio-economic changes, such as rising inequality and social exclusion, labour market insecurity and family frailty, have impacted younger generations to a greater extent than older generations (Unt, Gebel, Bertolini et al. 2021).

NEET status is generally associated with disadvantaged opportunities at the edge of the labour market, a relatively high risk of poverty and social exclusion (Görlich et al. 2013; Salvà-Mut et al. 2016; Papadakis et al. 2020).

The deterioration of the conditions on the labour market for youths was particularly serious during the Great Recession, given that youth unemployment (Choudhry et al. 2012; Pastore, 2019) is more sensitive to cyclic conditions than the unemployment among adults (this is due to the gap in work experience and due to weaker employment contracts among young employees). Also, the worsening of the work outlook for youth has been exacerbated by the COVID-19-related shock, the likelihood of becoming a NEET growing significantly across Europe during the pandemic (Aina et al. 2021).

Segmentation in the labour market of young people and their possible marginalization in NEETs are driven by a complex set of mechanisms that could also be associated with difficulties in the transition from school to work, as well as structural inequalities and household characteristics (Rodriguez-Modroño 2019).

The specialized literature comprises a significant number of studies that analyse the determinant factors of the NEET status and its possible persistence. Thus, some studies show that the persistence in the NEET status is more likely to occur among the youth coming from more socio-economically disadvantaged family backgrounds, with poor housing or a poor economic situation (Salvà-Mut et al. 2017), involving poverty and socio-economic inequality (O'Reilly et al. 2017; Papadakis et al. 2017).

Other papers conclude that the probability of being NEET is positively associated with a low educational level (Carcillo et al. 2015), sometimes with early leaving of school (Vallejo and Dooly, 2013) and with people who perceive their health status as bad or very bad, but also with the existence of some forms of disability (Mascherini 2019).

Other studies in the literature, although fewer, analyse the consequences on poverty (and inequality) resulting from the individual's status on the labour market (especially taking into account the unemployed), both at macro and at micro level. If at macro level the unemployment increases the poverty risk and contributes to inequality (Ayala et al. 2017), at micro level, it gives rise to a number of negative social effects on the unemployed themselves, their families and on the communities they live in (Saunders, 2002). At individual level, being NEET predisposes individuals to social exclusion and to poverty (Gregg and Tominey, 2004; Mroz and Savage, 2006; Luijkx and Wolbers, 2009), which can have psychological, material and behavioural consequences (e.g., self-destructive behaviour).

As mentioned above, some authors have studied in their works the characteristics of young NEET and thus, three main dimensions can be identified: the age groups to which the NEET concept applies, their employment status and the subgroups of young people that fall into this category.

As for **the age group**, initially, the EU designed the NEET category to include those young people aged between 15 and 24, however, then extended the limit to include those aged between 15 and 29 (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2022). The

broadening of the age gap resulted following the consultations on NEET statute between the International Labour Organization and other international organizations.

The academic literature provides various definitions of the age range of young people who would fall under the NEET category (Sergi et al., 2018). Some works use smaller age groups, such as young people aged between 14 and 24 (Cabasés Piqué et al., 2016; Raghupathi V and Raghupathi W, 2020), 15-24 (Abayasekara and Gunasekara 2019; Cefalo et al., 2020; Mauro and Mitra, 2020; Raileanu Szeles and Simionescu 2022), 15–25 (Smoter, 2022), or 16–24 (Bradley et al., 2020; Maguire, 2015; Mellberg et al., 2023; Tamesberger and Bacher et al., 2014).

In terms of **employment status**, the statistical definition of NEET status is based on a total of six months (or a quarter of the last 24 months) without work, education or vocational training (Yates et al. 2011).

Furlong (2006) suggests a more nuanced definition of NEET, which includes “young people who are long-term unemployed, temporary unemployed, who take care of children or relatives in the homes, who are temporarily ill or disabled, and long-term, making efforts to develop artistic or musical talents or simply taking a short break from work or education.”

In addition, the literature differentiates between those who are looking for a job, who are considered as "active" NEETs and those who are "inactive" (Holmes et al., 2021).

Some authors include, in the NEET definition, for example, women with caregiving responsibilities, young people who cannot work because of illness or disability, those discouraged from seeking work, and those who are volunteer in a NEET status (Yeung and Yang, 2020). Therefore, as an alternative to the standard NEET classifications, Serracant (2013) develops a restricted indicator for NEET, which refers to persons who are inactive, not studying, not sick or with no disabilities, that don't have caregiving responsibilities and do not wish to work or study.

André and Crosby (2022) distinguish between two groups of NEETs: those in “discontinuous”, unstable work situations and NEETs who are “out of the system”, i.e. individuals who do not seek help from service institutes.

Long-term unemployment is, in fact, one of the main structural factors of the NEET status (Eurofound, 2017; Caroleo et al., 2020) and, in turn, can further affect the chances of young people with health issues or disabilities who already face an increased risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Young mothers are also a vulnerable group, on average at a higher risk of becoming NEETs than young women without children (Levels et al, 2022).

A comparative study for Romania, Bulgaria and Italy has shown that, at macro level, the risk factors for including the young in the NEET category comprise the education systems poorly connected to the labour market, the rigidity and instability of the labour market, as well as the affiliation to a specific geographical environment. The education level, the professional status, the family environment and the area of residence explain the high rates of young NEETs in the three countries (Caroleo et al., 2021).

According to recent statistics and research, young people living in villages and rural areas are among the most likely to be NEETs, especially in southern and eastern European countries (Caroleo et al., 2021; Rocca et al., 2022; Bojnec, 2021). The particular situation of the NEET youth population in Romania, with an emphasis on the rural area, is analyzed in National reports 2009-2019 Rural NEET across Europe 14 countries reports, published by COST Action CA 18213: Rural NEET Youth Network: Modeling the risks underlying rural NEETs social exclusion in 2020.

Due to the fact that studies examining the NEET youth situation are recent and still rare, their vulnerability is not yet fully acknowledged (Mascherini, 2019; Simões et al, 2022).

The Great Recession and the health crisis have aggravated the situation of the young, adding up digital inequality (Grishchenko, 2020; Raileanu and Simionescu, 2022), the growth of unemployment and of the young NEETs share (Tamesberger and Bacher, 2020), as well as the intensification of inequalities among the young in the rural and urban areas (Esteban-Navarro, 2020). In many cases, the new problems/inequalities reflect previous social inequalities that have

deepened, complicating the adult life transition process, already unpredictable and fragmented (Bulanova and Artamonova, 2020; Demidenko, 2022).

Studies such as the ones of Dragolea (2016), Hatos (2006), Zamfir (2012) suggest that during Romania's transition period there was no real political concern for reducing social inequalities. In Romania, these can be analysed not only from the perspective of income inequality, but also through unequal access to services that influence the individuals' quality of life, in general, and of the young, in particular: sector studies on unequal access to education (Țoc, 2018), health, (Precupețu & Pop, 2017), housing (Briciu, 2016), labour market (Domnișoru, 2014; Dragolea, 2008, 2016).

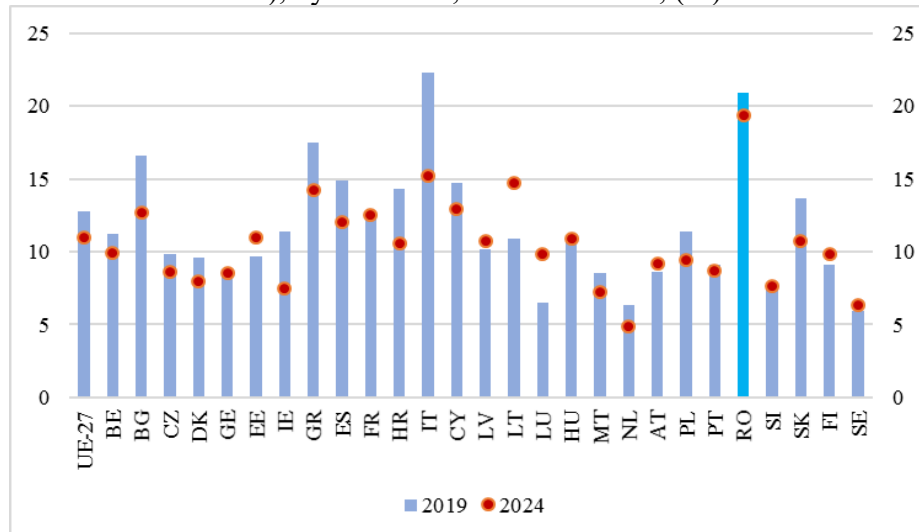
3. Specifics of NEET youths in Romania within the European context

Most countries in Europe face the problem of inactive young people who are neither present on the labour market, nor in the education system or in other types of vocational training.

While during the years of Romania's accession and integration into the European Union a reduction in the rate of young NEETs aged 15-29 years was recorded, starting with 2009 a year-on-year growth followed, reaching 25.8% in 2015.

The European Commission's report on the situation of young people in the European Union (EU youth Report 2024) shows that Romania has the highest rate of young people who do not work, do not attend school and do not attend training programs, of 19.4% in 2024. At the same time, Romania stands out as the only country among those with a high NEET rate where there was no improvement, moreover a worsening of the situation was recorded between 2019 and 2024 (Fig. no. 1). The latest Eurostat data indicates that in 2024 Romania recorded a very slight growth of the NEET rate, from 19.3% in 2023 to 19.4% in 2024, with a considerable spike as compared to 2019 (16.8%).

Figure no.1 Share of young people (15-29 years) not in employment, education or training (NEET rate), by countries, 2019 and 2024, (%)



Data source: Eurostat statistics, [lfsi_neet_a__custom_16415659]

Romania's situation is notable in that all other European countries with a high NEET rate either experienced a stagnation as compared to 2019 (Cyprus) or reported an improvement (Bulgaria, Greece, Italy – the latter being the EU country with the highest rate in 2019 of 23.5%).

Romania constantly faced the problem of youth unemployment, and the economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic generated a substantial increase in the percentage of young unemployed. Also, in Romania, similar to the southern European countries, the informal economy is developed, especially for the young and for women (Ferrera, 2010). This is a possible

explanation for the large number of young NEETs in these countries in the context of the Great Recession and the health crisis.

Over time, the transition from education to work has become more complex. Currently, young people change jobs more frequently and take longer to establish themselves on the labour market, either by their own choice or by necessity. More and more students in post-secondary education enter part-time or seasonal employment to supplement their income, but many young people who are working are also returning to study or vocational training to improve their qualifications. In this context, the transition from education to work has become less clear, with an increasing share of working students and an increasing share of employed people completing their studies. The analysis of the data in Table no 1 shows that, both at EU-27 level and in Romania, employment (but not in education and training) increases with age, while the opposite is valid for education (not employees, but in education and training), where the share decreases considerably with age.

In addition, in 2024, 12.3% of young people aged between 15 and 19 in the EU-27 and 0.7% in Romania were both employed and attending an education program, thus taking advantage of this more flexible transition from education to work, with a percentage growth to 22.7% and 5.7%, respectively, among those aged 20 to 24. For the 25-29-year-old group, the share of those who were employed and attended an education program dropped to 17.9% in the EU-27, but increased to 11.2% in Romania, and among those aged 30 to 34 the share of people who were employed and attended an education program dropped to 3.5% and 10.8% respectively.

Table no.1 Employment, education and training status of young people, by age, EU, 2024, (%)

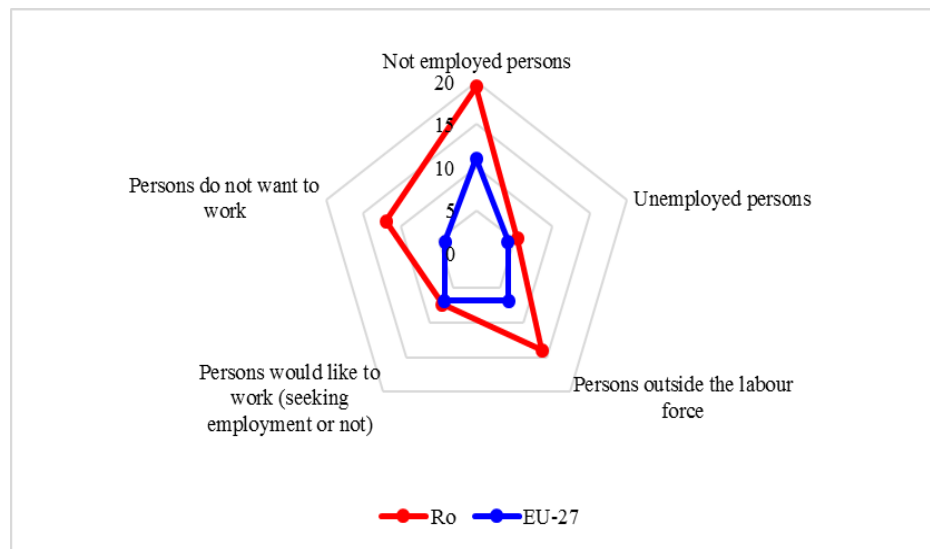
	15–19 years		20–24 years		25–29 years		30–34 years	
	Eu-27	Romania	Eu-27	Romania	Eu-27	Romania	Eu-27	Romania
Employed, but not in education and training	3.5	3.8	31.3	29.5	59.3	60.4	68.4	66.1
Employed and in education and training	12.3	0.7	22.7	5.7	17.9	11.2	13.5	10.8
Neither employed nor in education and training	5.4	11.4	12.8	23.1	14.6	24.5	15.1	22.6
Not employed, but in education and training	78.7	84.1	33.1	41.7	8.1	3.9	3.0	-
Unknown	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0

Data source: Eurostat statistics, [edat_lfse_18]

As for the structure of the NEET group after their participation in the labour market, the situation in Romania differs considerably from the EU average (Fig. no. 2). Interestingly, the highest share of young NEETs in Romania in 2024 are young people who are outside the labour market, those who are not employed and those who do not want to work. Unemployed NEETs account for 5.4% of the total young NEETs, such percentage being close to the European average (4.2%).

Another important issue regarding young NEETs, in general and those aged 15-29 in particular, in Romania is the fact that more than 25% are difficult to identify, are practically “invisible”: they are not registered with labour force agencies, have a low level of schooling and have no experience in formal work.

Figure no. 2 Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by labour status (NEET rates) in 2024, (%)

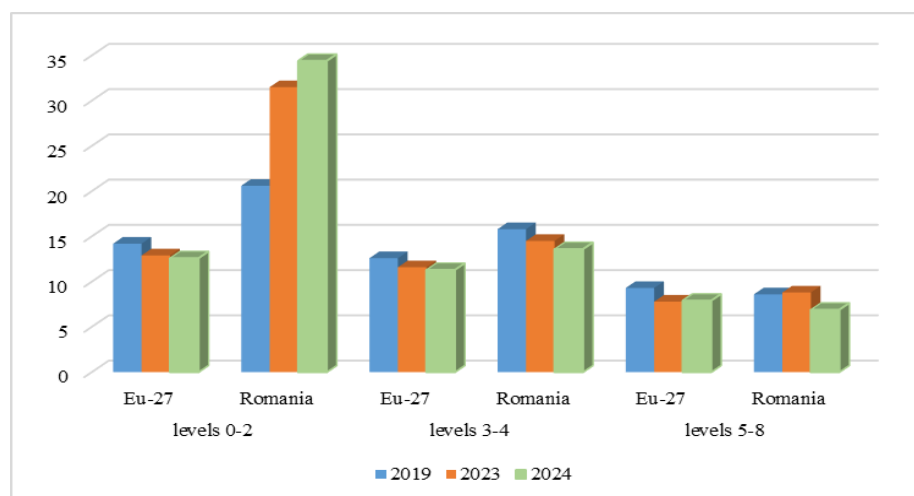


Data source: Eurostat statistics, [edat_lfse_20\$defaultview]

One of the factors that lead to the NEET status is also *the education level of young people*: ISCED 2011 levels 0–2 (low level of education), ISCED 2011 levels 3 and 4 (medium level of education), ISCED 2011 levels 5–8 (higher level of education). In 2024, the NEET rate for young people aged 15 to 29 in the EU-27 was 12,6% among those with low education levels compared to 11,3% among those with medium education levels and 7,9% among those with a high level of education (Fig. no. 3).

In the same year, Romania recorded the highest NEET rate among the Member States of young people aged 15-29 with low training level (34.4%) (Fig. no. 3). For young NEETs with medium education level, the NEET rate was close to the EU-27 average (13.6% versus 11.3%), and for those with higher education level the share of NEETs was 6.9%, 1 pp below the EU-27 average.

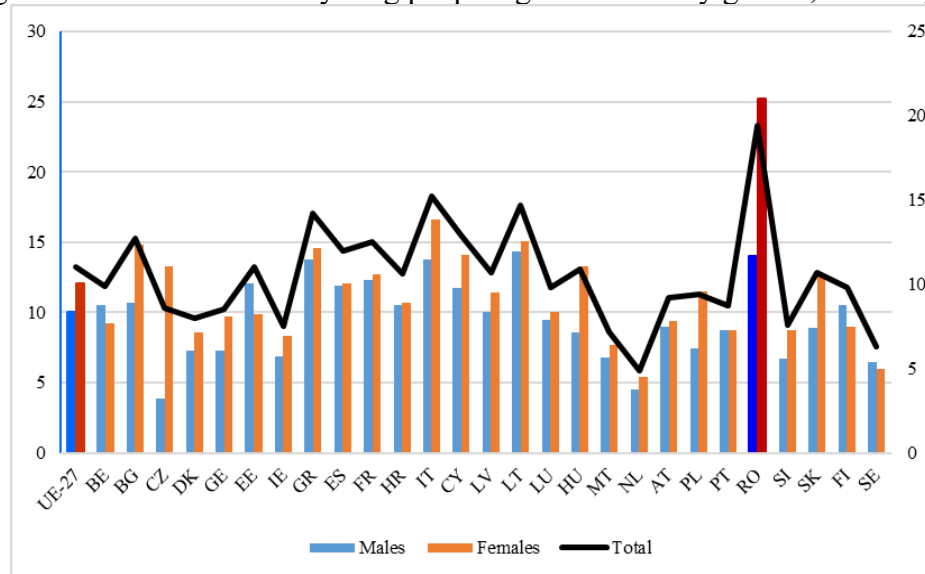
Figure no. 3 Evolution of NEET rate for young people aged 15 to 29 by level of education in Romania and the EU-27, (%)



Data source: Eurostat statistics, [edat_lfse_21__custom_16865435]

Young women are more prone to not be in employment, education or training than young men (Fig. no. 4), as there is a gender gap in the NEET youth group.

Figure no. 4 NEET rate for young people aged 15 to 29 by gender, in 2024, (%)



Source: produced by the author based on Eurostat statistics [edat_lfse_38__custom_16415768]

In 2024, 12.1% of young women aged 15 to 29 in the EU-27 were NEETs, while the corresponding share among young men was 2.1 percentage points lower (10.0%). This phenomenon is due to several factors, of which: social conventions or pressures, which tend to give greater importance to the role of women in the family and the role of men in providing for the family through work. In addition, there is a risk for labour market problems, such as: employers who prefer to hire young men than young women; young women who face assimilation difficulties when returning to work after birth; young women are more prone to having low-paid jobs or precarious jobs, etc.

In the same year, in two EU-27 Member States, the proportion of young female NEETs was at least 10 pp higher than the corresponding share for young men. The biggest gap was recorded in the Czech Republic (9.4 pp), followed by Romania (11.2 pp). However, four countries had higher NEET rates for men compared to those for women, but to a much lesser extent, with Estonia being the country with the largest gap, the men share being 2.2 pps higher than that of women (Fig. no. 4).

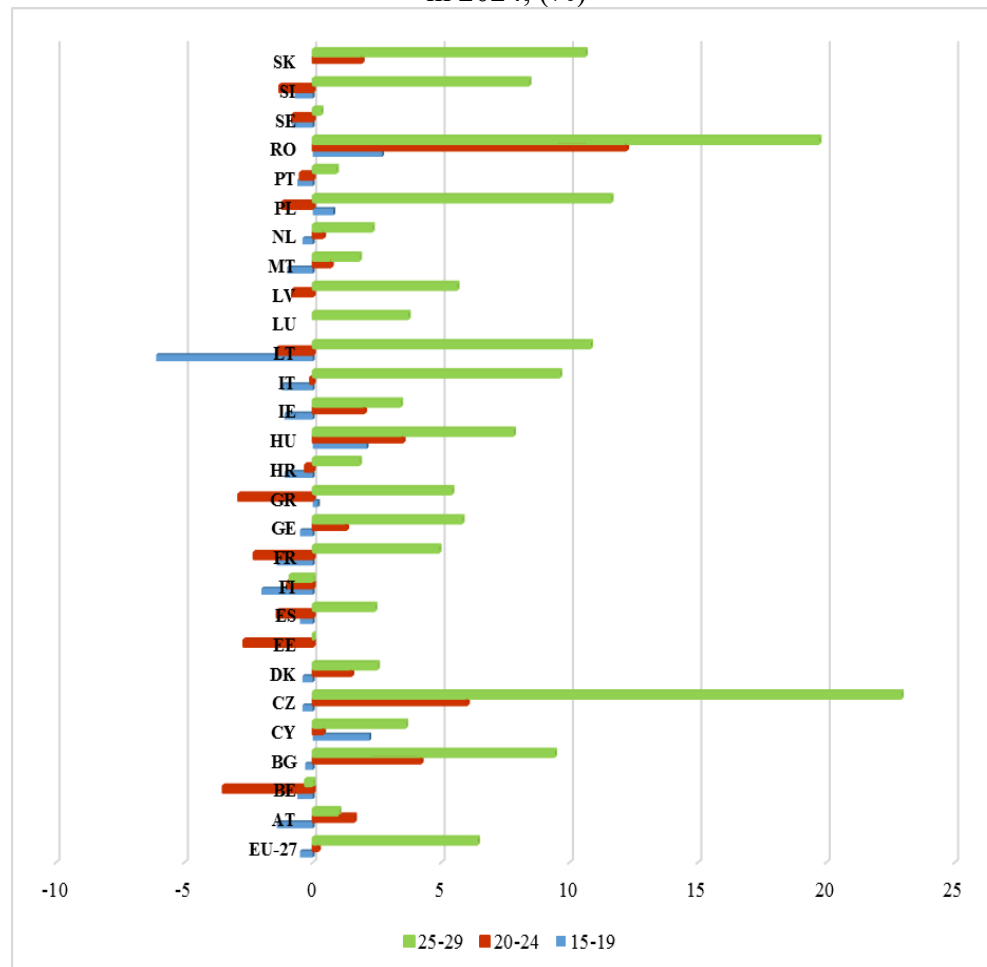
From the gender gap viewpoint, in Romania, women are more likely to become NEETs than men. In contrast, the gap between NEET women and men aged 15-29 years is higher among all EU Member States (11.2 pp in Romania compared to 2.1 pp the EU-27 average in 2024). This confirms the idea that women still have a lower presence on the labour market in Romania.

As young women get older, they find it harder to access a job and have less participation in education or training. An analysis carried out on the three youth age groups (15–19 years, 20–24 years and 25–29 years) shows that the gender gap in relation to age for NEET in all Member States in 2024 decreased for the first group (the only exception being Romania where the share of young women is higher than that of young men), but increased for the other two (Fig. no. 5).

If the NEET rate for young women aged 20-25 years was about the same as for men (only 0.2 pp higher than that of NEET young men) in the EU-27, in Romania, the NEET rate of young women was 12.2 pp higher than that of NEET young men. For the 25-29-year-old age group, the NEET rate was consistently higher for women than for men in all EU countries except Belgium and Finland, where the shares for men were slightly higher than those for women, and Estonia, where the shares for women and men were equal. The difference between higher NEET rates for women

compared to men was between 0.3 percentage points in Sweden and 22.9 percentage points in the Czech Republic.

Figure no. 5 Gender gap for NEETs by age group, in 2024, (%)



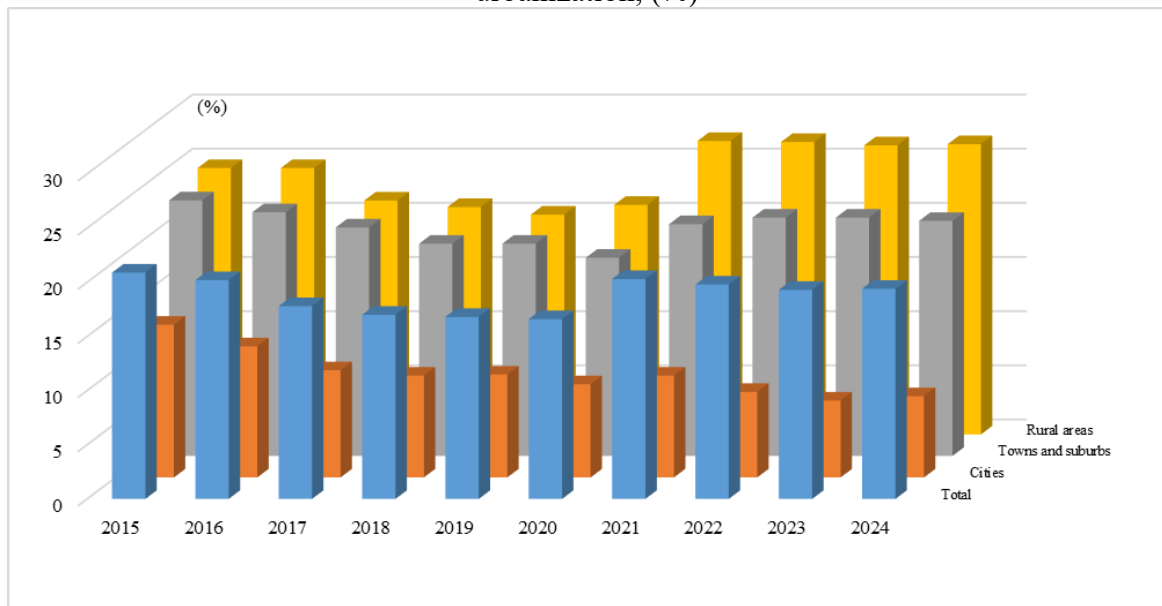
Source: produced by the author based on Eurostat statistics [edat_lfse_28__custom_16925188]

According to recent statistics and research, young people living in villages and rural areas are among the most likely to be NEETs, especially in southern and eastern European countries (Caroleo et al., 2022; Rocca et al., 2022). Due to the fact that studies examining their situation are recent and still rare, their vulnerability is not yet fully acknowledged (Mascherini, 2018; Simões et al., 2022).

Unlike the EU-27 average, where there are no major differences depending on the urbanization degree, in Romania, young NEETs are more likely to be found in rural or small urban areas and suburbs (for the age group 15-29 years, in 2024, 26.8% of the young NEETs were recorded in rural areas, 21.7% in cities and suburbs and only 7.5% in cities) (Fig. no. 6).

Young NEETs in rural areas face additional challenges from those in urban areas due to: i) lack of adequate infrastructure; ii) high rates of school abandonment; iii) high unemployment rates and, last but not least, iv) the depopulation process caused by the youth migration from rural areas. Also, young NEETs in rural areas face greater uncertainty in transitioning to adulthood. Compared to young people in urban areas, they live in areas that are economically disadvantaged and have less educational resources and fewer jobs.

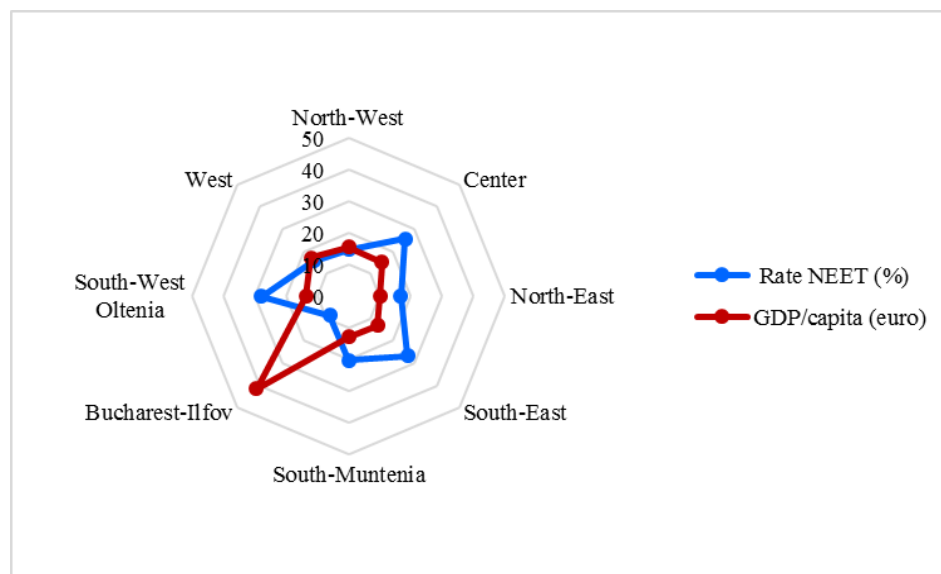
Figure no. 6 Evolution of NEET rate in Romania, in the period 2015-2022, by degrees of urbanization, (%)



Sursa: realizat de autori pe baza statisticilor Eurostat [edat_lfse_29]

Economic disparities in Romania's development regions are also compatible with other dimensions of inequality, such as life expectancy, employment and unemployment rates, schooling, private and public material resources. All these lead to relatively large differences between the young NEET shares in Romania's development regions. Thus, in 2023, the highest values of the young NEET rate, for ages between 15-29 years, were recorded in the South-West Oltenia (27.7%), South-East (26.8%) and Center (25.7%) regions, and the lowest in the Bucharest-Ilfov Region (8.5%). In the other regions: North-West, North-East and West, the share of NEETs was below the 19.3% national average (Fig. no. 7).

Figure no. 7. NEET rate and GDP/inhabitant in the development regions of Romania in 2023



Source of data: Eurostat statistics [edat_lfse_22\$defaultview] [nama_10r_2gdp__custom_16483381]

The analysis of the territorial index evolution in the period 2020-2024 shows that, in general, the young NEET rate at the level of the regions increased compared to Bucharest Ilfov region, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Table no. 2).

Table no. 2 Gaps in the young NEET rate in the development regions of Romania compared to Bucharest-Ilfov region, in the period 2020-2024

	Territorial Index (%)					Gap/Relative Lead (%)				
	$i_{k/j}^y = \frac{y_k}{y_j} \cdot 100$					$\Delta_{k/j}^y = \frac{y_k - y_j}{y_j} \cdot 100$				
	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
North - West	130.7	121.2	182.7	172.9	169.5	30.7	21.2	82.7	72.9	69.5
Center	251.5	227.4	340.0	300.0	261.1	151.5	127.4	240.0	200.0	161.1
North -East	94.1	170.8	232.0	197.6	173.7	-5.9	70.8	132.0	97.6	73.7
South-East	224.8	231.0	341.3	315.3	314.7	124.8	131.0	241.3	215.3	214.7
South - Muntenia	199.0	191.2	297.3	238.8	212.6	99.0	91.2	197.3	138.8	112.6
South - West Oltenia	167.3	231.9	377.3	325.9	263.2	67.3	131.9	277.3	225.9	163.2
West	178.2	161.9	256.0	185.9	144.2	78.2	61.9	156.0	85.9	44.2

Source: Author calculations based on Eurostat data [edat_lfse_22\$defaultview] [nama_10r_2gdp__custom_16483381]

The analysis of the territorial index evolution in the period 2020-2021, shows that the NEET rate at the level of the regions was affected differently by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, in the North-West, Center, South-Muntenia and West regions, the gap in relation to Bucharest-Ilfov Region has decreased, this being determined by various causes: lower number of jobs lost through the transfer of work from home, possibly more flexible measures adopted at local level during the pandemic, etc. In 2022 the gaps between NEET rates of the seven regions and of Bucharest-Ilfov region grew significantly, however, after 2023, they recorded a downward trend (Table no. 2), without reaching the gaps recorded in 2019.

The pandemic also negatively affected education activities: more students were demotivated during that period because of the need to learn online. Also, other forms of education (training courses, training programs, etc.) decreased during the pandemic period due to the restrictions imposed.

3. Conclusions

The young are a vulnerable category, more exposed to the risk of poverty or social exclusion and which is affected by changes in the labour market and the emergence of atypical occupations.

Romania has the highest number of young people in the European Union who do not have a job and do not attend education or training courses.

In the European Union, 11.0% of young people aged 15 to 29 were in the NEET category in 2024. Romania recorded the highest share in the EU-27, with 19.4% of young people who did not have a job and did not attend education or training courses.

Among the 27 Member States there are large differences in the number of young NEETs. Thus, at the opposite end we have the Netherlands, where only 4.9% of people aged 15-29 were in the NEET category.

The European Union's objective is that each Member State records by 2030 young people out of education or out of work to a maximum share of 9%. Aside from the Netherlands, eight other EU countries have already reached the target set in 2024: Sweden (6.3%), Malta (7.2%), Slovenia

(7.6%), Ireland (7.5%), Denmark (8.0%), Germany (8.5%), the Czech Republic (8.6%) and Portugal (8.7%).

The main social and economic factors underlying this phenomenon are:

- education: people with a low level of education have a higher risk of becoming NEETs;
- migration: those who emigrated from one country to another are more likely to become NEETs than those born in the country where they are residents;
- gender: there is evidence that women are 60% more likely to become NEETs than men;
- disability: having a mental/motor disability (even of a mild form) increases a person's risk of becoming NEET by about 40%;
- family: those whose parents are unemployed or with a low level of education are more likely to become NEETs than those whose parents are well educated and active on the labour market.

Eurostat data also show that in most Member States there are differences between the number of young women and young men. In 2024, 12.1% of women in the 15-29-year-old age group in the EU were in the NEET category, compared to 10.0% among men.

In Romania, one in four young women were in this situation (25.2%), once again with the highest share in the Union. The main features of young NEETs, aged 15-29 years, in Romania are:

- significant differences in the distribution of young NEETs by urbanization degrees over rural areas (7.5% in cities compared to 26.8% in rural areas in 2024);
- they are distributed unevenly in terms of the level of schooling, with the majority of the population belonging to this category having a very low level of education;
- the share of inactive people is much higher than the share of unemployed NEETs;
- gender gaps are important, with the number of young female NEETs being higher than that of male NEETs;
- the NEET rate differences are significant at the level of Romania's development regions, which are also interdependent on regional socio-economic and geographical disparities. If by 2019 a drop of the NEET rate was recorded in all regions, after the health crisis it increased significantly, reaching slightly below the values recorded in 2019 only in the Central, South-Muntenia, Bucharest-Ilfov and West regions.
- national statistics fail to capture the entire population of NEETs due to a phenomenon specific to Eastern European countries: temporary migration for work purposes;
- the existence of a significant number of socio-economic, educational support programs and measures targeting this population category but not interrelated and, as a result, have a very limited effect and modest results.

Among the most important reasons why young people in Romania become vulnerable are also the results of the Romanian education system such as: high early school dropout; lack of basic skills when leaving the system; educational inequalities, unfavourable to those with low socio-economic status of the family, a phenomenon that leads to the intergenerational reproduction of poverty.

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