

## YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN BULGARIA AND THE PATH FORWARD

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The article aims to identify the barriers before market inclusion for young people and the inertia of status while analysing the employers' need of workforce. It also points out some of the factors which influence the youth labour market in Bulgaria in the strongest way and see how they affect young people on the one hand.

**Methodology:** The study applies special approach and analyses the issue in two satellite contexts – state-of-the-art national environment and its strengths, parallel with individual specificities leading to readiness to enter the labour market and internal bindings. It includes descriptive research approach based on literature review. Statistical information from Eurostat and forecasts and analysis provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in Bulgaria were used to analyse the youth labour market in the country. Other analytical documents prepared by various experts' groups have been considered as well.

**Findings:** General factors predetermining the youth labour market are pointed out with special focus on the situation in Bulgaria. The analysis reflects not only the environment where young people start their professional life, but also the most common skills they need to improve in order to meet employers' expectations.

**Practical implications:** The paper might help different stakeholders bettering perspective on how youth labour market changes and how to support young people entering the workforce in a more effective way, removing part of the barriers.

**Originality/value:** The article outlines the main current barriers before young people entering the labour market in Bulgaria and general trends, influencing youth labour market domestically and in other European countries as well. The analysis takes into account the fast, dynamic and unexpected changes in overall economic situation and the need for the youth labour market to adapt to the requirements of digital economy.

**Keywords:** Youth unemployment; labour market; required skills; employers' needs

**JEL Codes:** J13, J24, J64

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## **Introduction**

Youth unemployment is becoming increasingly pressing issue at European, national and regional level. According to Dietrich and Möller (2016) it is menace for the stability of democratic societies in the medium and long run. Youth unemployment depends on numerous variables as business cycles, country specificities, as well as personal qualities of individuals and it is important to look at the problem in perspective. For example, Pastore (2018) believes that countries differ dramatically in the level and quality of preparation for work life they provide to young people. He claims that youth in Southern and Eastern Europe were one of the groups who suffered the most after the global financial crisis and unemployment among them was one of the worst in Europe. Many authors discuss the scarring effect of youth unemployment – whether the long-term effects are limited (Mroz, 2006) or more serious (Eurofound, 2018; Scarpetta, et. al. 2010).

That is why youth unemployment should be carefully investigated in order to understand the underlying reasons for it and realize what the best measures would include as more and more young people are attaining schools and universities, but the employment, income and participation rates for this group are lower and lower (Pastore, 2018). Moreover, the pandemic increases these risks and younger generations face harsher labour market conditions (Grzegorzcyk, Wolff, 2020).

The aim of the article is to identify the most exposed factors influencing youth unemployment in Bulgaria and outline common characteristics of the current situation of the labour market. To achieve this the work explores the barriers to employment for young people in Bulgaria and what are scopes of skills, which they should acquire in order to be adequately prepare for the labour market.

## **Methodology**

What differentiates this study is the special approach to analyse youth unemployment in Bulgaria in two satellite contexts – the recent national environment on the one hand, the readiness of young people to enter the labour market and their internal binding. The first part of the study includes descriptive research approach based on literature review of authors researching the topic. Aspects determining youth unemployment in Europe are synthesised, describing common trends.

To further understand the situation particularly in Bulgaria, the labour market in the country is investigated, based on statistical information from Eurostat and forecasts and analysis provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in the country. Other analytical documents prepared by various experts' groups have been considered as well.

As a following step, analysing secondary data was performed to outline the factors for young people who are related to their readiness to enter the labour market. The source of information are several studies researching the necessary skills for young people to be successful on the labour market. They are prepared by agency for social analyses and employers' association in Bulgaria. On the one hand they convey the reasons why youths have difficulties to enter the labour force, and on the other focus on the specific skills which should be improved. Survey on employers' needs additionally clarifies what needs to be built on in young people's preparation for employment.

General findings and conclusions for the labour market situation in Bulgaria, applicable to other European countries, with regard to youth's labour force are outlined.

### **Theoretical background - Determinants of youth unemployment**

Unemployment has costs to society – human resources are wasted and wellbeing is decreased.

Naturally, the overall economic situation in a country affects youth unemployment. Needless to say, when the gross domestic product (GDP) is higher, it is expected that this would lead to decrease in unemployment overall. However, the rate for youth would be influenced in a stronger way, because it is procyclical (Tomic, 2018, Hutengs and Stadtmann, 2014). Tomic (2018) also argues that the real GDP growth rate and the share of construction in gross value added (GVA) determines low youth unemployment, while the share of public debt in GDP is related to its high levels.

Other study also claim that the unemployment rate is more sensitive to business cycles (Dunsch, 2017). In addition, the European Commission (2013) states that under harsh economic conditions young people are presented with less work opportunities, often are employed under temporary contracts and are more easily dismissed as having less experience in a company. The figure below represents the complex processes and factors, which influence the labour market and its competitiveness.

The expenses related to unemployment benefits and less income from payroll taxes add to the economic challenges. For economies with accumulated debt, it is additional burden for providing better social conditions. Moreover, such countries might already lack investments in new industries and proper preparation for young people to enter the labour market (Cvecic, Sokoloc, 2018).

In addition, usually the larger part of temporarily employed workers are youths and have less employment protection compared to adults with regular permanent contracts and react more quickly to changes in the macro environment. According to Scarpetta, Sonnet and Manfredi (2010) this is the main reason why young people's employment is more sensitive to business cycles. A research by Ayllon and Ramos proves the concept using Okun's law. Their analysis

shows that young people, regardless of gender, are the one most affected by business cycles variations (Ayllon, Ramos, 2019).

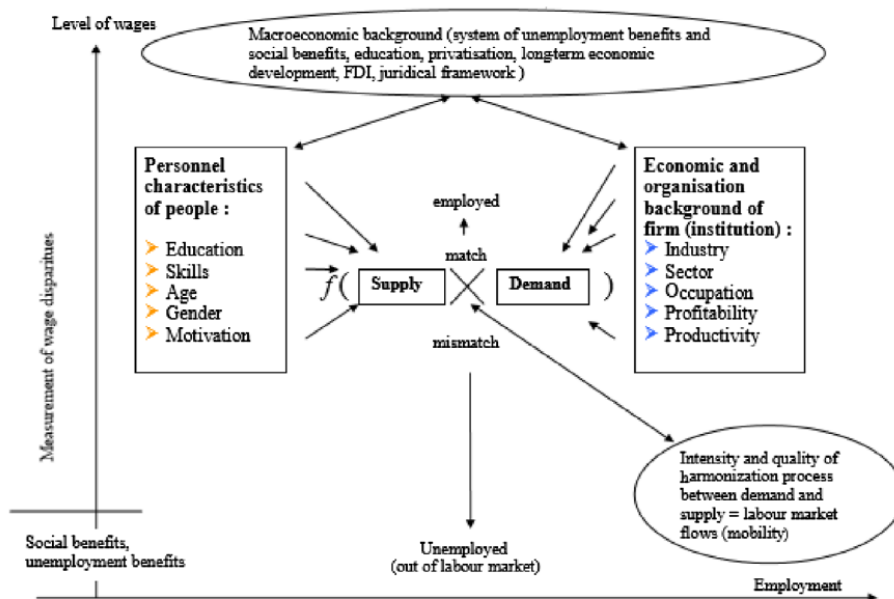
Scarpetta, Sonnet and Manfredi (2010) as well as other researchers (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Eichhorst, Hinte and Rinne, 2013) believe that there are several main factors determining youth unemployment – less work experience, incomplete education or one which do not prepare them for entering labour market, working under less stable contractual agreements, less contacts to benefit from during employment search and difficult transition largely due to skills mismatch. All of the above is considered as prerequisites for “scarring effect”. The German Institute for the Study of Labour defines this effect as “the negative long-term effect that unemployment has on future labour market possibilities in itself”, meaning that an unemployed individual is more likely to face negative aspects of the labour market, compared to the same individual, who has not experienced unemployment (Nielsen, Reiso, 2011). Such circumstances are negative not only for the individual, but for society as a whole, they may lead to less investments in education and training, less tax revenues and “brain drain”, when capable young people leave the country to seek work opportunities abroad. These factors turn youth unemployment in one of the most serious problems in Europe (Ayllon, Ramos, 2019). The situation is even worsened by the pandemic. The crisis highlights the need of urgent measures against unemployment and especially youth unemployment as young women were one of the most likely groups to lose their job and the least likely to have permanent contracts (Eurofound, 2020).

An important point to take in consideration is that youth unemployment is linked with migration within the EU and usually young people are driven to immigrate in countries with increasing GDP per capita (Franc, S. et al., 2019). The research shows that the emigration rate responses quickly to changes in GDP, which means that youngsters would be among the first to emigrate in order to find a better job. Typically, countries in Southeast Europe, including Bulgaria, show steady high levels of emigration of youths and brain drain (Gjorgjievska, 2020).

The last EC review shows decreasing unemployment for young people (15-24) - September 2020 compared to September 2019 with 2.1%, while for the age group (24-54) – 1.2% according to Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

The behaviour of young people entering the labour market is affected by all types of components of macroeconomic background, including the system of unemployment and social benefits, which may have serious impact on their decisions to be part of the work force or not to. The other important aspect for realization on the labour market are the personal characteristics of young people. Apart from the education and motivation, the skills the individual possesses are also becoming more important and determinant for their career. Inadequate workers’ skills are seen as one of the causes of unemployment.

Figure no. 1 Processes and factors influencing the labour market competitiveness



Source: Filipova, L., Gottvald, J., Simek, M., 2005

At the same time there are much more determinants of youth unemployment than economic factors. O'Reilly et al. (2015) discusses the difference between the current phase of youth unemployment compared to earlier periods. The authors identify several main factors as most significant in determining youth unemployment:

- labour market flexibility, due to temporary and part time work, which leads to less stable employment for young people.
- skills mismatch, as the education and skills level of an individual do not meet the requirements of companies.
- youth migration within the EU, which has increased and while it may have positive effects at macro/European level leading to lower unemployment rate, at the same time it could come at a high price for the individuals with very short and temporary contracts.
- family legacies, as children of long-term unemployed parents are more likely to have the same experience.
- higher priority received at EU level.

Current situation shows that unpredictable events, like Covid-19 pandemic, aggravates the whole environment in respect of youth unemployment level and labour market as a whole.

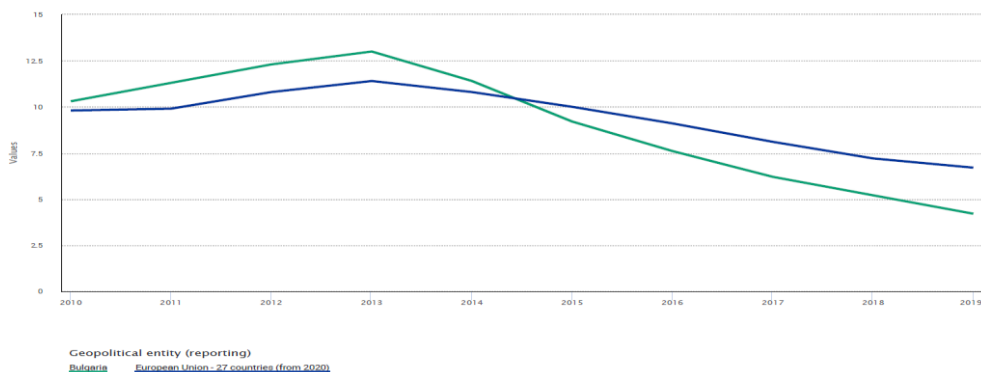
## Labour market in Bulgaria

Various institutions in Bulgaria are dealing with stimulation and protect youth with a little experience to tackle the labour market realization. They are working as well on the introduction of measures and the implementation of projects that will contribute to overcoming them. One of the areas in which special efforts are envisaged are the youth organizations and formations. This emphasizes the capacity and opportunities of young people, and their willingness to be involved and involved in the field of youth work.

At national level, youth unemployment policies and the career opportunities of young people are implemented through specially designed measures and interventions managed by The Ministry of youth and sports, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (through the Employment Agency), The Ministry of Education and Science, and other institutions, such as the Ministry of Health, the Agency for Social Assistance, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, which also have some responsibilities in formulating and implementing policies.

General trend of unemployment until 2019 is to slowly decrease. For Bulgaria this percentage is even lower than the average for the European Union since 2015.

*Figure no. 2 Total unemployment rate as percentage of the population*

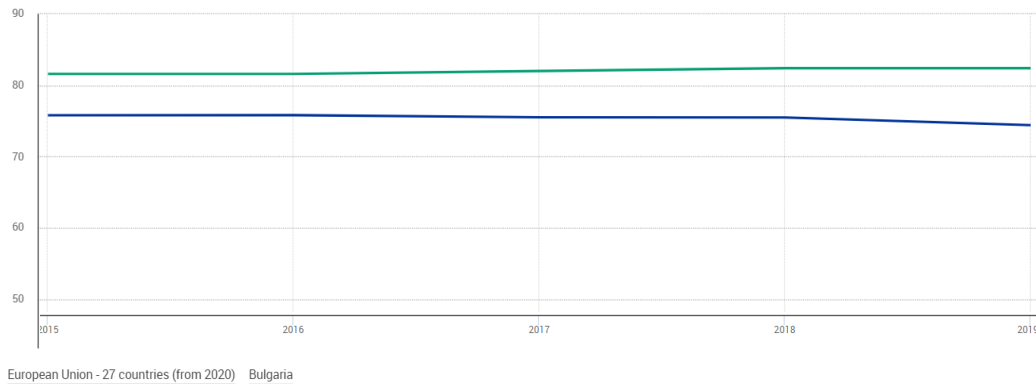


Source: Eurostat

At the same time the unemployment trap upholds high values. The unemployment trap shows what the financial incentives are for an unemployed person who provides unemployment benefits to start working again (National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria). The higher the unemployment trap rate, the lower the unemployment incentive for starting work. It is seen that this rate for Bulgaria was and continues to be considerably higher than the average for the EU. Moreover, while for the EU this level drops a bit during the last years, for Bulgaria they have slightly increased. In 2019, the unemployment trap for Bulgaria was 82.4. This means that if the only unemployed person returns to employment, his net income will increase by only 17.6% compared to what was promised, without assessing additional costs and efforts, refer to the work itself. Despite the fact that the period in which the benefit is received in Bulgaria is limited,

a high level of unemployment capacity does not stimulate job demand and the trend since 2009 there is a sharp increase and the rate stays high (NSI Bulgaria).

Figure no. 3 Unemployment trap

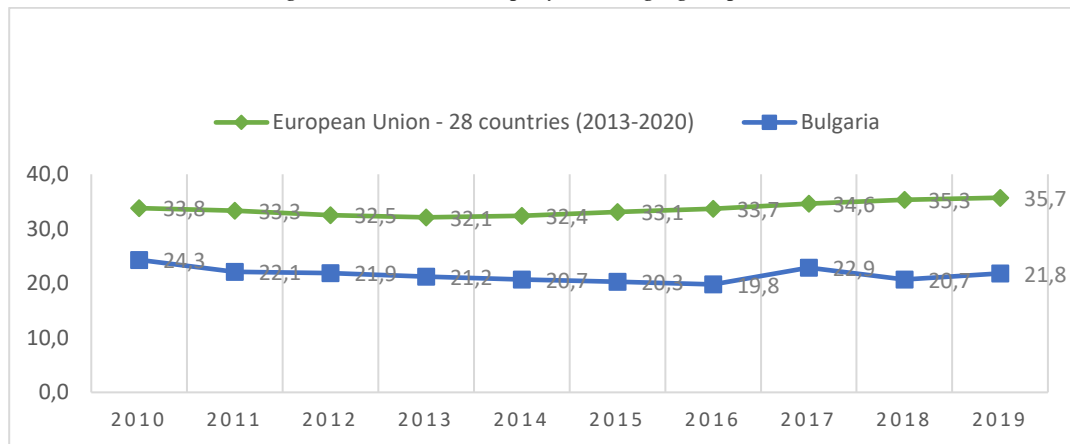


Source: Eurostat

The employment rate of persons aged 15-24 in 2019 is 21.8%. In the period 2010-2016 there is a decrease in the employment rate of this age group. The employment rate reaches the highest value in 2017 – 22.9%.

Bulgaria has lower employment rate of young people in the age group 15-24 compared to EU as seen on the figure below.

Figure no. 4 Youth employment, age group 15-24



Source: Eurostat

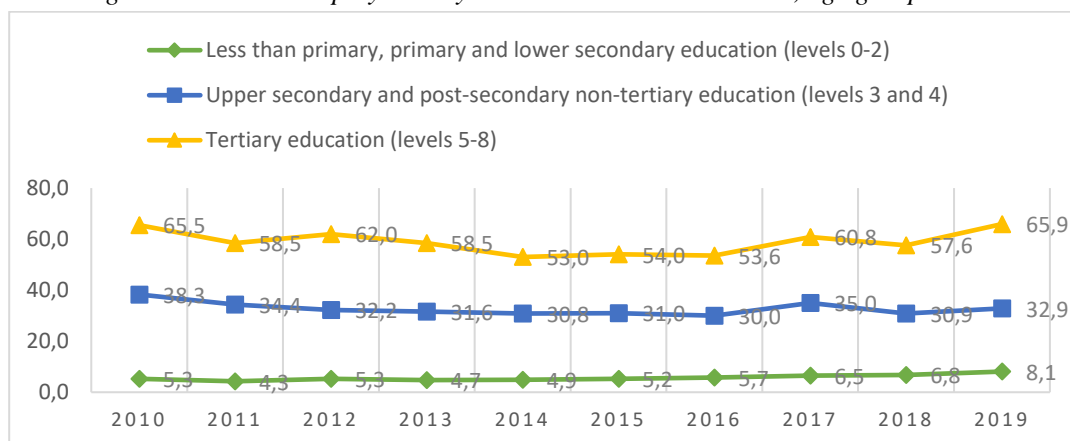
It's evident that Bulgaria is behind EU trends. The gap of nearly 14 points requires a lot of actions at national level in this direction. The Bulgarian trend of youth employment is

relatively flat. An exception is seen in 2020 when during the pandemic the youth unemployment drastically increased (8 %, NSI Bulgaria).

Young people in the age group 15-24 with tertiary education have the highest employment rate. In 2019 the employment rate in this group is 65.9%. Although there are some periods of decrease in the employment rate of this group, in 2019 it has almost the same value as in 2010. The high share of the employed in this group can be explained by the fact that the longer time spent in education develops more the qualities and skills of young people, which in turn allows them to make a smoother transition to employment (Center for Research and Analysis, 2020).

The data for youth unemployment by educational attainment level shows that the young people with less than primary, primary and lower secondary education are the most vulnerable group.

Figure no. 5 Youth employment by educational attainment level, age group 15-24



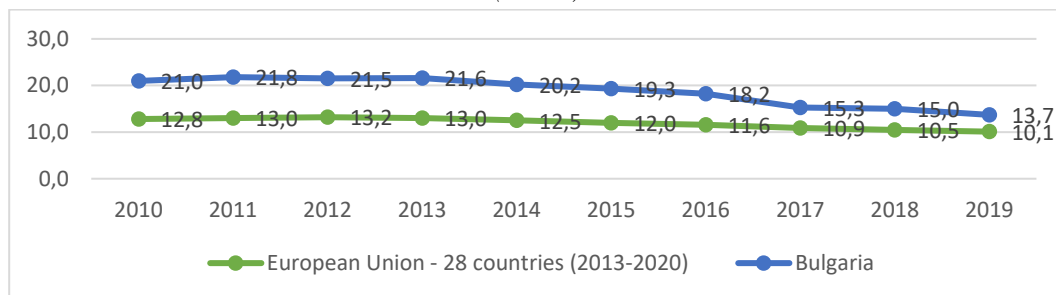
Source: Eurostat

Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEETs) are defined as young people who do not work, do not participate in the formal education system, and are not included in training. This definition includes: unemployed persons not participating in any education and training, as well as inactive persons not participating in education and training.

These people experience the so-called voluntary unemployment and might also be affected by the unemployment trap. After 2013 there is decrease in the share of young people in Bulgaria neither in employment nor in education and training. The share of NEETs aged 15-24 in 2019 is 13.7%, which is 7.3 p.p. lower compared to 2010. Despite the positive trend in the long run these share for Bulgaria is considerably higher than the average for the EU.



Figure no. 6: Young people aged 15-24 neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET)

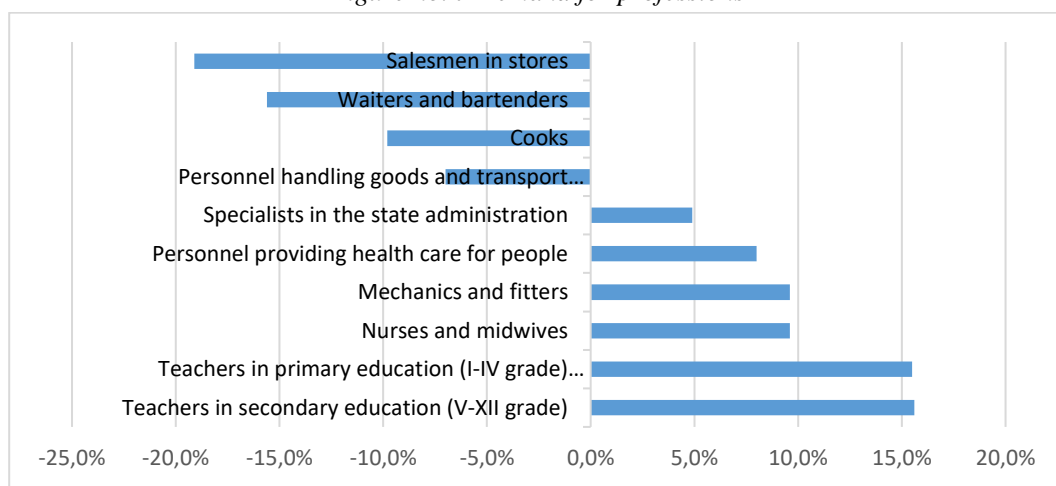


Source: Eurostat

Global trends in the supply and demand of labour by profession in the coming years will be strongly influenced by the development of new technologies that will gradually displace the human factor from activities characterized by routine and repeatability. At the same time, this will increasingly require lifelong learning as a prerequisite for successful employment and requirement for the workforce of the next decade. The trends on the labour market in Bulgaria, however, are determined by the economic development of the economy in recent decades, which is characterized by continuing technological backwardness compared to developed countries and other EU member states. Therefore, over the forecast horizon, despite the accepted assumption of convergence, the impact of new technologies and digitalisation on the occupations in demand in the labour market will be somewhat limited (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2019).

Below the relative change in demand for different professions is presented.

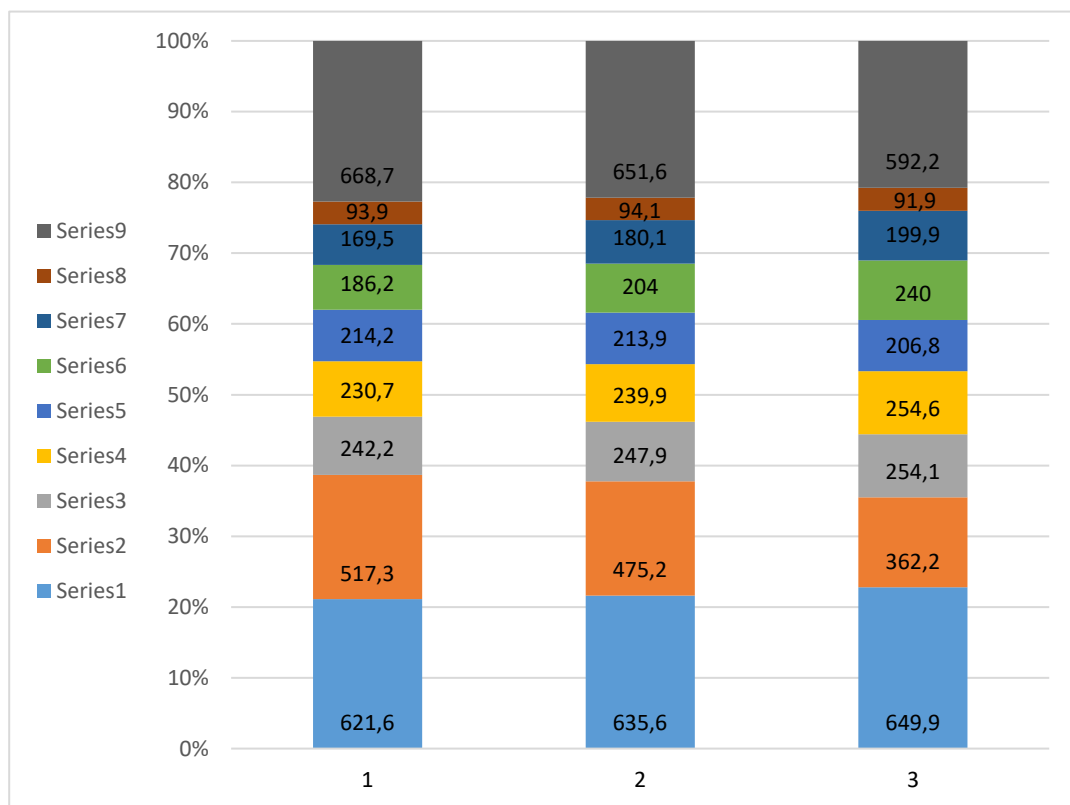
Figure no. 7 Demand for professions



Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2019

The long-term forecast prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2019) states the following change in employment by economic sectors for the period between 2020 - 2034.

Figure no. 8 Employment by economic sectors for the period between 2020 -2034



Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2019

The consequences of the pandemic should be also taken in consideration in relation to the prognosis although the forecast is for the long term and it is not clear whether the disruption of the labour market during the Covid-19 crisis will have lasting effect. In the short-term employees whose professions require travel and direct contact will experience the effects of the pandemic most severely. Sectors where such effects will be evident are tourism and catering, transport, entertainment, childcare, mass event organizers and many other professions (Innovative Sofia, 2020).

## **Barriers before labour market inclusion**

In order to analyse youth unemployment in depth, the perspective of employers and what they expect from young people as well as their level of preparation when entering the labour market are considered. Taking into account the key trends in the labour market participation of young people up to 24 years of age, a thorough research amongst Bulgarian employers was conducted (Global metrics, 2020). The survey was conducted among employers and companies for human resources. In the course of the survey, employers were asked to assess/rate, on the one hand, certain qualities/ skills of the workforce / candidates and, on the other hand, to indicate to what extent each of these qualities/ skills is important to them. The qualities/ skills assessed by the employers are divided into three categories: preparation for work, basic professional skills and soft skills.

When it comes to preparation for work the five most important skills for employers are ability to master knowledge and skills, work discipline / work habits, practical preparation of the workforce, preliminary preparation for the work tasks and ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice.

The following factors, which adversely affect the ability of young people to enter the labour market, were identified.

- *Lack of experience*

The first cause of unemployment that can be identified is lack of experience. It is often related to lack of established work habits and basic professional skills, which can result in inability to perform everyday work tasks.

- *Lack of qualifications*

Lack of specific qualifications needed by employers is another obstacle that young people can face in their transition from education to employment. Many job positions require specific qualification on the part of the employees, which are crucial in performing everyday work tasks. Employers may not be willing to hire young people without experience or qualifications because it will mean that they will have to devote certain time and resources to train them.

- *Educational attainment level*

One of the main factors that influence the realization of young people in the labour market is the degree of education completed. In 2019 only 8.1% of young people with less than primary, primary and lower secondary education aged 15-24 are employed. At the same time, the share of unemployed young people in this group is highest - 15.7%. In 2019, the percentage of NEETs for young people aged 15-29 is 16.7% among people with low educational attainment. These data indicate a greater vulnerability of young people with lower education.

When talking about the impact of education on the transition of young people to the labour market is important to point out that the different types of secondary education may have different outcomes. Young people who have completed secondary general education (without continuing to higher education) can be in more vulnerable position compared to those who have completed secondary vocational education. Unlike students enrolled in vocational programs who receive training in specific professions, secondary general school graduates are less preferred by employers, precisely because of the lack of more specific specialization and professional skills.

- *Lack of information about vacancies*

Having information about various opportunities for employment is of crucial importance. Some young people may not be able to access such information (either of lack of necessary skills to look for such opportunities online or because of lack of knowledge about where to search for such information), while others may simply refuse to do so.

- *Unrealistic expectations*

Some young people can have unrealistic expectations regarding their employment opportunities after graduation. These unrealistic expectations can be concerning the job position or the remuneration. Often after graduating young people would want to start working at higher positions and with higher salaries, thus they are prone to refusing jobs they think are not “suitable” or “good enough” for them.

- *Constrained opportunities due to location*

Another factor that can influence the realization of young people in the labour market is the place of living - urban or rural areas. People living in villages or remote areas are more vulnerable in the labour market than people living in larger cities. The main reason for this is the lack or limited choice of job opportunities in villages and remote areas.

- *Constrained opportunities due to disability*

Young people with disabilities may also be in a less privileged position in the labour market than other young people. One of the obstacles to including this group in the labour market is the lack of an environment tailored to their needs. Another obstacle can be employers' attitudes towards hiring people with disabilities.

- *Discrimination due to ethnicity*

Young people from marginalized groups (e.g. minorities) are also one of the more vulnerable groups in the labour market. The main obstacle to this group is the prejudices and attitudes of the general public (including employers) towards them.

- *Overall state of economy*

The overall state of economy and lack of demand/vacancies can have serious impact on youth unemployment. All of the above-mentioned circumstances make young people

one of the most vulnerable groups on the labour market. If the economy is in bad state employers may not be willing to hire young people but rather more experienced ones.

### **Required skills of young people for sustainable employment opportunities considering innovation and digital society, review on gap of policies and capacity building of youth organizations**

Having the necessary skills and qualities is of crucial importance for smooth transition from education into labour market and sustainable employment. With the spread of internet and information and communication technologies, there are changes in the work tasks and the specific skills required by the labour market.

The topic of the new skills needed in the digital society is has been studied by different organizations.

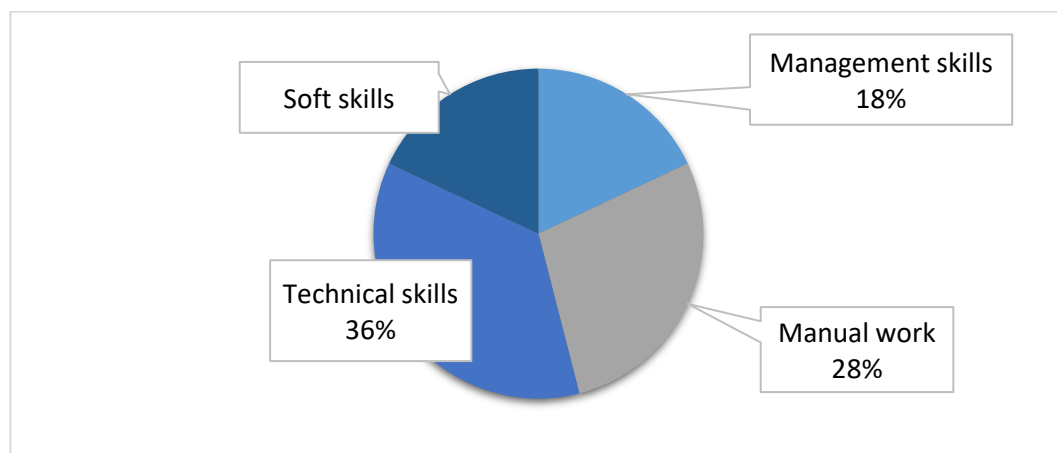
In their report “How to develop the skills of 21st century in class?”, Teach for Bulgaria presents 13 skills that should be developed in the school curriculum and that can help students achieve better results both in school and later on in life (reading, mathematic, scientific, digital and financial literacy; personal skills; critical thinking; communication activities, etc.)

Part of the skills discussed in this article are related to a survey among employers conducted in 2019. One of the purposes of this survey is to evaluate which of the skills are important for the employers and how do they assess this skill in the workforce (Global Research, 2020).

### **Employers’ needs of workforce**

Other studies have also looked at the basic skills which employers seek.

*Figure no. 9 Basic skills, required by employers*

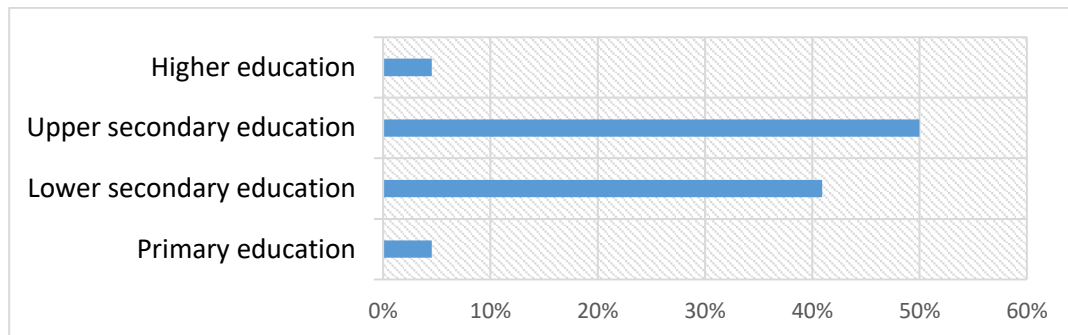


Source: CATRO Bulgaria, 2018

As it is visible from the figure in greatest demanded is the personnel with technical skill. Management and soft skills could be seen as additive.

The same research shows the minimum education level, required by the employers.

Figure no. 10 Minimum education level, required by employers

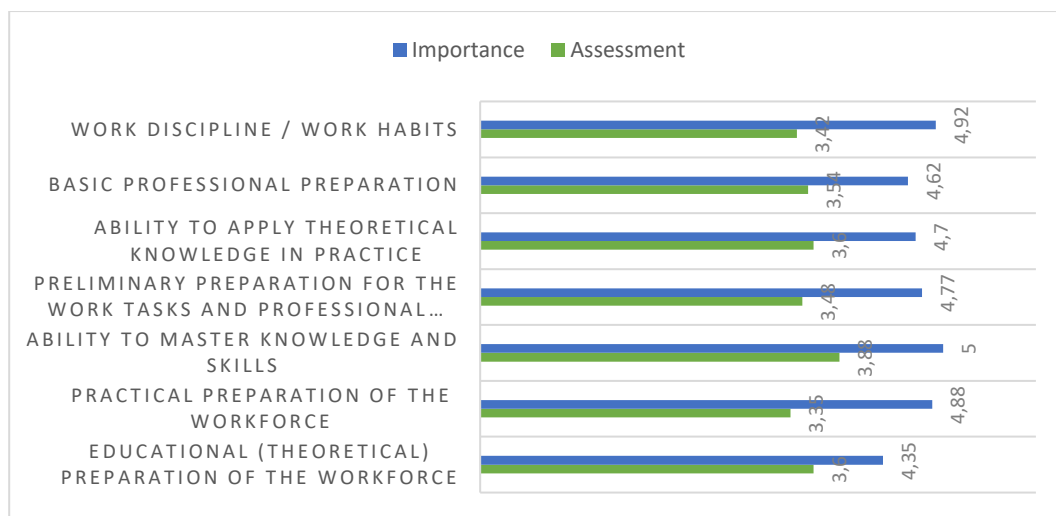


Source: CATRO Bulgaria, 2018

The demand for personnel with secondary and/or vocational secondary education is highest. This trend is consistently visible in employers' research as well as in the forecasts of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

The expectations of employers from labour force towards the knowledge and skills of employees are represented below. The figure shows the importance of certain competences versus their average assessment in the employees.

Figure no. 11 Employers' expectations



Source: CRA, 2020

## **Discussion**

The study conveys that the factors influencing European labour market impact the Bulgarian as well. In some cases, they are more exposed. Youth unemployment was and continues to be a serious challenge before national and European economies. It is key to analyse the issue in perspective. On the one hand youth labour market in Bulgaria, and other European countries, is subjected to international trends and is interrelated with the local economic development. On the other hand, it also reflects the skills and readiness of youths starting their professional life.

In Bulgaria fewer young people are employed compared to the average of the EU. Although there is a positive trend and less youngsters are neither in employment nor in education during the last several years, and despite targeted measures undertaken by government, their percentage is still higher than the mean level for the EU.

Besides the restricted migration and the overall economic state of the country, an issue for young people is the skill mismatch between what employers expect and how they are prepared. Barrier are related to lack of qualifications; also, less educated youths find jobs more difficultly and often youngsters fail to obtain a job due to unrealistic expectations.

What young people should pay attention to so as to improve their competitiveness at the labour market has to do with technical and manual skills, as well as soft skills. In addition, employers expect them to have better professional preparation, both in terms of practical habits and ability to acquire and apply knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are several main points which stand out significantly important in relation to labour market and youth unemployment. Bulgaria is a typical representative of East European countries. The insights into which are the most influential factors to youth labour market would be very much alike for some of its neighbouring countries. Moreover, there are few big trends typical for whole Europe, namely the decreased youth and labour migration due to Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the expectation that most states will suffer economic crisis, which inevitably would have impact on the most vulnerable to unemployment group – the youths. That is why the following points which stand out significantly important in relation to labour market and youth unemployment in Bulgaria, could be applicable in other European countries:

- Dynamic labour market. Two main periods may be outlined in recent decades – one until 2009, when the unemployment rates raised, especially youth unemployment, and until 2020. We are at a moment where it is not possible to foresee what would be the future

dynamics of labour market because of the uncertainty due to pandemics and transformation of economic sectors as the intensity of the economic effects highly depend on the individual country (Fana et al, 2020). There are some expectations about raising of overall productivity in labour market, but for some countries Poland, Estonia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Denmark the intensity is higher (EC COM, 2020).

- The problem with youth unemployment is a serious issue in Europe and Bulgaria and most probably would aggravate. In addition, the pandemic is significantly impacting youth in three main directions: difficulties to enter the labour market or find a new job; disturbance of education, training and work-learning; economic effects and income losses (Lee et al., 2020).

- Until now the migration processes have had a positive influence balancing the labour market (O'Reilly et al, 2015). However, at the moment this becomes extremely difficult and migration is being minimized to an absolute minimum due to the COVID 19 situation setting trends for further periods.

- In terms of demand for labour and requirements of the employers an accent should be put on people with secondary and/or vocational secondary education, with focus on soft skills.

- During the last year it became evident that a new approach towards education and training is vital in order to address the needs of national labour markets. The sound impetus should be put upon digital transforming processes.

Similar trends are typical for all countries in Europe. Strong economic sectors would probably have to re-evaluate their development and this will require a change on the labour market, especially for young people.

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