

The Youth Guarantee in Eastern Europe. A Systematic Review



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Abstract The Youth Guarantee (YG) is one of the most innovative European programs for young people. Given the complexity of the program for the analysis of its effectiveness and efficiency, it is necessary to provide clear information, supported by scientific evidence. This paper aims to examine the empirical evidence on the social outcomes of the YG program in the countries of Eastern Europe. The present analysis is based on a systematic review, a scientific method is effective for both decision-makers and the scientific community because the data they use and submit to the analysis are classified and evaluated based on scientific criteria, and objectives that allow obtaining a complete, up-to-date, and reliable images. The credibility of the investigated sources is ensured by including in the analysis only the reports published by the European institutions (European Commission, European Council, etc.) regarding YG. Through the analysis of these documents, we found that YG led to an increase in the employability rate of young people, their level of education, and social integration, to the development of self-confidence in their competencies but also in institutions (schools, PES, employers, etc.).

Keywords EU cohesion policy · Youth guarantee

1 Introduction

The YG program, one of the EU's most innovative programs, is the result of the 2013 EU Council Decision (EU Council Recommendation, 2013) which aims to support young people who are considered to be most affected by successive socio-economic crises which member states have faced in the last two decades. Unlike other European programs, YG is differentiated by at least two aspects that give it a higher degree of clarity and predictability: a guarantee and a clearly delimited time period for intervention. (Escudero & Mourelo, 2017). These characteristics are reflected in

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C. Henriques and C. Viseu (eds.), *EU Cohesion Policy Implementation - Evaluation Challenges and Opportunities*, Springer Proceedings in Political Science and International Relations, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18161-0_7

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the fact that young people receive a quality offer of employment, further education, retraining, apprenticeship, or an internship within four months of entering or leaving the job or are no longer included in formal education. YG is also characterized by the fact that it addresses a specific age group—15–24 years—and in applying the measures and interventions Member States are free to select their own methods, to build an institutional network to support the implementation of the program, provided that they are adapted to national, regional and local conditions. Although it started at the same time in all EU countries, after almost a decade, the stage of achieving the objectives, the areas in which the YG was applied, the socio-demographic, and economic characteristics of the target group but especially the results differ not only from one country to another, from one region of Europe to another, but also from one dimension of the program to another. In this regard, EU-level reports, and different studies (EC, 2018; Pesquera et al., 2021) point out that better collection and analysis of information on YG results would be needed. Our aim is to analyze the social outcomes of the YG program in the EU member states of Eastern Europe with a focus on two categories of beneficiaries: young people at risk of early school leaving (ESL) and NEETs (young people who are not even in school nor on the labor market)—from the beginning (2014) until now. In this article, we propose a summary of the most relevant results. The first part of the article includes an analysis of the situation of young people in Eastern Europe in terms of ESL and NEETs to understand the context in which the YG program started and took place. The research methodology that we will use to achieve the set goal as well as the results obtained by applying the systematic review method will be found in the second part of the article followed by the third part which includes the discussions. The last part will be dedicated to the conclusions and recommendations.

2 Regional Context

Eastern European countries are characterized by certain aspects that derive from their socio-economic, and historical course: the accession of the East to the EU has occurred recently—the last two decades—in distinct stages and by groups of countries, against a background of socio-economic and institutional development lower. The global socio-economic crises have had a greater negative impact in Eastern Europe because they have overlapped with the national ones generated mainly by the long and difficult transition process from the centralized economy to the market one, from totalitarianism to democracy. European programs of the YG type depend to a large extent on the capacity of national institutions to implement, monitor, etc. Institutional reform, which aims to make them more competent and more transparent, is one of the priority objectives of Eastern European countries. At the same time, the continuous reform can affect the development of YG type programs due to the instability and the frequent changes that it generates. All of this makes the population of young people in Eastern Europe, the target group of YG, to be characterized



Fig. 1 Early leavers from education and training. *Source* Authors’ own elaboration. Data available from Eurostat (2022), [edat_ifse_14], Data extracted 08.06.22

by mobility, and diversity but especially by a high level of segmentation from the educational, occupational but also motivational, and aspirational points of view.

2.1 ESL: Main Drivers and Evolution

Eurostat (2022) defines ESL as the situation in which young people aged 18–24 are completed at most a lower secondary education and who are not in further education or training for four weeks. ESL is the result of a combination of factors that go beyond the boundaries of the education system. Young people may leave the education system prematurely due to the quality of education, learning conditions or due to a wrong school orientation but all these situations overlap with belonging to a disadvantaged socio-family and economic environment, an ethnic minority, or living in rural areas, etc. For this category of young people, solutions must be identified that will keep them in school, to restore their confidence in the education system both for themselves and their families. The ESL rate in Eastern Europe between 2014—the year of the program’s debut—and 2021 there have been significant variations both from one country to another and within each country from one year to another. The ESL rate varies at the start of YG (2014) from 2.8% in HR to 18.1% in RO (Fig. 1). If we consider the maximum and minimum values of this indicator for 2021, we find that the same countries remain at the base and at the top of the hierarchy, but for both situations, the ESL values decreased: by 0.4% in HR and by 2.7% in RO.

2.2 NEETs: Main Drivers and Evolution

The analysis of the definitions and classifications of NEETs reveals a very high level of heterogeneity: young people who voluntarily choose not to enter the labor market or in the education and training system belong to the same category as young people

Table 1 Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEETs rates)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
EU-27 from 2020	15.7	15.2	14.5	13.7	13.1	12.6	13.8	13.1
Bulgaria—BG	24.0	22.2	22.4	18.9	18.1	16.7	18.1	17.6
Czechia—CZ	12.1	11.8	11.1	10.0	9.5	9.8	11.0	10.9
Estonia—EE	13.8	13.2	14.1	11.6	12.1	10.6	11.9	11.2
Croatia—HR	21.8	19.9	19.5	17.9	15.6	14.2	14.6	14.9
Latvia—LV	15.2	13.8	13.3	12.3	11.6	10.3	11.9	12.1
Lithuania—LT	12.9	11.8	10.7	10.2	9.3	10.9	13.0	12.7
Hungary—HU	16.4	15.1	14.1	13.3	12.9	13.2	14.7	11.7
Poland—PL	15.5	14.6	13.8	12.9	12.1	12.0	12.9	13.4
Romania—RO	19.9	20.9	20.2	17.8	17.0	16.8	16.6	20.3
Slovenia—SI	12.9	12.3	10.9	9.3	8.8	8.8	9.2	7.3
Slovakia—SK	18.2	17.2	15.9	16.0	14.6	14.5	15.2	14.2

Source Authors' own elaboration

Data available from: Eurostat (2022), [edat_ifse_20], Data extracted 08.06.22.

who for objective reasons (disease, growth or family care) do not have a job or cannot attend training courses. Three of the Eastern European countries—HU, BG, and RO—are characterized by the highest rates of NEETs from 2014 to 2021 (Table 1). BG and RO are also the least developed countries in Eastern Europe compared to all other EU-27 countries, which is why the effects of socio-economic crises in recent years have had a greater impact and more negative consequences.

Increasing the rate of NEETs individually favors a major risk of marginalization and exclusion from the labor market (Caroleo et al., 2020; Thompson, 2011), impoverishment of human capital (Becker, 1994), and reduced likelihood of future employment in the workplace (Ryan, 2001). At the social level, this leads to a loss of economic productivity and growth (Mascherini, 2019). At the individual level, the status of NEETs over a long period of time has effects on the behaviors and attitudes of young people towards work, and education: low self-esteem, giving up looking for a job, depression, development of anti-social behaviors, etc. Some experts (Robertson, 2019) believe that long periods of educational and/or occupational exclusion make some young people insufficiently prepared in terms of physical and mental health to be the target group for those specific YG interventions that aim to rapid integration in school and/or on the labor market.

3 Methodological Framework

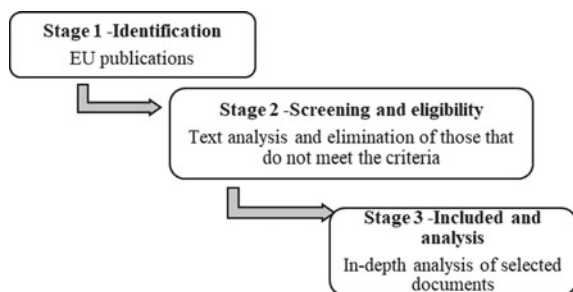
In the last years, the interest in YG implications is demonstrated by both the high number of studies and the diversity of the methods used to be analyzed: comparative evaluation (Ule & Leskošek, 2018), case studies (Tsekoura, 2019), secondary analysis, and public policy analysis (Petrescu et al., 2021), the convergence analysis (Tosun et al., 2019), etc. For this article, we opted for a systematic review method. A systematic literature review is a theoretical approach of which is to reviewing relevant documents in a particular field, documents are selected based on certain criteria of relevant databases (Okoli and Schabram, 2010). The evaluation of the results of the YG program almost a decade after its launch (2013–2022) requires the organization of those conclusions reached so far by differing reports from relevant European institutions and with a high level of credibility. For this purpose, a systematic analysis of the EU’s published reports was used.

3.1 Selection: Criteria and Study

For the selection of the most relevant documents related to the YG, a series of criteria were specified: (a) the period of time 2014–2022 because the program was launched in 2013; (b) to include the term “youth guarantee” and to refer to the countries of Eastern Europe as a precondition because the main purpose of this study aims to analyze the results of a certain program in a certain regional/territorial area; (c) focus on the dimension of ESL and NEETs or related terms (training, scholarships, etc.); (d) to make references to the type of measures applied, target group, etc. to allow the shaping of a measuring frame; (e) be present in one of the EU publications in order to ensure a high degree of credibility of the information source. The study selection (Fig. 2) was made in three steps.

First, the titles of all retrieved documents were screened for eligibility for the above-mentioned inclusion criteria. Second, the summary or introduction of all initially relevant documents was screened for eligibility by applying uniform criteria.

Fig. 2 Document selection process. *Source* Authors’ own elaboration



Finally, the full text of all remaining publications was analyzed. After applying the selection criteria, 87 documents were selected for this review.

3.2 Results

The evaluation of the YG program can be done from various perspectives: evaluating the social profitability and effectiveness of interventions for the various beneficiaries of the program, evaluating the interaction and complementarity of the program with a country's broader social welfare policies, evaluating social outcomes and social and economic impact of YG on individuals and communities, etc. In this article, we will focus on evaluating YG's social outcomes. We focused on programs targeting ELS and NEETs because investments in education are, according to specialists (Becker, 1994), the most profitable both individually and socially. Table 2 shows an overview of the target group and the type of intervention likely to have an impact both on the individual and on the communities they belong to.

In order to evaluate the social outcomes of the YG on the beneficiaries, we grouped the information obtained by analyzing the documents selected into two main categories: target group and type of intervention (Table 2). Within them, there are different

Table 2 Overview of target groups and types of intervention through the YG program

Countries	Target group			Type of intervention
	Type	Age	Specific target group	
BG, LV, CZ	NEETs	15–29	–	Employment and training programs, Vocational programs
BG	NEETs	15–24	Roma population	Training program
RO	NEETs	16–24	NEETs from rural areas and Roma	Creation of an electronic registry for NEETs
HR	ELS	–	–	Career guidance and counseling
SK	ELS	16–24	Roma population	Mentoring program
SI	ELS	15–26	–	Learning program for young adult
PL	ESL	–	–	Training to improve literacy and numeracy
LT	NEETs	16–25	–	Counseling to build up confidence and motivation
EE, LV, LT, PL HU, SK, RO	NEETs	16–29	–	Subsidized employment offers

Source Authors' own elaboration

sub-categories (age of beneficiaries, specific group, etc.) that support the in-depth analysis of the topic. In selecting the categories of analysis, we took into account the recommendations of various guidelines developed at the EU level: e.g. Guidelines to analyze the performance of the national YG (ILO, 2016).

4 Discussions

A synthetic analysis of the main results obtained by applying the systematic review method reveals some specific features both to the two categories of analysis—target group and type of interventions. The beneficiaries of the YG actions aimed at increasing the level of education and/or support for integration into the labor market were young people aged 15–29. Through the YG program, young people over the age of 24, but not older than 30, can be considered a target group if member countries deem it necessary. The analysis of the documents reveals that most Eastern European countries have extended the maximum age range from the target group included in the YG from 24 to 29 years. In all Eastern European countries, more than young ESL, NEETs were more frequently targeted by YG actions in terms of both education and professional integration. This is not only because the NEETs rate is above the EU-27 average but also because in some Eastern European countries (CZ, EE, HU, LT, LV, RO, SI) young NEETs have a low level of education. In this case, the intervention must be carried out in both directions: increasing the level of education and support for integration into the labor market. By comparison, BG, SK, PL, and HR have a high level of education among young NEETs. (Botrić, 2017; Caliendo et al., 2019) requiring a different approach: the emphasis must be moved from the basic needs (a minimum level of education and facilitating professional integration) to those of motivation and achievement: the adequacy of the job offer to the level of education and aspirations, support for entrepreneurship, etc. Even if in the literature of specialty but also in the official documents of the EU, regarding age are included in the NEETs category, young people aged 15–24, some researchers (Maguire & Thompson, 2007) consider this interval to be far too restrictive given the particularities of this stage of life—youth—but also the issues that the general population must face today. The results of the analysis lead to the idea that the need for support is even higher for the age groups 24–29 years and we find that the positive impact of interventions is higher. Thus, in BG, SK, EE, HR, HU, LV, and RO the 25–29 NEET rate decreased by 1–4 pps, and the employment rate increased by more than 1–5 pps. (EC, 2016) following the application of YG. The data from the analysis and the results obtained by some countries by applying YG support the opinion of British researchers: young NEETs also need psychological support, as well as training in basic or professional skills, as well as a quality job offer whatever their age. From social outcomes, this means reducing the unemployment rate and dependence on PES. The fact that in some Eastern European countries, the most vulnerable category of populations in terms of education and employment is the Roma minority (Cace and et al., 2014) is also reflected in the YG program: BG and RO have established that young people

belonging to this minority are a priority target group. The interventions addressed to this specific target group are more complex because they must include the young person's family, as well as education, the development of confidence and motivation to learn, counseling for adaptation and professional integration, etc. Another specific group is young Romanian rural NEETs who represent a social problem for RO (Neagu, 2020). In this case, the biggest problem is identifying the beneficiaries because in most countries, for example, RO, these young people tend to be "lost" statistically due to temporary migration, lack of information, etc. Another problem that young people with a high degree of vulnerability raise is that they do not become dependent on YG programs. To avoid this situation the type of intervention applied in each country and for each target group is very important. Also, evaluating the results of YG interventions in each target group supports the successful implementation of the program.

YG allows for 4 major types of intervention: job, apprenticeship, traineeship, and education. Within each type of intervention, different country options can be identified in the selection of the most appropriate programs for the target groups. The analysis of the documents related to YG highlights the fact that they aimed primarily at developing educational and practical skills to help young people with difficulty continue or complete their level of education or integrate into the labor market. It is also found that in many cases the success of YG is due to the development of programs that have helped young people to rediscover and identify, and define their interests, goals, and educational and occupational talents. This type of intervention mainly targeted disadvantaged young people who have experienced long periods of exclusion and educational, social, and professional exclusion and who need a transition period to regain confidence in themselves and in social systems. According to Robertson (2019), these young people must first be psychologically prepared in order to be later supported for their integration into the labor market. For this category of beneficiaries, actions have been carried out within the YG (EC, 2016) to help build confidence and motivation (LT), and to facilitate the experimentation of several types of programs to help them rediscover their competencies. (LV), rediscovering their motivation for learning (SK). Another type of intervention is aimed at young people with potential, who are at a disadvantage because they have not had the opportunity to capitalize on their talents, and skills or because they have not been guided by a directive to put them in place value skills. The most frequent interventions fall into the category of career guidance (HR) and consist of youth entrepreneurship programs, grants for business start-ups, guidance and/or financial support for business plan development, etc. It should be mentioned that even in these situations the measures are combined with another type of support (EC, 2019): the one to help them cope with the stress, and the risks involved in entrepreneurship. Supporting entrepreneurship means not only the integration of young people but also the creation of new jobs for other young people in difficulty. We observe that the dominant type of intervention at the level of a country correlates with the dominant type of target group: in countries (HU, RO, e.g.) where dominant groups are young people with very low levels of education, characterized by long periods of social and professional exclusion, the emphasis is on completion, compensation; in countries (HR or EE) where young

people have at least an average level of education and a minimum of experience on the labor market, the emphasis is on development and capitalization of skills. The particularities of the countries but also of the target group are reflected in the visibility of the obtained results: much more visible when the completion of the level of education and integration in work was aimed at and less visible in the case of institutional development, training programs, counseling, etc. but this will have effects in the medium and long term.

5 Conclusions and Further Research

The partial results presented in this article claim that most Eastern European countries have extended the age of the target group of YG and have achieved very good results in the age category over 24 years which means that changes should be taken into account in the age of target group level; each country opted for the implementation of the YG by methods appropriate to the needs of the target group, which contributed to the success of the program; there are differences between Eastern European countries regarding the target groups, the type of intervention, results, etc. but this must be put in context in order to understand objectively what the reasons are and what the effectiveness of YG is especially in terms of social outcomes. Every successful intervention in YG represents a gain for both the beneficiary and the community. In the case of those where the intervention aims to increase the level of trust in social systems, it means a step in breaking the vicious circle of intergenerational, community poverty; in the case of those who need support in order to capitalize on their entrepreneurial skills, it means increasing job offers. The effectiveness and efficiency of programs like YG depend to a very large extent on the existence of reliable information, supported by scientific evidence. Documents published by the official EU website are an important starting point in identifying the need for public policies in a sector or field, and the most appropriate type of intervention. The more scientific evidence there is and the higher the level of trust, the greater the chances that the field, the sector in question, will be supported. This can be seen from the summary presented in this article: the systematic review method supports the identification of YG target groups and their particularities, and the type of intervention chosen in each country, allows comparability between countries on different dimensions of YG. Data collected for this analysis will be analyzed more complexly, in more detail to better understand the situation of the YG program and to contribute important information for decision-makers.

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