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Tackling Roma youth unemployment in Romania: the role of Youth Guarantee Programme

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The Youth Guarantee Programme addresses the issue of education, training and employment among young people under the age of 25 years among the European Union Member States. In Romania, as in many other European countries, the main concern is represented by the Roma NEETs and their inclusion. This brief includes a series of recommendations on how Romanian authorities should implement more effective education, training and apprenticeship programmes for Roma youth. Such an approach includes an effective coordination between the Public Employment Services and Roma integration stakeholders for the success of the Youth Guarantee Programme among these communities.

Addressing measures to reducing unemployment among young people

Tackling youth unemployment is one of the most important priorities of the European Union (EU). Since the economic crisis in 2008, the access of

young people to the labour market has been hampered. The youth unemployment rate has increased from 15.1% in 2007 to 23.9% in 2013. Currently, even if this situation has improved, the trend remains high - the EU average is about 16%. While there are some countries that exceed the threshold of 40% (Greece, Italy, Spain), others have the lowest youth unemployment rate in the EU (Germany – 6.1%, Czech Republic – 6.8%, the Netherlands – 7%). Thus, there are still disparities among Member States and the biggest challenge for young people is the transition from education and training to employment.

In this regard, the Youth Guarantee Programme (YG) has been created in 2013 as the first EU strategy that aims at helping young people aged 16-24 who are neither in employment nor in education or training (NEETs). The programme represents a real opportunity to reduce disparities among the EU Member States and to

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address the issue of young people in transition from education to employment with a special focus on vulnerable groups, e.g. Roma, people with disabilities etc. The main mechanisms for funding YG at the EU level are the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI). Within these instruments, the total budget to be spent until 2020 is at least 12.7 billion EUR in labour market integration measures for young people.

Since the launch of the programme, the situation of NEETs has improved in the EU Member States given that 2/3 of young people have obtained an employment, apprenticeship or similar offers. Moreover, since January 2014, over 14 million young people were registered within YG and over 9 million accepted an employment, education or training proposal. However, the situation of NEETs within the EU remains worrying as they are still confronted with specific issues such as less developed working/learning environments, early school leaving, social inclusion, discrimination, lack of professional qualifications etc. These are factors that cause social and economic disparities among young people and hinder their integration. As the official data show, in 2016 approximately 6.6% young people were still NEETs, which represents about 12% of people aged 16-24.

In Romania, the concern for NEETs is relatively recent and has come in response to the EU policies. Romania has implemented YG in two stages: 2014-2015 and 2017-2020. The second stage of implementation is more complex than

the previous one and includes a series of objectives which consider the issue of vulnerable groups as the main principle of reducing social exclusion in Romania.

The main responsible institutions in Romania for YG implementation are the Ministry of Labour and Social Justice and the Public Employment Services (PES) represented by the National Employment Agency (ANOFM).

In Romania, the YG Implementation Plan includes measures such as internships and apprenticeships, hiring youth by stimulating employers who could benefit from subsidies, boosting youth mobility by awarding assignment or installment bonuses, stimulating youth to start a business or create SMEs, counseling and assessing professional skills, vocational training and delivering personalised accompaniment to young people at risk of social marginalisation.

The Romanian case is relevant in this context given that the YG programme has reached a very small number of NEETs within 2014-2015 (only 17.1%) according to the European Commission. Although registered under the YG umbrella, 65% of young people did not receive such offers within a period of four months after becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. In this framework, there is no unified follow-up mechanism in tracking the evolution of NEETs under the YG umbrella in Romania is this stage.

The access of Roma youth to education, training and employment

The case of Roma youth is extremely relevant in the light of YG implementation since their situation is precarious. They are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Romania in terms of education, training and employment.

Roma continue to face difficult access to fair working conditions and to education and training/apprenticeship programmes even after Romania aligned its anti-discrimination legislation with EU standards and invested in public campaigns to reduce social exclusion. The public perception concerning Roma people is negative. In the collective mind, Roma continue to be discriminated regarding the public image as well as the access to the labour market and social services, this being the expression of negative stereotypes.

More specifically, as in many other European countries, Roma youth have limited access to fair education and training in Romania. The main problem is related to the fact that many Roma live in rural areas and/or disadvantaged communities, which make youth integration and access to education more difficult. Roma youth are forced to choose undeclared work from an early age rather than participating in education and training programmes. In 2017 more than 63% of Roma aged 16-24 were NEETs compared to the EU average of 12%, according to official data.

Furthermore, Roma youth are not encouraged by their families to pursue long-term education and training programmes. As a result, many of them prefer to choose undeclared work in

Romania or abroad or, more often, to be included in the social security system. Hence, the phenomenon of early school leavers among Roma youth is up to 19% and it leads to an increasing rate of NEETs in Romania and their poor integration into the labour market.

All these issues are related to the poverty risk which is almost three times higher among Roma people than the rest of the population in Romania, which makes their social inclusion even more difficult.

A holistic approach to addressing the Youth Guarantee to Roma youth

Until now, the Youth Guarantee Programme in Romania considers the Roma youth issue only in general terms and mentions it only once in the Implementation Plan along with young people with disabilities. The main recommendation within YG is related to the necessity to reduce social exclusion among vulnerable groups and not specific measures for helping Roma youth.

Hence, the impact on Roma youth through YG schemes in Romania has not been significant since the implementation of the programme. There is a lack of coordination between the main institutions involved. Thus, the public employment service in Romania (ANOFM) lacks the sufficient capacity to help Roma NEETs to find a training/apprenticeship programme or to get employed. Frequently, there is a gap between providing integrated packages of personalised services for Roma youth aged 16-24 and tracking their evolution while being

under YG umbrella. In addition, these facts indicate a series of disparities in reaching Roma youth and their long-time access to effective programmes.

What is the way forward?

In the following years, Romania needs to bring changes in the implementation of YG. Given that Roma youth is the most vulnerable group in Romania, as in many other European countries (such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Spain), the main recommendations are related to their social inclusion:

- **The need for a more effective targeting of Public Employment Services of Roma youth.** Since the YG implementation in Romania, the country services have not shown an effective collaboration with Roma people because they are not targeted in particular. These agencies should establish a proper communication system so that they could reach the needs of Roma youth in terms of education, training, employment.

- **The need of a unified system that aims to target Roma youth and to introduce specific programmes for their inclusion.** The YG measures in Romania should focus particularly on vulnerable groups and marginalised communities, such as Roma youth. In this way, a clear follow-up mechanism of their evolution, of their belonging to a specific programme as well as of their future within those programmes will be developed.

- **The need of visibility of training and employment offers among Roma youth.** They should have easy access to information among their communities. In this case, non-governmental organisations could play an important role by developing public policies that could help Roma NEETs to access suitable opportunities according to their needs.

- **The need for effective individual monitoring of targeted Roma youth after training/apprenticeship programmes.** The development of effective training and apprenticeship programmes in many disadvantaged areas of Romania could be a proper solution in this case for reducing the social exclusion and poverty risk in most of the disadvantaged communities. But more important is the fact that, once developed such a mechanism, the PES offices could monitor regularly what the young people included in the programme will do in the future.

Conclusion

The Youth Guarantee Programme represents an important step for the EU Member States to tackle the issue of vulnerable groups and to contribute to job creation and consequently to economic growth.

The case of Romania is relevant given that the country has encountered plenty of difficulties in the implementation of YG measures. There is a huge need for skilled workforce in Romania, able to adapt to economic upheavals. The challenge is to address specific measures for vulnerable groups and to track their evolution within these

programmes over the long term. In order to fulfill these objectives, Romania should pay attention to PES and their involvement with programmes for Roma youth.

Even if PES helps young people to access YG measures, it is unclear what happens with these people after getting an education/training/job proposal, in Romania as well as in many other EU countries. If the authorities focus more specifically on the needs of specific groups, they will contribute to the long-term success of the programme as well as to an effective change among NEETs.

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