



The impact of Covid-19 on the youth labour market in Europe



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INTRODUCTION

In addition to the tragic impact of Covid-19 on health, the pandemic has been accompanied by an equally dramatic economic and social crisis. In terms of employment, this has come at greatest cost to young people and other particularly vulnerable groups. The European Union recently stated that in the first three quarters of 2020 the youth employment rate fell by 0.8% in the 15- to 19-year-old age-group, by 4.1% among 20- to 24-year-olds, and by 3.2% among 25- to 29-year-olds.¹ Furthermore, the current economic crisis has led to a significantly more rapid increase in long-term unemployment among young people than among workers who have been in the labour market for longer.²

The available data shows that the unemployment rate among young people is considerably higher than that of the more adult population active in the labour market.

However, even before the outbreak of pandemic, the so-called “youth problem”, which has now once again become the focus of the European debate, was based on vulnerabilities that cannot be attributed solely to unemployment, but also include the phenomenon of economic inactivity described by the acronym NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). According to the most recent data, the proportion of young NEETs aged between 15 and 24 in Europe peaked at 11.6% in the second quarter of 2020, an increase of 1.8% compared to the same period of 2019.³ In 2019, 35.5% of the young population (aged 15 to 29) were already in atypical employment.⁴ During the economic crisis that followed the pandemic, the prevalence of temporary work among young workers continued to

1 ESDE (Employment and Social Developments in Europe), *Employment and Social Developments in Europe*, Quarterly review, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, December 2020, p. 8

2 N. O'HIGGINS, *This Time It's Different? Youth Labour Market During the Great Recession*, IZA Discussion Paper, 2012, no. 6434

3 ESDE, p. 11

4 https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=yth_empl_050&lang=en

increase and became the predominant – and in some countries almost exclusive – form of employment for younger people.

As several analyses conducted in recent months have shown, a large proportion of the young people who are presently in a state of unemployment or economic inactivity were previously active in the sectors that were hit most heavily by the restrictions of the health crisis, such as tourism, catering and hospitality.⁵ These sectors are also characterised by below-average remuneration and widespread non-standard forms of employment.

The industries that were able to continue their activities and that offer more opportunities for remote working, by contrast, are those that employ a higher proportion of older and better-paid workers.⁶

Because of their more limited work experience, but above all due to the widespread economic instability that in many countries is discouraging recruitment, it is also more difficult for young people than for older workers (aged 55 and above) to gain entry to the labour market after they have completed their training. As the data from the *Living, working and COVID-19*⁷ survey shows, young people were among the groups most heavily affected by layoffs during the pandemic months: 11% of respondents aged between 18 and 29 – compared to 8% of workers over 30 – stated that they had lost their jobs.

5 See D. TAMESBERGER, J. BACHER, *COVID-19 Crisis: How to Avoid a “Lost Generation”*, Intereconomics, 55, 2020, pp. 232–238; ESDE, *Employment and Social Developments in Europe*, op. cit.; M. FANA, S. T. PÉREZ, E. F. MACÍAS, *Employment Impact of Covid-19 Crisis: From Short Term Effects to Long Terms Prospects*, J. Ind. Bus. Econ. 47, 2020, pp. 391–410; ILO, *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. Fourth Edition*, Updated Estimates and Analysis, May 2020; M. FANA, E. FERNANDEZ-MACÍAS, *The Impact of COVID Confinement Measures on EU Labour Market*, Science for Policy Briefs, Luxembourg, 2020; UNICEF, ETF, *Preventing a “Lockdown Generation” in Europe and Central Asia. Building Resilient Societies with Young People in the Era of Covid-19*, December 2020

6 *The Impact of COVID Confinement Measures on EU Labour Market*, op. cit., p. 3

7 EUROFOUND, *Living, working and COVID-19*, COVID-19 series, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, September 2020, p. 7. The survey that was launched in April 2020 to measure the immediate impact of the pandemic on the living and working patterns of people in Europe consisted of two rounds (April-May, then July). In both rounds, the participants were asked the same questions on their life satisfaction, their state of health and their confidence in institutions, as well as their work situation, their work-life balance and their ability to work remotely during the first phase of the pandemic.

The impact of the crisis on the employment and future careers of the young population can be considered with three different aspects in mind.⁸ The ILO has pointed out that the delays in the organisation of education and training resulting from contact restrictions, along with the social and psychological unease caused, could continue in the future to reduce the employment and earning potential of young people and their chances of gaining entry to the labour market. Secondly, both temporary and permanent closures in the sectors in which mostly young people are employed have had a serious impact on youth employment levels. They have led to a renewed division between insiders and outsiders, the primary victims of which have historically been young people. Lastly, the crisis has slowed down labour market mobility significantly, making it increasingly difficult for young people to find and keep a job in the medium to long term. If this situation were to continue for too long, it would have a negative impact on the maintenance and updating of skills, as well as on professional networks. Alongside these aspects, a prolonged period of unemployment or economic inactivity in one's working life can also have a psychological and physical impact.⁹

From a methodological point of view, this study is based on preliminary desk research aimed at identifying the literature and international reports that describe the situation of young people in the labour market over the past twenty years, and at demonstrating the structural vulnerability of young people to economic crises (like that of 2007–2008) and pandemics (like the Covid-19 pandemic, which is still ongoing). Following this research, the youth employment situation in Italy, Spain, Poland, Denmark and Slovakia in 2020 was examined by means of a comparison with the data from the previous year published by Eurostat. The choice of coun-

8 ILO, *Preventing Exclusion from the Labour Market: Tackling the COVID-19 Youth Employment Crisis*, Geneva, May 2020; ILO, *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and The World of Work. Fourth Edition*, Geneva 2020; UNICEF, ETF, *Preventing a "Lockdown Generation" in Europe and Central Asia. Building Resilient Societies with Young People in the Era of Covid-19*, op. cit.

9 OECD, *Youth and COVID-19: Response, Recovery and Resilience. Youth policy responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, Geneva, June 2020

tries was intended to convey as comprehensive and homogenous a picture as possible of youth employment at a European level, while emphasising territorial trends in the southern, northern and eastern regions of the continent.

The third part of this study presents the results of interviews that were conducted with trade union and vocational training representatives from the countries concerned, who were selected from among the members of the European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA) network. The interviews – which were conducted electronically with the individual actors involved and are based on an analysis of the most recent international literature on youth employment in the coronavirus era – focused particularly on the potential suggestions and political strategies that were identified for improving the status of young people in the world of work. These are presented systematically in the fourth and final section of the study, which also includes examples of best practice that have been tested across Europe.

1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE YOUTH EMPLOYMENT RATE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

According to Eurostat, the unemployment rate in Europe in January 2021 was 8.1%, just under one percent higher than the 7.4% of the previous year. The unemployment rate among under-25s, by contrast, rose by two percent in the space of a year, from 14.9% in January 2020 to 16.9% in January 2021¹⁰, confirming once again that in times of crisis the young population pays a higher price in terms of employment.

A comparison of the youth employment rate (ages 15 to 29) in the first three quarters of 2020 with the equivalent periods of 2019 reveals that the largest difference in the EU rate was recorded in the second quarter, with a decrease of 7.4%.

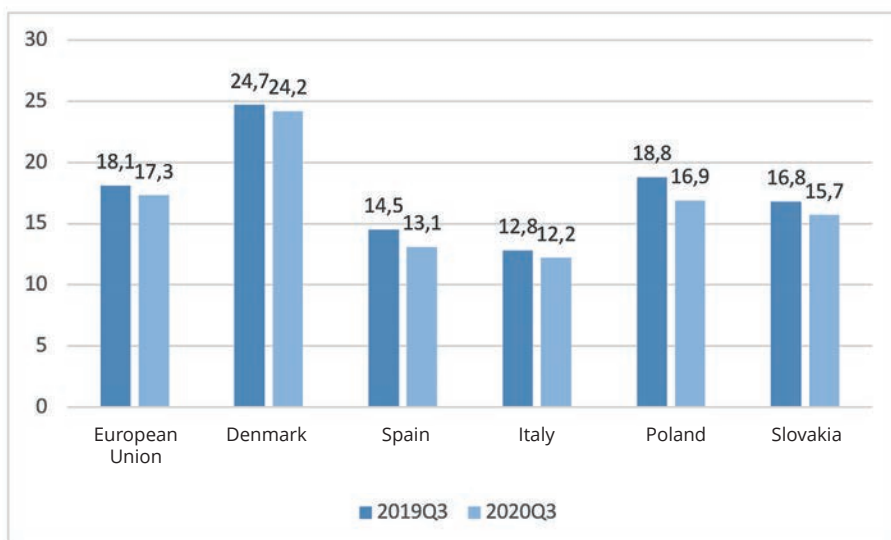
In the countries under consideration (Italy, Spain, Denmark, Poland and Slovakia), the second quarter of 2020 stood out as the period with the largest decrease in youth employment compared to the same period of 2019. Most notably, Spain suffered the largest decrease (-16.2%), while Denmark came off best (-2.5%).

It is also clear that the negative trend continued through the period considered in Denmark and Poland, whose lowest figures came in the third quarter of 2020 (-4% in Denmark and -10.8% in Poland), while Italy, Spain and Slovakia were able to achieve a turnaround and record an improvement – albeit minimal – between the second and third quarters of 2020. Even here, however, the 2020 youth employment rate remained significantly lower than that of 2019.

10 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Unemployment_statistics#Youth_unemployment

The particular difficulties faced by young people as a result of the current economic crisis are illustrated well by a comparison between the employment rate of young people (aged 15 to 29) and that of the working population as a whole (aged 15 to 64). While youth employment constituted a stable 18.1% share of total employment in the third quarter of 2019, this fell to 17.3% in the same period of 2020. Among the countries considered in this study, Poland suffered the largest drop, with a fall of 1.9% between the third quarter of 2019 (18.8%) and the third quarter of 2020 (16.9%). It was followed by Spain, which recorded a share of 13.1% in the third quarter of 2020, a difference of 1.4% compared to the 14.5% of 2019. Slovakia was not far behind, with a 1.1% decrease in share, from 16.8% in 2019 to 15.7% in 2020. By contrast, Italy and Denmark had the best figures to show in terms of youth employment as a share of total employment – Italy with a share of 12.8% in the third quarter of 2019, which fell to only 12.2% in the same period of 2020, and Denmark with a gap of only 0.5% between the 2019 share (24.7%) and the 2020 share (24.2%).

Youth employment (ages 15 to 29) as a share of total employment (ages 15 to 64)



Source: Eurostat. Data processed by ADAPT

In the countries analysed, the number of young people (aged 15 to 29) in employment compared to the working population as a whole (aged 15 to 64) fell by an average of 1.26%, with substantial differences between the countries.

Within the space of a year, there were almost 1.2 million fewer young people in employment across Europe, and Spain and Poland were the most heavily affected of the countries studied. In concrete terms, 1,181,400 jobs for young people aged between 15 and 29 were lost across the territory of the European Union between the third quarter of 2019 and the third quarter of 2020. As we have seen above, Denmark had the smallest difference between youth employment and total employment, with a loss of 12,000 jobs, compared to an overall loss of 208,800 jobs held by young people during the reference period in Spain. Poland, meanwhile, suffered 165,000 job losses, while 89,000 jobs were lost in Italy and 17,800 in Slovakia.

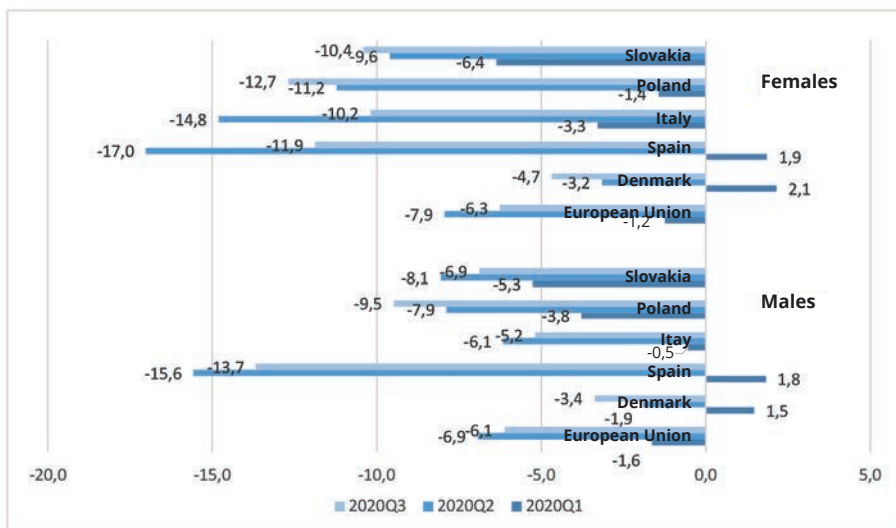
The sharp downturn in youth employment in Europe, and specifically in the countries under consideration here, came with substantial differences not only at a territorial level, but also in terms of the gender of workers. Young female workers, like the female population as a whole, were hit particularly hard by the economic crisis, which impacted traditionally female-dominated sectors such as personal services, retail and wholesale. It should also be noted that women in the workforce are often employed on non-standard contracts and with a reduced number of working hours (part-time, often involuntarily).

While a comparison of the EU-wide data for the first, second and third quarters of 2020 with the same periods of the previous year does not indicate any significant differences in terms of the employment of men and women aged between 15 and 29, an evaluation of the data included in this analysis from the individual countries may be useful.

Spain stands out once again among the countries analysed, since in the second quarter of 2020 it experienced the sharpest decrease in youth employment compared to the same period of 2019, both among women (-17%) and among men (-15.6%). Denmark, by contrast, was confirmed as

the country that best managed to maintain both the female and male youth employment rates. In the third quarter of 2020, these fell by a maximum of 4.7% and 3.4% respectively as compared to the third quarter of 2019. Italy, meanwhile, saw the largest difference between women and men with regard to the downturn in youth employment. An analysis of the first, second and third quarters of 2020 reveals that the female employment rate suffered a decrease of 3.3%, 14.8% and 10.2% respectively in comparison to 2019, whereas the decrease in the male employment rate amounted to only 0.5%, 6.1% and 5.2%. The differences between the female and male youth employment rates in Slovakia and Poland are smaller but nevertheless still substantial. In Slovakia, the gap widened between the first quarter of 2020 – when the decrease in the female employment rate was 6.4% and the male employment rate 5.3% compared to 2019 – and the third quarter of 2020. In Poland, meanwhile, the decrease in the female and male employment rates differed by approximately 2% in all three quarters of 2020.

Total female and male employment rate, ages 15 to 29. Percentage difference between 2019 and 2020 quarters



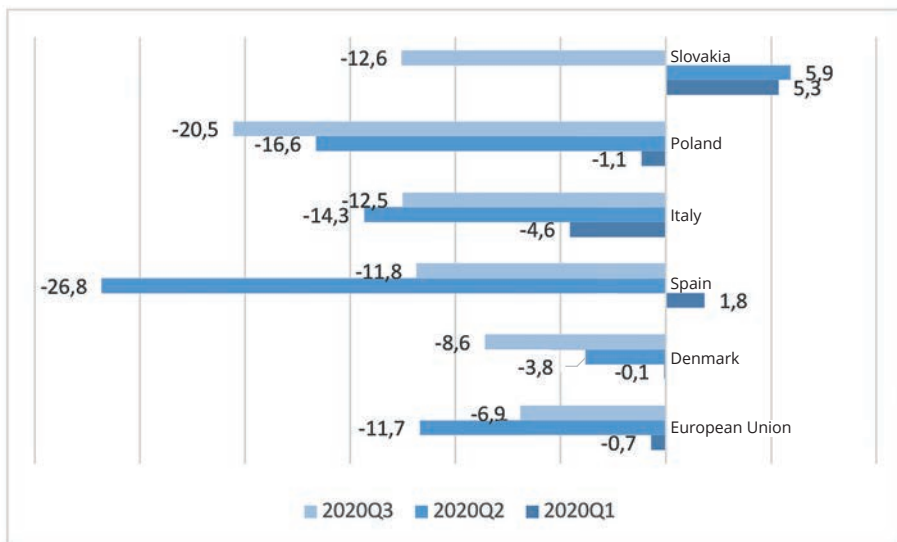
Source: Eurostat. Data processed by ADAPT

In the quarters of 2020, the youth employment rate in Europe was subject to fluctuations (compared to the same periods of the previous year) that corresponded to the type of contract on which the young people were employed.

According to surveys by Eurostat, young people (aged 15 to 29) with part-time employment contracts have been most heavily affected by the economic crisis connected to the coronavirus. At a European level, the second quarter of 2020 saw an 11.7% decrease in part-time employment in comparison to the same period of 2019, whereas the employment rate among workers with full-time employment contracts decreased by 6.1% in the same reference period. This data can be seen as an addition to the above analysis of the gender differences in the downturn in youth employment rates, since women, who are at a disadvantage compared to men, are traditionally more often employed on non-standard employment contracts, which include part-time employment contracts.

A more detailed analysis of the downturn in youth employment rates in relation to contract types reveals that, of the countries considered, Poland suffered the most dramatic decrease in part-time employment. After a slight increase in the first quarter of 2020, this fell exponentially by 16.6% in the second quarter and as much as 20.5% in the third quarter. Though Spain reached a peak in the second quarter of 2020 with -26.8% compared to the same period of 2019, it finished the third quarter on an upward trend with losses of 11.8%. Once again, Denmark came off best, despite an increase in the percentage of part-time jobs lost in 2020 as compared to 2019, rising from what approached a parity in the first quarter of 2020 to 8.6% in the third quarter. Slovakia and Italy, meanwhile, had similar loss rates, which increased from approximately 5% in the first quarter to approximately 12% in the third quarter.

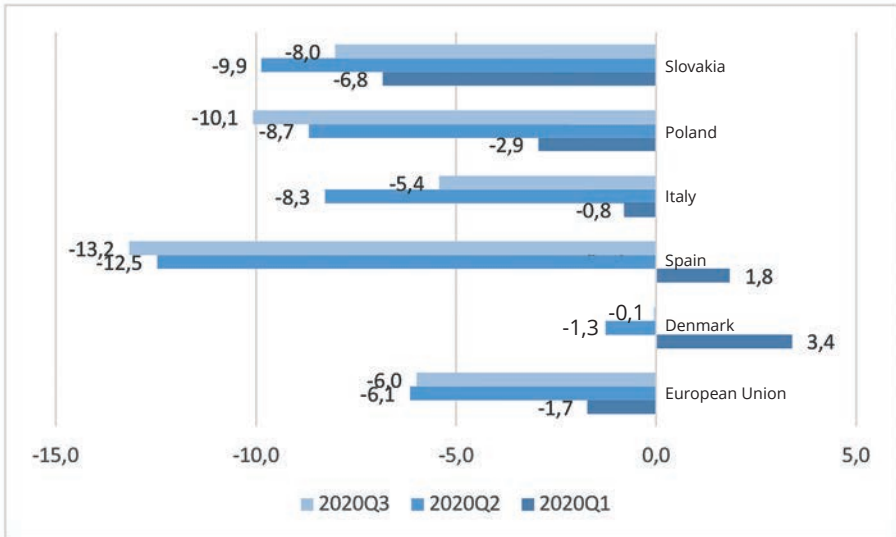
Part-time employment, ages 15 to 29. Percentage difference compared to previous year's quarter



Source: Eurostat. Data processed by ADAPT

Spain was, by contrast, the country with the greatest loss of full-term employment contracts, which decreased by 12.5% in the second quarter and by 13.2% in the third quarter. Denmark confirmed its first place here, too, with the smallest loss of full-time jobs: after an increase in the first quarter of 2020 (+3.4%) it recorded a moderate decrease in the second (-1.3%) and third (-0.1%) quarters. Poland was able to limit the loss of full-time contracts in the first part of 2020 but finished the third quarter with a loss of 10.1%. This development contrasted with improving results in Slovakia and Italy, which achieved an improvement of 1.8% and 2.9% respectively between the second and third quarters of 2020 compared to the equivalent periods of the previous year.

Full-time employment, ages 15 to 29. Percentage difference compared to previous year's quarter



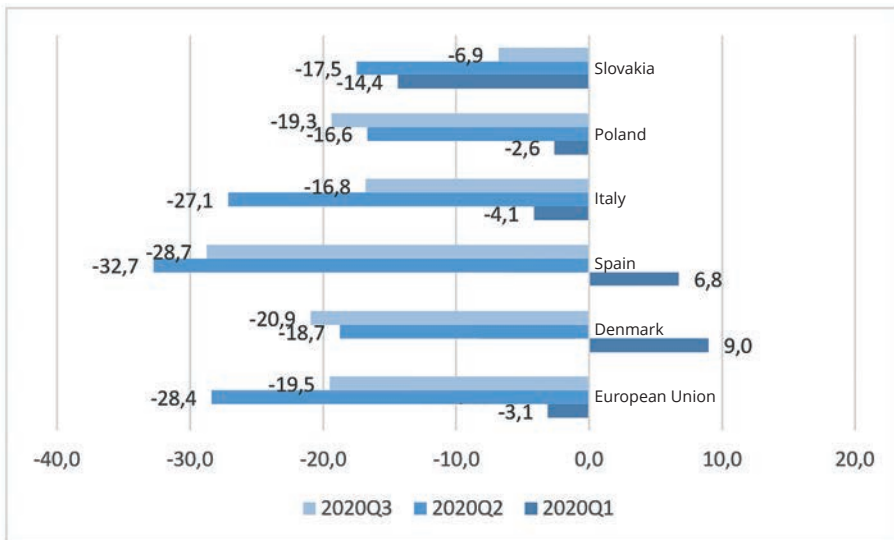
Source: Eurostat. Data processed by ADAPT

Lastly, the fluctuations to which European youth employment has been subject in the past year are also identifiable in relation to the fields in which the young workers are employed. It is clear, for example, that the hospitality trade – with a 28% decrease in the young people employed in this industry across Europe – suffered particularly badly as a result of the pandemic. The IT sector, by contrast, is the industry that best withstood the changes brought about by the economic crisis and had the lowest difference rate between 2019 and 2020.

In the hospitality industry, the greatest loss of workers aged 15 to 29 was suffered by Spain in the second quarter of 2020 (-32.7% compared to the same period of 2019). Generally speaking, the other countries under consideration in this study, including Denmark, also experienced a negative development in the industry, though Denmark managed to limit the difference between the 2020 quarters and the equivalent periods of 2019. Poland and Italy finished the third quarter with losses of 19.3% and 16.8%

respectively, in comparison to a decrease of 20.9% in Denmark. Slovakia achieved outstanding results, finishing the third quarter with a growth of approximately 10% as compared to the preceding quarter.

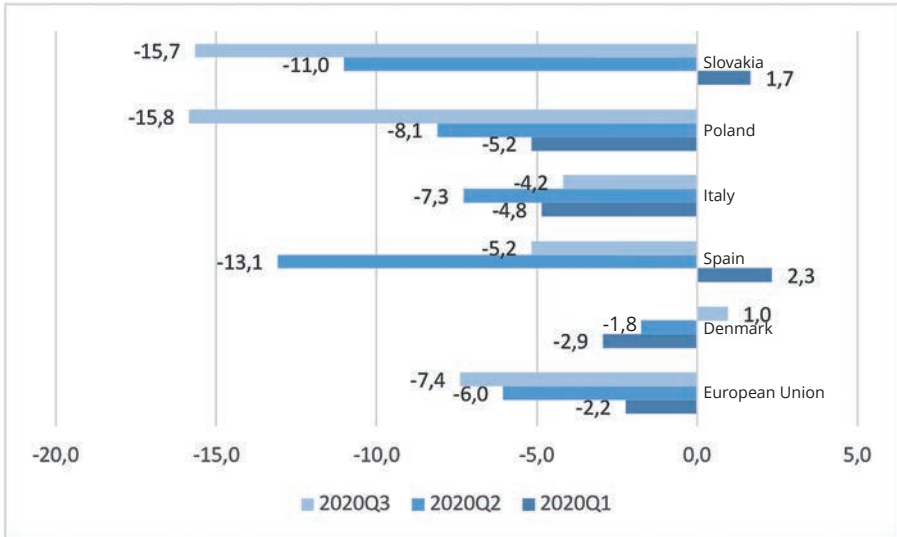
Employees aged 15 to 29 in the hospitality industry. Percentage difference compared to previous year's quarter



Source: Eurostat. Data processed by ADAPT

The industrial sector was also severely affected by the crisis associated with the spread of the coronavirus and at a European level suffered a decrease of more than 7% in the third quarter of 2020 in comparison to the same period of 2019. Slovakia, which had distinguished itself in the second half of the year thanks to a turnaround in the hospitality industry, was the country with the worst figures in the industrial sector and, like Poland, suffered a 15.7% decrease in youth employment in the third quarter of 2020. In Italy, the losses were less dramatic (-4.2%), while Denmark was able to achieve an increase of one percent in the third quarter of 2020.

Employees aged 15 to 29 in the industrial sector (excluding construction industry). Percentage difference compared to previous year's quarter

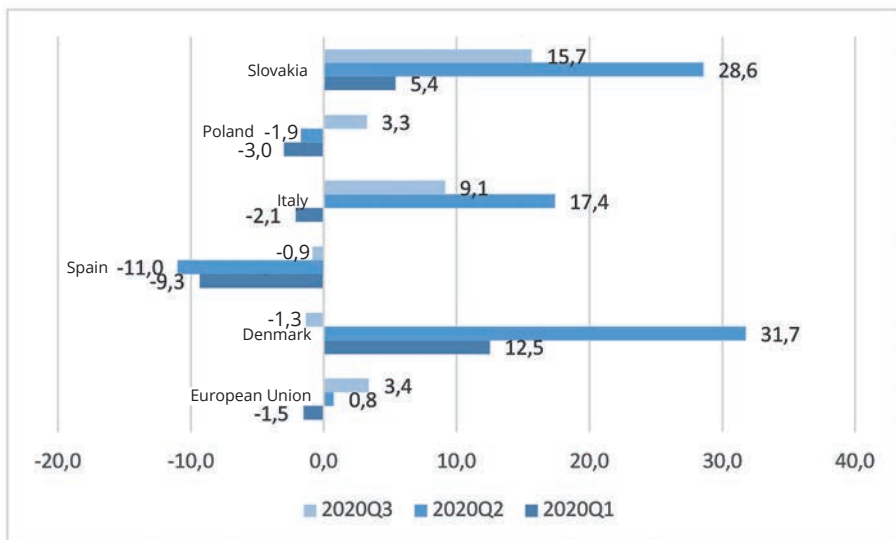


Source: Eurostat. Data processed by ADAPT

The fates of the farming, forestry and fishing industry and the IT sector, by contrast, appear to have taken a different course, since in several of the countries analysed, the youth employment rate in these areas actually increased.

Notable with regard to the former is the growth of 31.7%, 28.6% and 17.4% calculated respectively in Denmark, Slovakia and Italy in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same period of 2019. However, Denmark and Slovakia experienced a change in trend in the third quarter of 2020 and suffered losses of 1.3% and 15.7% respectively. The situation in Spain was anomalous: here, there were job losses for young workers in the industry in all quarters, and the trend only improved in the third quarter, which ended with a limited loss of 0.9%.

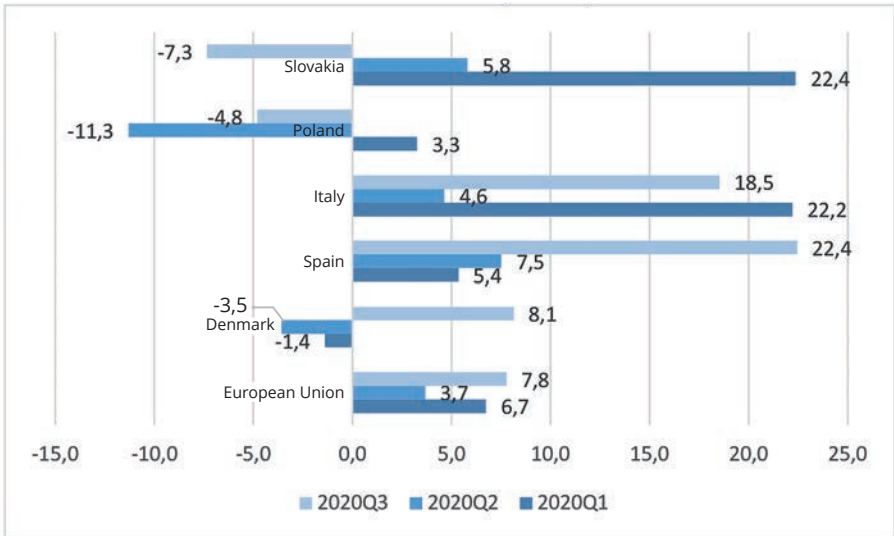
Employees aged 15 to 29 in the farming, forestry and fishing industry. Percentage difference compared to previous year's quarter



Source: Eurostat. Data processed by ADAPT

In the IT and communications industry, however, Spain stood out positively and was able to increase its youth employment rate from +5.4% in the first quarter of 2020 to +22.4% in the third quarter of 2020. The number of working people aged between 15 and 29 rose in Italy, too, albeit less consistently than in Spain. Nevertheless, Italy finished the third quarter with +18.5% in comparison to the same period of 2019. Slovakia and Poland, by contrast, saw a decrease of 7.3% and 4.8% respectively in the 2020 youth employment rate in this industry compared to 2019, thus reversing the growth trend of the first half of the previous year. The opposite trend was observable in Denmark, where after a decrease of around 2% in the first half of the year, the third quarter of 2020 ended with a plus of 8.1%.

Employees aged 15 to 29 in the IT and communications industry. Percentage difference compared to previous year's quarter



Source: Eurostat. Data processed by ADAPT

2 YOUNG PEOPLE AND WORK – OLD PROBLEMS

Thus far, the existing data presented shows that the situation has consequences resembling the effects of the last great economic crisis, albeit in different circumstances. This is confirmed by the surveys of international institutions: as was clearly demonstrated during the 2020 pandemic crisis, and previously in the context of the economic and financial crisis that began in 2007, young people have always been among the groups most severely affected by crises.

Even before the crisis of 2007, however, the literature¹¹ indicated that the vulnerable position of the young population in the labour market is not necessarily the exclusive result of a specific economic situation but must be regarded as a structural element of most industrialised and non-industrialised countries. With regard to the structural vulnerability of young people in the labour market, some have even spoken of *déjà vu*.¹²

Although the high youth unemployment rates in the years following the “great crisis” were not in themselves anything new in the labour market landscape, it became apparent that the situation in Europe was characterised in part by a large-scale process of labour market deregulation.¹³

In the years immediately following the financial crisis, legislative measures were taken in many European countries to reduce the level of protection given to normal (permanent) employment. Thus “flexicurity”¹⁴ was developed – an integrated strategy aimed at combining flexibility of work for the benefit of companies and social security for the benefit of workers.

11 N. O'HIGGINS, op. cit.

12 D. N. F. BELL, D. G. BLANCHFLOWER, *Youth Unemployment: Déjà Vu*, IZA Discussion Paper, 2010, no. 4705

13 M. TIRABOSCHI, *La disoccupazione giovanile in tempo di crisi: un monito all'Europa (continentale) per rifondare il diritto del lavoro?*, in *Diritto delle relazioni industriali*, no. 2/XXII, 2012

14 The so-called “flexicurity” strategy was introduced in the European Commission Green Paper of 22 November 2006 entitled “Modernising labour law to meet the challenges of the 21st century”.

The flexicurity model had been theorised by the European institutions at the beginning of the new millennium, within the context of the implementation of the 2000 Lisbon Strategy, in order to efficiently meet the needs and demands of globalisation, promote higher employment rates, and counter high long-term unemployment.

With the start of the economic crisis and the collapse of the financial markets in 2007–2008, flexicurity became the new European labour paradigm. In terms of the impact of flexicurity on the youth labour market, it has been observed that the strategy's incomplete implementation puts the younger population¹⁵ at an even greater disadvantage than older members of the workforce.¹⁶ Flexible work has intensified the segmentation of the labour market and hits precisely those groups of people that it was intended to protect – women and young people – hardest. This can be attributed primarily to the fact that increasing flexibility has not been accompanied by new, adapted protective measures that might have addressed the changes in contemporary labour markets.

Highly acclaimed studies suggest that the adverse impact of flexicurity on the young population has a number of different causes. Firstly, flexible termination disadvantages young people more heavily because employers are always more reluctant to lay off older employees. This would involve a greater loss of human capital, the ethical responsibility for laying off a possible family breadwinner, and whatever costs might be associated with the layoff. Secondly, in addition to the matter of flexibility, the matter of job security is inevitably weaker where young people are concerned. Income protection for the unemployed is structured according to an insurance principle by which workers are entitled to wage replacement benefits corresponding to the work they have done in recent months. This principle can only put young people at a disadvantage, since they may, by definition, have worked (and paid in) too little or not at all. Fur-

15 J. LESCHKE, M. FINN, *Labor Market Flexibility and Income Security: Changes for European Youth during the Great Recession*, in J. O'REILLY, J. LESCHKE, R. ORTLIEB, M. SEELEIB-KAISER, P. VILLA (Eds.), *Youth Labor in Transition: Inequalities, Mobility, and Policies in Europe*, pp. 132-162

16 M. SIGNORELLI, *Youth unemployment in transition economies*, IZA World of Labor 2017, p. 401

thermore, there is hardly any insurance protection for forms of work outside the market, such as internships within and outside school. Lastly, it is important to bear in mind that fixed-term employment contracts are significantly more common among young people than among adults. The degree of instability that characterises the economic system as a whole tends to be passed on to young people more than to adults because the dynamics of the management and staffing of companies make it easier to offer short- and fixed-term contracts to those who have never had a permanent contract than to those who have already been in such an employment relationship.

Several studies have indeed questioned the positive impact of a deregulated or flexible labour market on youth unemployment.¹⁷ But there are also studies that argue that, in the long run, employment protection systems have benefited the employment situation of young people.¹⁸

A comparison of the data on youth and adult unemployment rates in different European countries offers information on the impact of legal frameworks on the employment status of young people. It shows that in some countries such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland, which use dual vocational training extensively as a means of integrating training and work, the two unemployment rates are essentially the same. It should also be noted that employment protection levels have risen in these countries over the years.

An empirical comparison of the health of the youth labour market with adult employment rates seems to indicate that the main obstacles to young people's entry into the labour market are to be found in the transition from school to work rather than in the current legal frameworks.¹⁹ In Germany, for example, dual vocational training is viewed as the "back-

17 F. FAZIO, A. M. WELEMARIAM (Eds.), *Young Workers in Recessionary Times, Literature Review*, in *E-Journal of International and Comparative Labour Studies*, 2012, no. 3–4, September–December 2012, ADAPT University Press

18 F. FAZIO, A. M. WELEMARIAM (Eds.), *op. cit.*

19 This is the central thesis in M. TIRABOSCHI, 2012, *op. cit.*

bone of the economy”²⁰ because of its ability to integrate the education system into the labour market. This integration takes place at two levels: at a micro-level in the person of each young apprentice, who has the status of both a student and an employee, and at a macro-level in the “control room of vocational training”, in which central and local institutions, employers’ associations and trade unions manage and direct the system as a whole.²¹

In the context of dual vocational training, two further factors that influence youth employment can also be evaluated: the good functioning of the education system in general, and the role of labour relations in shaping the labour market. On the one hand, dual vocational training is embedded in the education system in every respect as an alternative to conventional schools, grammar schools and technical colleges, and on the other hand, dual vocational training makes it possible to construct and adapt job profiles to meet the demands of the market.

The ranking of the World Economic Forum in connection with the 2017–2018 Competitiveness Report²² also confirms the importance of a co-operative system of labour relations in creating a more inclusive work environment. Here, the indicators relating to the degree of co-operation in labour-employer relations and the degree of flexibility of wage determination are given particular attention. These indicators show once again that the countries with lower unemployment rates (such as Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Germany) are the very countries that have the most co-operative labour relations systems and are open to dialogue with the social partners and local communities.

Examining the participation of young people in the labour market from the perspective of the transition from the world of education into the world of work also makes it possible to look beyond the simple phenom-

20 M. WEISS, *Formazione professionale in Germania: il sistema duale*, in *Diritto delle relazioni industriali*, no. 1/2014

21 MASSAGLI E., *Il sistema duale tedesco*, in MASSAGLI E., *Alternanza formativa e apprendistato in Italia e in Europa*, Studium, Rome, 2016, p. 72

22 K. SCHWAB, *The Global Competitiveness Report 2017–2018*, World Economic Forum, Geneva, 2017

enon of unemployment. When it comes to young people failing to gain entry to the labour market, it is difficult to use the term “unemployment”. Indeed, even by the end of the last century²³ the term already seemed somewhat inadequate as a way of describing the increasingly complex and multi-layered relationship between young people and their search for their first job. The dualism of employment and unemployment also seems partial and reductive because it views workers in the traditional sense²⁴ and disregards other “activities outside the market”.²⁵ These are activities that young people often engage in during the transition into working life, e.g. voluntary work, unpaid work and school-based internships.

Although taking the unemployment rate as an indicator of the state of the youth labour market is not without problems (since it does not factor in young people in training or voluntary work and thus runs the risk of over-representing the phenomenon), it should be acknowledged that it remains a particularly effective indicator of the collective position of young people in the labour market. A large proportion of young workers are precisely on the borderline between the regular labour market, the irregular labour market and areas that are not entirely clearly and unambiguously defined (e.g. internships and platform work). This further complicates their employment situation.

23 Among the first proponents of this thesis was O. MARCHAND, *Youth Unemployment in OECD Countries: How Can the Disparities Be Explained?*, in OECD, *Preparing Youth for the 21st Century – The Transition from Education to the Labour Market*, 1999

24 “Regarding the various existing forms of work, it is important to note that data presented here refers only to employment, thus overlooking participation in other forms of work such as volunteer work or unpaid trainee work. In this sense, youth not in employment, education or training may not be entirely idle, for they may be involved in these other forms of work. However, these other forms of work are not remunerated.” In: ILOSTAT, *Labour market access – a persistent challenge for youth around the world*, Spotlight on work statistics, no. 5, March 2019

25 M. TIRABOSCHI, *Persona e lavoro tra tutele e mercato. Per una nuova ontologia del lavoro nel discorso giuslavoristico*, ADAPT University Press, 2019

Within the context of a broader argument aimed at reassessing society and the labour market in view of the socio-demographic changes affecting it, the author suggests extending the concept of work, restricted in jurisprudence exclusively to the productive dimension, to include all activities capable of satisfying urgent social needs not covered by the market, as well as the production of common or relational goods, such as, among others, personal care and support services, territorial welfare, territorial protection and the development of the artistic and cultural heritage.

3 INITIATIVES AT COMMUNITY LEVEL

The European institutions have developed a variety of initiatives aimed at providing economic and social support for the benefit of the young population. Firstly, there are measures designed to support entry into the labour market whose aim is to promote instruments that can ensure a match between the job profile acquired by a young person and the qualifications demanded in the market. In July 2020, the European Commission launched the Youth Employment Support initiative, a set of measures aimed at implementing the Youth Guarantee project, strengthening the vocational education and training (VET) system, and promoting the apprenticeship system.²⁶

The Youth Guarantee project dates from 2013, a historical period in which youth unemployment in Europe had reached a peak of 24%.²⁷ The goal of the programme was therefore to connect young people aged 25 and under with a high-quality job offer, a training offer or an apprenticeship or internship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving school. The project's new formula envisages raising the upper age limit from 25 to 29 and widening the target group to include minorities and people with disabilities, so as to provide for all the most vulnerable groups within the young population. It specifies customised career guidance and seeks to match young people and the qualification requirements of companies. The European Commission reports that the Youth Guarantee has so far helped 24 million young people back into the labour market or into training.²⁸

The other pillars of the project are to be found in the courses provided by VET and the promotion of the apprenticeship system. These two elements constitute a point of reference for the training of young people and their entry into the world of work. In the case of the former, the Euro-

26 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1036>

27 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/MEMO_13_464

28 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en>

pean Union – with support from CEDEFOP, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training – has built an extensive network between the social partners in order to be able to offer and develop vocational training for young people. According to a CEDEFOP survey, 60% of vocational training participants find a job within a month of completing their training.²⁹ As the European Union itself states, the vocational training system will play an increasingly central role in supporting new processes of technological innovation and sustainable development in the future. It will become a point of reference for companies in recruiting young people with the skills and multidisciplinary competences needed to shape these changes.³⁰ Beyond this, it is noteworthy that the European institutions are focusing their attention on two elements of the vocational training system in particular. The first concerns the promotion of the quality of vocational training and the co-ordination of the social partners involved in the different countries via the adoption of the recommendations contained in the 2009 European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training.³¹ The second concerns the creation of a framework for the recognition, transfer and possible accumulation of learning outcomes, which was established that same year with the adoption of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training.³² Lastly, dual vocational training is one of the most important building blocks in the vocational training system at a European level. The coalition established in 2013 to support the implementation of a network between the social partners, including the national governments, has been able to create more than 900,000 employment opportunities for young people to date.³³ By enabling dialogue between companies and training institu-

29 CEDEFOP, *Making VET fit for the future*, Information series, October 2018

30 See ESAI (Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion), *Innovation and digitalisation in Vocational Education and Training*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, December 2020

31 Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training

32 Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training

33 <https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/commission-launches-renewed-european-alliance-for-apprenticeships-eu-commission-press/>

tions, this system has proved very helpful in facilitating the transition into the world of work and in meeting the needs of companies in terms of providing training in the skills they require.³⁴ The option of training people on the job is therefore a commendable feature of dual vocational training that can greatly boost the employability of a young person by strengthening their relationship with potential employers.³⁵

34 See CEDEFOP, *The Next Step for Apprenticeship*, Reference series, January 2021; ESAI (Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion), *Good for Youth, Good for Business. European Alliance for Apprenticeships*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, June 2019

35 McKinsey&Company, *Education to Employment: Getting Europe's Youth into Work*, 2012

4 THE PERSPECTIVE OF TRADE UNIONS AND TRAINING PROVIDERS

In view of the situation presented thus far, the decision was made to look in depth primarily at the causes of the poor status of young people and the role that workers' representatives and those responsible for vocational training might have to play in changing the situation. To this end, representatives from the countries involved were invited to take part in a number of different interviews with the aim of exploring the topic in greater depth on the basis of their own personal experiences, rather than just the scientific literature. Those included were the Polish Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarność, the Independent Christian Trade Unions of Slovakia (Nezávislé kresťanské odbory Slovenska / NKOS), the largest German trade union confederation (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund / DGB) and the Spanish trade union Unión Sindical Obrera (USO).

5 FACTORS MAKING YOUNG PEOPLE THE MOST VULNERABLE GROUP IN THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS

All those interviewed confirmed the hypothesis that the economic and social crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic has seriously affected young people, who have been identified as one of the most vulnerable and at-risk groups in the labour market.

Solidarność views the excessive flexibility of the labour market and the spread of atypical employment contracts as the cause of the weak market position of young people, who have traditionally been more likely to be employed on atypical contracts. From the 2000s onwards, more flexible forms of employment – and particularly so-called civil law contracts – became widespread in Poland. These were promoted both by the political authorities and by employers, who saw a greater prevalence of atypical and flexible forms of employment as promising greater freedom in the organisation of labour. From the workers' perspective, the Polish trade union reports, this policy of flexicurity was accompanied by the loss of most of the rights associated with an employment contract and by reduced access to the social security system. As the data discussed in the preceding sections shows, the workers hit hardest by the pandemic in Poland, too, were those employed on non-standard employment contracts, among whom young people stood out particularly. Some of them lost their jobs, while the majority suffered a dramatic drop in income that was only partially cushioned by low unemployment support and/or other forms of protection.

To complete the picture of the youth employment situation during the Covid-19 crisis, NKOS emphasises that young people are not only predominantly employed on weak employment contracts but are also over-represented in the industries most heavily affected by the pandemic, such as the tourism sector and the hospitality trade.

According to USO, the decrease in the youth employment rate in 2020 is attributable to the general decrease in entrepreneurial activity, and hence to the reduced need for recruitment by the companies affected by the economic crisis.

As stressed by NKOS, economic crises can have a profound influence on the working life of young people in the medium to long term, since initial experiences in the labour market significantly impact young people's employment prospects. The "scar-like" effects of a "weak" entry into the world of work can persist over time and condemn young people to precarious employment relationships and to postponing the realisation of life plans to the near or more distant future.

In the interview, NKOS also pointed out that in the Slovak labour market educational qualifications still appear to play a decisive part in a young person's success or failure in finding a job. While university graduates find appropriate employment relatively easily and quickly, even in pandemic times, school leavers, by contrast, suffer from the shortcomings of an education that meets neither the real and concrete needs of the labour market nor the demands of employers.

According to the DGB, young people in Germany who have medium or low educational qualifications or come from immigrant families may also suffer most as a result of the current economic crisis. This is, in fact, a consequence of the dramatic reduction in what is on offer in the German training market, which has been diminishing for years. According to the 2020 Vocational Training Report, less than one in five companies in Germany still employs an apprentice. In the space of a decade, the number of companies offering training has fallen by more than 50,000. Even before the start of the pandemic crisis, one in three young people in Germany with a lower secondary school leaving certificate was unable to find an apprentice position. In total, there were more than 1.3 million young people between the ages of 20 and 29 who had not completed their training before the pandemic. This corresponds to 14% of the age group. Lastly, the decrease in new training contracts in 2020 was estimated to be 11% and was therefore greater than that of the 2007 global financial crisis (-8.4%).

As the interview with USO indicates, a high proportion of young Spaniards also pay a price for not having an education beyond compulsory schooling. They need additional time to acquire vocational skills, which delays their entry into the labour market. The quality and content of a school education that does not correspond with the country's production requirements – along with the excessive prevalence of fixed-term jobs – are recognised as one of the main causes of the difficult youth employment situation in Spain.

6 INITIATIVES AT THE LEVEL OF TRADE UNIONS AND TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Since the beginning of the pandemic crisis, the German trade unions have, as Germany's largest trade union confederation reports, been campaigning to preserve federal government support for in-company vocational training. In particular, the DGB has called for adequate support for young people in training and for training companies. As stated in the interview, many of the demands made by the union have been incorporated into the federal government's 500-million package designed to support training companies. In concrete terms, companies that hire apprentices from insolvent companies and take over their training will receive a bonus. In addition, the awarding of the grant encourages companies to offer "online distance learning" and to create the necessary conditions for young apprentices to be integrated into two or more production contexts in the course of their training, so that they can gain more experience and apply their social skills. Companies heavily affected by the crisis that were forced to reduce working hours for staff not undergoing training (i.e. not including apprentices), also receive a grant. Contrary to what was envisaged in the governing coalition's stimulus package at the start of the crisis, the general training bonus for companies that continue their training commitment to young people is currently only granted to medium-sized companies that have been forced by the pandemic to reduce working hours. According to the DGB, this is a clear signal that, in the government's view, healthy training companies do not need subsidies to continue their work and can thus carry on independently.

As NKOS reported, training companies in Slovakia that had to suspend their dual training activities (alternating classroom and in-company training) from 16 March 2020 onwards could also apply for financial support

to pay the salaries of training staff working in the company, up to a maximum of 80% of the average salary of other employees.

According to NKOS, the closure of vocational colleges that was trialled during the health emergency phase in 2020 was generally very instructive, since it precipitated a number of insights relating to the classroom training context which may provide a basis for improvement measures in the institutions in the near future. In particular, access to digital infrastructures has proved unsuitable and inadequate for coping with the workload of Slovak students in education and training, though there are contextual differences between schools, teachers and students. As other interviews also indicate, the exceptional situation of the pandemic has underlined the fact that access to education is still heavily dependent on the socio-economic status of young people's family of origin. Students from large families and families with financial difficulties were most significantly disadvantaged during distance learning due to poor internet connection quality, inadequate or unsuitable equipment and the cost of using large amounts of data.

In Spain, USO's action in support of youth employment does not appear to be aimed primarily at the business world, but rather at involving young people in associations where they can learn the rationale of mutual aid. In this spirit, the Spanish trade union interviewed has committed itself to promoting youth associations by encouraging young people to join trade union organisations and to participate actively and constructively in them. For its part, the Spanish trade union, independently and together with other youth organisations, is taking action to promote campaigns that call for an improvement to the working conditions of the young population by abolishing temporary work, job rotation and wage discrimination. In addition, USO calls on public administrations to implement an active policy of stable and high-quality employment for young people and to promote training for young people without qualifications in order to facilitate their integration into the labour market. Lastly, the Spanish union sees educational institutions of different types and levels as privileged dialogue partners in the spread and implementation of trade union culture among young people. It invites universities, grammar schools and secondary and

vocational training centres to organise conferences and workshops aimed at conveying a basic knowledge of labour and trade union rights to young students. Ultimately, the union hopes that such encounters will inspire young people to join trade unions.

7 THE ROLE OF POLITICAL ACTORS AND THE MEASURES TAKEN

The employment situation of young people, which was already difficult and has been further exacerbated by the onset of the pandemic, necessitates the definition and implementation of measures that address the matter of young people from a holistic and thus comprehensive perspective. Recognising the importance of work in our society, which remains not only economic but first and foremost existential, their primary aim must be to improve the integration of the young population into the labour market.

The majority of those interviewed recognise the value of the aims pursued by the Youth Guarantee programme and hope to see it implemented in the near future to combat rising youth unemployment rates. The trade union NKOS recognises the Youth Guarantee programme as the most important measure in strengthening and balancing the Slovak youth labour market, while the Polish Solidarność extends its sphere of action and calls for its implementation in all member states.

According to USO, the Youth Guarantee programme is part of the “Action Plan for Youth Employment 2019–2021” in Spain, which was launched by the Spanish Ministry of Labour to take the action necessary for the development of a new production model with long-term strategies promoting innovation. With regard to the youth population, the programme aims to boost the competitiveness of the Spanish production structure by promoting the development of future industries and sectors with high added value. The goal is to achieve a level of economic growth that creates a substantial supply of stable or flexible jobs. The programme also envisages an increased commitment to comprehensive training and qualification for young people. Both the education and training system and the work environment are recognised as places of individual, collective and professional development for young people, especially those from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. With regard to this

latter, particularly vulnerable group of young people, the programme is intended to support the return of early school leavers to school, the development of strategic skills, dual vocational training, employment with rights, young entrepreneurship and trade union participation.

Since, as described above, the imbalance between supply and demand in relation to jobs for young people is regarded in Spain as one of the main causes of the poor quality of youth employment, USO proposed a range of actions and measures to promote dialogue between training institutions and producers, and decent, high-quality employment conditions for young people. First and foremost, the aim is to enable young people to take constructive action in their job search and in the labour market by providing them with training and vocational qualifications that can be used in the leading production sectors. To achieve this result, investment in education, vocational training and particularly in the development of skills relating to digitalisation is essential. In addition, USO recommends that special attention be paid to particularly vulnerable groups of young people such as migrants, disabled people and early school leavers, and that a culture of equal opportunities between men and women be promoted with the intention of eliminating gender bias and combating horizontal segregation and the gender wage gap. Lastly, the union hopes that public employment services will play a more active role by providing the young people in their care with support that is appropriate and as personalised as possible, and by promoting the reintegration of NEETs.

Improved access to public employment services is also called for by Solidarność as an essential precondition for combating growing inequalities within the young population and between generations, and as a means of promoting fair and decent working conditions. In line with the Spanish results, Poland also stressed the need to tackle the imbalance by adapting the competences taught to young people by the education and training systems to match the requirements of the labour market.

Furthermore, in addition to the need to promote high-quality employment for young people, Solidarność mentioned the right to access to the social security system (including the right to decent unemployment sup-

port) and the implementation of measures to improve labour protection, beginning with an increase in labour inspections. In the interview, Solidarność also drew attention to housing issues and called for young people to be given independent access to housing. As a consequence of the economic crisis triggered by Covid-19, widespread difficulties have been observed among young people in Poland in bearing the costs of renting a flat and thus of achieving or maintaining economic independence from their family of origin.

Alongside institutional and state actors, Solidarność also assigns a crucial role to the social partners in promoting high-quality employment for young people. While acknowledging the interest of the Polish President in the matter, Solidarność also clarifies that the trade union and other organisations were consulted by a presidential advisor during the pandemic. The union calls for the social partners to promote social dialogue and collective bargaining at all levels and support the involvement of young people in the structures of individual organisations and their decision-making processes.

In Germany, the DGB reports, the social partnership has proved its worth in relation to training in the last pandemic year. The Alliance for Initial and Further Training, in which the federal government, state governments, trade unions and employers' associations have joined forces, agreed in May 2020 on measures to stabilise dual training so that apprentices can continue their training and take their examinations.

Lastly, NKOS made reference in the interview to the retraining courses offered by the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, which is also committed to granting subsidies to those employers who make the implementation of youth employment a priority.

8 THE ROLE OF SOCIAL DIALOGUE

Thanks to the strong support of the European Commission, which affirmed the central role of education and training policies in the new EU Sustainable Growth Strategy, vocational training has again become a focal point of the European area's socio-economic development in an action framework for the next decade. All the organisations interviewed accord the social partners an important role in the promotion of youth employment and recognise social dialogue as a concrete means of ensuring high-quality education and training for the young population.

In terms of the European framework, the DGB has particularly high hopes for the so-called "Osnabrück Declaration", which points out how important it is to be able to prevent the rise of youth unemployment and improve the quality of education and vocational training. The declaration is a document defining new vocational education and training (VET) policies for the period 2021–2025 that was adopted on 20 November 2020 by the EU member states' ministers responsible for VET, the European social partners and the European Commission. In the declaration, the ministers commit to contributing to the recovery of the labour market after the Covid 19 pandemic, developing the European education and training area through innovative education and training systems, and establishing adequate systems to support the digital and green transition, so as to improve employability and competitiveness and thus support economic growth.

In the interview, USO made reference first of all to the priority efforts of the most respected trade unions and employers' associations to redefine the framework for social dialogue – particularly at a national level – from a holistic perspective that incorporates and takes into account the contributions of the different production sectors and social and economic institutions. The aim in general is to establish a more transparent and open model of social dialogue with all those organisations that are able to contribute with proposals and initiatives to an improvement in the employability of young people.

NKOS also recognises that social dialogue plays a central role in devising measures to overcome the negative economic and social impact of the pandemic and in promoting employability.

Solidarność furthermore affirms the strategic significance of social dialogue in the service of young people's interests and stresses the importance of consultation regardless of the achievement of the goal and end result. Solidarność sees the value of consultation primarily in the opportunity both to increase information and awareness regarding a pressing social issue, such as that of youth employment and its quality, and to support the constructive involvement of institutions and relevant stakeholders. The establishment of the Youth Guarantee is regarded as a positive outcome of a fruitful social dialogue triggered by the 2007–2008 financial crisis.

Primarily, Solidarność ascribes social dialogue a diagnostic function with regard to the emergence and limitation of significant socio-economic problems. The initial diagnostic phase should, in the union's view, be followed by a constructive period that involves the young population and is aimed at developing and defining practical operational solutions. In the interview, Solidarność also pointed out that no space is given to this process in Poland. The problem of youth employment and opportunities for entry into the labour market is not a subject of public interest or debate. Instead, the topic is often exploited by politicians for election campaign purposes.

Lastly, as the DGB emphasised during the interview, Germany also reserves a crucial role for the social partners by giving them an active role in the design, implementation and regulation of the national training system.

The question of ensuring high-quality education and training is also the subject of demands made by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the DGB that advocate the implementation of the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA) in national legislation and at company level. In particular, the interview revealed the desire to establish minimum standards for training in Europe that include the existence of a training contract, the definition of learning goals, the

payment of apprentices for the hours of training completed both at vocational college and in the company, the right to social security and the right to career guidance.

9 POLITICAL PROPOSALS AIMED AT PROMOTING YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

- The economic and financial crisis of 2007–2008 sparked a growing awareness and willingness on the part of European governments, institutional decision-makers and stakeholders to invest both in formal, non-formal and informal learning and in strategies for the possible development of new competences, and to evaluate and validate these. Eventually, it made these issues the subject of concrete intervention measures. In the current situation, with the signs of the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic clearly apparent, it is all the more necessary to increase the visibility of and tap into the skills acquired by young people in the course of the training they have completed, so as to promote their use in the labour market and thus facilitate young people's geographical and job mobility. To realise its full potential as a contribution to economic recovery, non-formal learning must now be a priority goal and a challenge for the EU, national authorities and companies, and one to which all market actors can contribute in different ways.
- In line with the guidelines expressed by the European Community, more active and constructive involvement in the development and implementation of methods and instruments for the validation and certification of competences is desirable from all parties involved in the process, e.g. employers' associations, trade unions, chambers of commerce, industry and crafts, national offices involved in the recognition process for professional qualifications, employment services, youth associations, socio-educational professionals, education and training institutions and civil society organisations.
To support participation in this process, employers, trade unions, youth associations and civil society organisations can unite and coordinate their efforts so as to promote and facilitate the identification and certification of learning outcomes achieved in the workplace

or through voluntary activities, using appropriate instruments developed within the framework of Europass and Youthpass.

- To promote Community harmonisation with regard to the validation and certification of competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, greater use of the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning³⁶ by public institutions, the private and voluntary sectors and the social partners is desirable. This also applies to the validation instrument often used by employers' and trade union organisations in the context of the dual system, i.e. the alternating of school and work or apprentice training. It is an instrument developed by the European Commission and CEDEFOP that brings together and illustrates the different tools devised by European states for the recognition of formal and non-formal learning. What is more, the inventory makes it possible to identify the best practices of the member countries in this area, as well as the main actors involved in different ways and for different purposes.
- Education and training institutions should facilitate access to formal education and training on the basis of learning outcomes achieved in non-formal and informal settings and, where appropriate, recognise credits acquired in such settings under the European Credit Transfer System for relevant learning outcomes.
- Orientation for young people in the world of work needs to be re-evaluated in accordance with the Europe 2020 documents.³⁷ This effort to provide guidance must be seen both as a range of services for students and citizens in the broadest sense and as a policy capable of meeting the demand for resources, competences and professionalism on the part of companies. It is a strategy well suited to

36 The most recent version, updated for 2018, can be found at <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory> Also available at this address are the "Country Reports" dedicated to the countries relevant to this research (Denmark, Slovakia, Poland, Spain and Italy), which show the progress made in relation to the validation and certification of competences and also list the methods and means implemented to this end.

37 See, for example, European Commission, EUROPE 2020, *A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*, Brussels, 2010

the present time, which is characterised by the need not only to guarantee employment for young people coming out of training, but also to ensure that those who have left the labour market due to the pandemic are redirected into new leading industries. Particularly in light of the increasing individualisation and fragmentation of career paths, school and training institutions, training establishments and trade unions, third-sector bodies dedicated to study and career guidance and youth associations can envision and pursue a new understanding of this task that focuses on the individual and their interests and needs, while at the same time advancing the skills acquired.

- In the current pandemic situation, guidance should no longer be regarded in the traditional sense merely as a means to a successful transition between school, training and work, but should evolve to become an ongoing support in the life of every worker, providing specific services with the ultimate aim of promoting active employment, economic growth and social inclusion. With this in mind, the labour market actors involved in different ways in guidance work can implement the efforts of existing services by promoting autonomy and full responsibility in decision-making in the sphere of work and vocation, as well as resilience in dealing with transitions and changes – particularly among younger users. This process would thus facilitate the transition from a purely supportive rationale to a rationale of accompaniment and empowerment, until full capacity for autonomous decision-making and orientation is achieved. Such a service would therefore encompass both study and career guidance (with regard to both initial entry and re-entry into the market) and guidance aimed at developing (self-)orientation, the latter dimension becoming more and more necessary in a fast and constantly evolving world.
- Youth employment can also be promoted in both quantitative and qualitative terms through greater use of apprenticeship contracts and the various dual training methods more generally. As mentioned above, countries with robust dual training systems (Germany,

Austria and Switzerland) succeeded in curbing youth unemployment during the economic and financial crisis of 2007–2008. Thanks to the practical implementation of cross-venue learning processes, dual training is indeed a privileged method for developing the skills, knowledge and professionalism of young people while also meeting the production and innovation needs of companies. To support the implementation of dual training throughout the Community territory, greater co-operation is desirable between the actors responsible for it – such as trade unions and employers, training institutions and public authorities.

- The revitalisation of vocational training systems in Europe can be supported by the existing European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EaFA). This is a programme launched in 2013 with the aim of improving the quality and availability of vocational training in Europe and advancing a culture of vocational training that transcends the difficulties undermining its use. European-level social partners (such as the ETUC, BusinessEurope, UEAPME and CEEP), the European Commission, the Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the member states were involved. On the basis of the provisions of the Alliance, which is managed by the Commission but gives responsibility for the project to the member states and the stakeholders involved, the desire is to implement bilateral and national agreements and co-operative initiatives between the stakeholders managing the system at a national level. In this way, training system reforms can be supported and awareness of their benefits in terms of increased employability and employment can be raised.
- In line with the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union on “A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee”, published on 20 October 2020³⁸, support is expressed for the commitment of member states to develop national programmes that offer

38 The text of the Recommendation is available at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11320-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

young people up to the age of 29 a high-quality job opportunity, a training opportunity or an apprenticeship or internship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving the formal education system. In order to address the difficult youth employment situation during the Covid-19 pandemic, member states should work to increase the efficiency of the education and training system in their territory, also using the funds made available in the Next Generation EU plan.

With the above-mentioned strategic nature of these measures in mind, the new Youth Guarantee also envisages the provision of tailored guidance, orientation and mentoring services, which require synergetic co-operation between the public authorities, the institutions involved in the education and training of young people, the social partners and the business community. The new Youth Guarantee is also an opportunity to improve the quality of the training and internships offered to young people, which has been neglected repeatedly in recent years in some member states, for example Italy, with the training positions offered by the Youth Guarantee often coming to resemble poorly paid real jobs with little or no training content. It is thus hoped that the project sponsor will become more closely involved as a guarantor of both the quality of the training offered to each young person and the monitoring of the situation that emerges after its completion.

Finally, it is hoped that particular attention will be paid to the young population in the organisation of the individual national and local projects funded by the Next Generation EU plan, not so much from a purely welfare perspective, but by ensuring that young people can benefit from the investments made in digitalisation and ecological change. First and foremost, this means tapping their skills in this area by guaranteeing their right to training, while at the same time making efforts to improve the management of employment transitions, of which they are often more victims than beneficiaries.

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