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Modelling of Social Policy and Initiatives under COVID-19: Rural NEET Youth Case Study

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Abstract: NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth rates in Europe are generally higher in rural regions than in urban areas and the share in rural regions is constantly increasing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, young people became even more vulnerable as they experienced social exclusion and mental health problems. The objective of this paper is to analyse NEET youth-related statistics in Europe and distinguish positive initiatives for young people in rural areas of the Baltic countries to encourage positive emotions and willingness to learn. Statistical analysis and case study methods were employed. Data on youth unemployment, NEET youth by age and gender, and poverty and social exclusion of young people, is analysed. Social policy initiatives in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, mainly from rural municipalities, are presented and discussed. This research determines the key issues related to NEET youth and proposes initiatives to overcome existing problems among young people. Such social initiatives aim to promote positive social emotions of youth, promote their inclusion in society, and foster regional sustainability.

Keywords: NEET youth; unemployment; COVID-19 pandemic; emotions; mental health



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1. Introduction

Countries worldwide have undergone unprecedented change due to the COVID-19 pandemic that is likely to have far-reaching, long-term negative impacts on youth. For many young people, their learning and social lives have been severely disrupted.

The COVID-19 crisis affected education in various ways, depending on students' socio-economic background, age, school type, language of instruction, as well as other factors. However, the pandemic has not necessarily created new inequalities but has undoubtedly made existing ones more recognizable (Sahlberg 2020). The closure of schools affected 1.5 billion students globally (UNESCO 2020) and raised an important issue—how vulnerable youth groups are socially, educationally, and emotionally impacted, and how their vulnerability affects the social and economic sustainability of a country or region.

Social and economic conditions in which students live and learn are social determinants of health, including mental health, and educational disadvantage. Young people who have been exposed to greater disadvantages are more vulnerable than their peers. Social vulnerability relates to the resilience of communities when faced with adverse events, such as the complex and unprecedented effects of the COVID-19 outbreak (Drane et al. 2020).

Access to resources is the critical factor driving educational inequalities and was a prominent issue during the time of lockdown. School closures increased inequality, as underperforming students were particularly affected by the lack of family support.

Previous studies show teachers' inability to meet students' individual needs, as teachers were unable to engage vulnerable student groups in the learning process (Mägi 2021). This may cause a young person's further exclusion from social life and an inability or unwillingness to further their learning and find a job. Such exclusion, in turn, can lead to a country or region's loss of social and economic sustainability. However, excellent examples exist in which national organizations and associations employed portals and platforms to communicate with and support young people.

In this context, NEET youth is an even more vulnerable group that requires proper attention. Rural NEET youth with limited mobility and lack of qualifications face particularly challenging issues compared to urban youth. The current NEET youth situation requires clarification, and positive initiatives should be presented and discussed in order to utilize countries' best practices. Thus, the research undertaken in this paper aims to fill the gap. The objective of this paper is to analyse NEET youth-related statistics in Europe and distinguish positive initiatives for young people in rural areas of the Baltic countries that will encourage their positive emotions and willingness to learn.

1.1. NEET Youth Peculiarities

The acronym NEET was coined in the United Kingdom towards the end of the last century. The term was formally introduced in 1999 (Mascherini 2019) in response to the fact that existing UK legislation did not describe unemployment for young people aged 16–18. The widespread use of the NEET category began in 2010 when the European Union adopted the NEET rate as a benchmark indicator of the younger generation's condition. Currently, NEET youth refers to a diverse group encompassing youths aged 15–34 who are unemployed or inactive for four or more weeks (Eurostat Glossary 2020).

In 2020, the proportion of NEETs in the EU was relatively high in rural regions (18.8%) and towns and suburbs (18.9%) compared to cities (16.0%). These numbers are higher than the rates in 2018. Disparities showing higher NEET rates in rural areas were evident in 16 EU Member States. In eastern and northern Member States, the lowest NEET rates were recorded in cities. On the other hand, in Belgium, Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, youth living in cities experienced a higher NEET rate (Statistics on Young People Neither in Employment Nor in Education or Training 2021).

The main drivers of NEET status in rural areas are more fully captured in interactions with two key individual factors: gender and age. In Europe, women are 62% more likely than men to become NEET (Mascherini 2019), especially in eastern and southern countries that have sub-protective institutional support systems (Schoon and Heckhausen 2019). Compared to women in more affluent city regions, female NEETs in rural areas are often dedicated to family duties, so they have a higher chance of falling into the subgroup of those unavailable to work due to family responsibilities. Furthermore, women in rural areas struggle with fewer employment opportunities (Leibert and Wiest 2016).

Thus, analysing the situation of rural NEETs and offering them opportunities is of great importance. Since they are mainly from smaller municipalities and districts, the case studies presented in this paper adequately represent possible opportunities for rural NEET youth.

1.2. Social Emotions of Young People

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused great harm to the lives of many people all over the world, including young people. This harm has manifested in declining mental health and psychological conditions (Kumar and Nayar 2020). Various common activities were disrupted, resulting in a negative impact on young people. NEET youth appear to be especially vulnerable because they did not have a stable social position before the pandemic crisis. Youth programs are one of the primary ways to promote a positive youth experience and, in turn, develop healthy and motivated young people who can contribute to society and increase a country's sustainability. The COVID-19 outbreak raises the question of how to retain forms of youth education, social activity, and leisure during times of crisis.

Scientists globally have provided examples of best practices, presenting innovative ways to motivate youth, include them in various activities, and promote their skill-building and leadership during the pandemic (Ettekal and Agans 2020). Such examples include:

- E-mentoring platform, and resources for mentors engaging virtually with youth;
- Students connecting with youth through social media;
- Virtual music classes;
- Virtual youth program involving group creation of a documentary play;
- Sewing masks to help keep people in communities safe;
- Highlighting the efforts of youth leaders around the world on social media;
- Developing a campaign to raise awareness of youth mental health during the pandemic;
- Empowering young people to take a stand against COVID-19;
- Young Futurists 2020 award.

These proposed initiatives have already been successfully implemented and can be further broadened. Particular examples of the Baltic countries' initiatives are analysed in the Results and Discussion section in the form of case studies.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Statistical Analysis of NEET Youth Situation

A short statistical analysis is required to make clear the NEET youth situation. The consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown on youth unemployment in the EU are quite dramatic and pessimistic. According to the estimations of [Tamesberger and Bacher \(2020\)](#), youth unemployment in 2021 will increase from 2.8 to 4.8 million because of the pandemic. The youth unemployment rate will increase to 26%, meaning that one in every four young people is unable to work ([Tamesberger and Bacher 2020](#)). As [Figure 1](#) shows, youth in Greece, Spain, and Italy are in a particularly vulnerable position. The Baltic countries remain in an average position, while Germany, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands have the lowest youth unemployment rates.

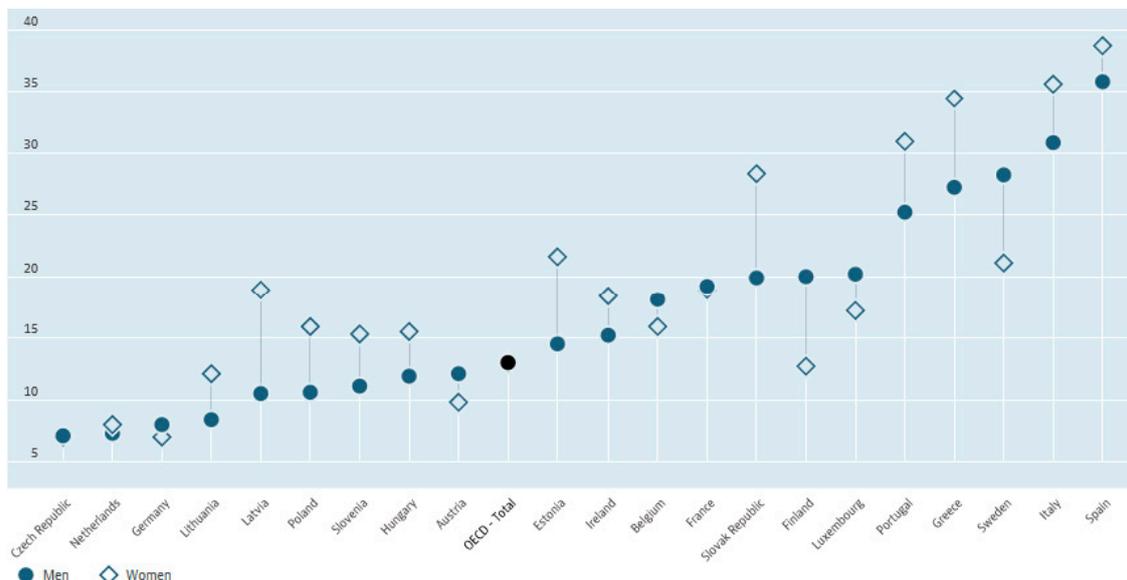


Figure 1. Youth unemployment rate 2021 by country in %. Source: [OECD \(2021a\)](#).

[Tamesberger and Bacher \(2020\)](#) have also made calculations on the share of NEETs. They forecast that the NEET rate in Europe will be historically high, ranging between 14% (optimistic scenario) and 15.2% (pessimistic scenario). According to the OECD, gender differences also occurred in 2019: in the Czech Republic, Poland, Portugal, and Hungary, the most vulnerable group among NEETs is young women aged 20–24. On the other hand,

in Latvia and Belgium, the most vulnerable target group is young men aged 20–24. In Lithuania, Denmark, Greece, Spain, and Italy, NEET youth is composed of an almost equal number of men and women aged 20–24 (Figure 2).

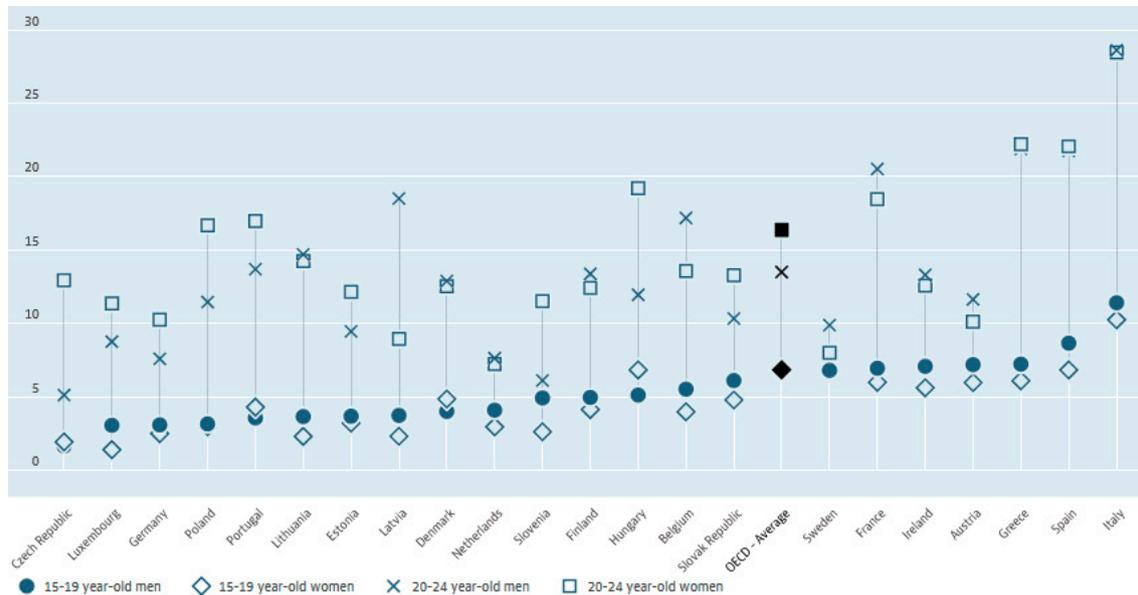


Figure 2. Youth not in employment, education, or training in 2019 by age group and gender. Source: OECD (2021a).

Poverty rates for NEETs are much higher than for non-NEET youth, and compared to youth in urban areas, rural NEETs face significant disadvantages in terms of access to second chances, apprenticeship, and mentoring programmes. All of the above statistics must be considered at the national and international level so that efforts can be made to avoid these negative scenarios.

Besides poverty, social exclusion is also a relevant issue pertaining to the emotional health of NEET youth. For this reason, Eurostat data is presented regarding youth aged 16–24 who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2019 (Figure 3).

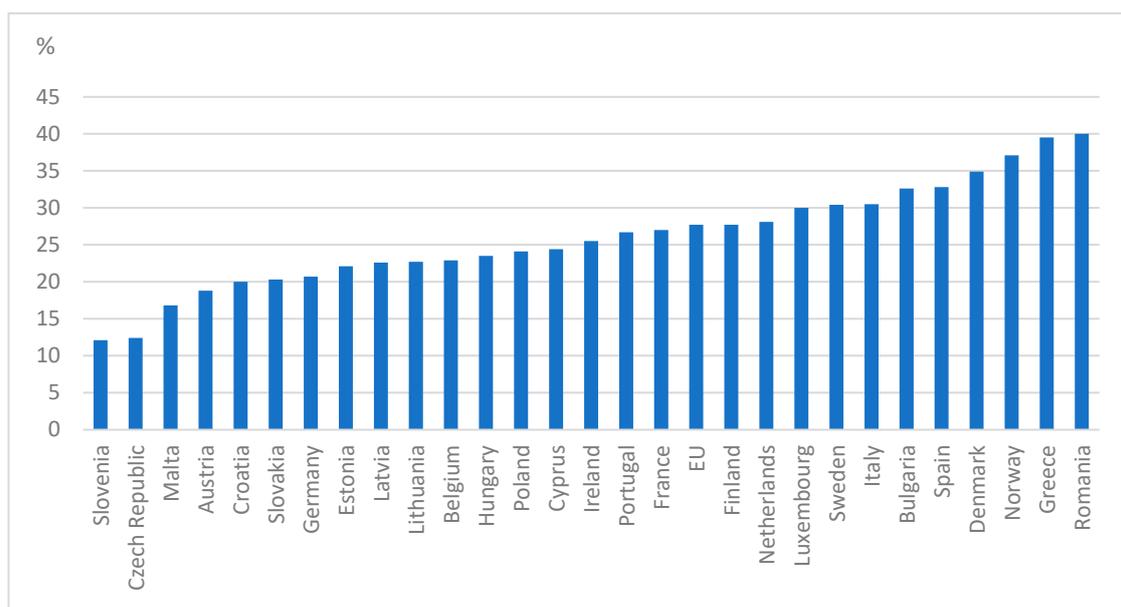


Figure 3. People at risk of poverty or social exclusion, aged 16–24, 2019. Source: Eurostat (2021).

As we can see from Figure 3, youth in Slovenia and the Czech Republic experienced the least poverty and social exclusion. Scandinavian countries, such as Denmark and Norway, as well as Greece and Romania, showed the most significant share of socially excluded youth. The EU average was 27.7%.

Specifically in the Baltic countries, NEET rates in almost all age groups were lower than the OECD average, with the exception of Latvian men aged 20–24. We can observe great gender differences in Latvian NEET statistics, while in Lithuania statistics on men and women were almost the same. Countries such as the Czech Republic, Luxembourg, and Germany generally had lower indicators than the Baltic states.

The three Baltic countries—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—are neighbours with similar historical backgrounds. Currently, there is insufficient research on NEET youth in the Baltic countries. Uncovering the situation and tendencies of NEETs in the Baltic region and learning from the experiences of other European countries is crucial. By comparing initiatives, best practice ideas can be determined to help develop national strategies and plans for combating high NEET rates.

2.2. The Case Study Methodology

The term ‘case study’ can sometimes be unclear because it is used in multiple ways. It can be perceived as a methodology, which means a system of frameworks used to design a study or the methods used to conduct a study. Case study can also refer to a type of academic paper that usually describes a problem, event, or situation (Salmons 2021). In addition, a case study can be an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life conditions, especially when the boundaries between the object of study and the context are not clear enough (Ebneyamini and Moghadam 2018).

Case study is also described as a method that employs particular approaches in order to collect and analyse data. The case study method is usually attributed to a group of qualitative research methods (Rashid et al. 2019). However, in recent research the case study method is often complemented with statistical techniques that increase the reliability of qualitative case studies (Çakar and Aykol 2021).

The case study method is applied by researchers when the main research questions are ‘How?’ and ‘Why?’ (Yin 2014). Additionally, the method is useful when the research concentrates on a contemporary situation or problem (Patnaik and Pandey 2019). The research performed using this method includes a detailed contextual analysis of certain events or situations and also determines their interrelationships. Case studies are also utilized to investigate underexplored topics with little empirical evidence (Çakar and Aykol 2021).

Case studies can be combined with other methods from various fields of science, such as ethnography, grounded theory, or phenomenology. Case study research is conducted in many social science disciplines, such as business, economics, psychology, sociology, public administration, or law and policy, as well as in practice-oriented fields like environmental studies, social work, or education (He et al. 2014; Montes-Rodriguez et al. 2019). The case study method can also be applied in health studies: a case of one or more patients provides valuable insights and can illustrate broader lessons to be learned (Crowe et al. 2011). Overall, case study research relying on multiple sources is a good tool for researchers conducting interdisciplinary studies (Salmons 2021).

The case study method enables a researcher to more closely examine data within a specific context—in our case, NEET youth in the Baltic countries. The method is a rational way to investigate trends of NEETs in one geographical region. Moreover, it is appropriate for analysing a small geographical area like the Baltic countries. Finally, the case study method usually investigates contemporary real-life phenomenon, and the NEET youth topic is an acute and contemporary phenomenon worthy of detailed analysis. For these reasons, we selected case study as the method for our research.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Overview of the Situation in the Baltic Countries

As previously discussed, COVID-19 generally had a negative impact on NEET youth statistics in Europe and in the Baltic states. During the 2019–2020 period, the NEET proportion in Europe increased from 12.6% to 13.7% in the 15–29 age group. In the Baltic countries, the proportions of NEETs in this group were slightly lower. The statistics for Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. NEET youth statistics in the Baltic countries, 2019–2020. Source: Eurostat (2021).

		2019							
		Total			Men			Women	
Age	15–29	15–24	25–29	15–29	15–24	25–29	15–29	15–24	25–29
Lithuania	10.9	8.6	15.1	10.9	9.7	12.9	11.0	7.5	17.5
Latvia	10.3	7.9	13.8	10.1	8.8	11.7	10.6	6.9	15.9
Estonia	9.8	6.9	13.8	6.0	6.6	5.2	13.8	7.3	23.2
		2020							
		Total			Men			Women	
Age	15–29	15–24	25–29	15–29	15–24	25–29	15–29	15–24	25–29
Lithuania	13.0	10.8	17.1	13.6	12.2	15.8	12.4	9.2	18.7
Latvia	11.9	7.1	19.5	11.3	7.0	18.1	12.6	7.2	21.0
Estonia	11.2	8.9	14.9	8.6	8.0	9.5	14.0	9.8	20.7

As we can see from Table 1, in 2019, the largest NEET proportion was women aged 25–29. In the 15–29 age category, the highest rates were found in Lithuania for both men and women. The proportion of NEET women was higher in Estonia than in the other two countries. Thus, women aged 20–24 are the most vulnerable group among NEETs in Estonia. In Latvia, the unemployment gender difference trends are similar: young women are less likely to be employed and involved in education than young men. This is especially the case in women with lower levels of education and young women on maternity leave. In Estonia, the unemployment rate of young people aged 16–29 also increased from 7.2% in 2020 to 12.3% in 2021 (Statistics Estonia 2021). Over 30% of NEETs are trapped in poverty, compared to 15% of young people in the general population.

In Latvia, the aging population has become more and more critical. From 2010 to 2020, the number of young people aged 15–29 has decreased by 161,000. During the last decade this number has decreased by about 15,000 a year, falling in 2020 to the lowest number in the last fourteen years—289,064 (Eurostat 2021). This demographical trend is related to the emigration of youngsters. Over the last fifteen years more than 120,000 young Latvians aged 15–30 have emigrated (Youth of the Baltic States: Study Report (Latvia) 2019). The research data from Analytical Overview of Youth Policy (2017) highlights the most essential reasons that youngsters emigrated from Latvia during the last ten years: financial difficulties, desire to improve quality of life, possibility of obtaining a better salary, and opportunities to earn money.

In 2020, the proportion of NEETs increased in almost all categories due to the growth of the overall unemployment level from shutdown of services. Also, education and training became a greater challenge for many young people because of more complex studying conditions and demand for additional technological appliances.

In the next sections, we will analyse major youth policies and initiatives in the Baltic states that contribute to the improvement of the NEET situation.

3.2. Lithuania

3.2.1. Lithuanian Youth Policy

Lithuanian youth policy is aimed at young people aged 14–29. Approximately 486,000 Lithuanians fell into this category at the beginning of 2021, according to [Statistics Lithuania \(2021\)](#).

Youth policy in Lithuania has been developed for more than 20 years. Lithuania has created a legal framework and institutional system for the formation and implementation of youth policy. Principles, areas, organization, and management have all been established. In order to create the right conditions for young people to take an active part in an open and democratic society, programs are implemented to encourage initiatives by young people and youth organizations. In addition, the connection is strengthened between youth non-governmental organizations and state and municipal institutions, and support is provided by EU structural funds and programs ([Youth Policy 2021](#)).

The main institutions formulating and implementing youth policy are:

- Commission for Youth and Sports Affairs of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania;
- Ministry of Social Security and Labour;
- Department of Youth Affairs under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour;
- Youth Affairs Council;
- Municipal Youth Affairs Council;
- Youth Coordinator;
- National Association of Youth Coordinators.

On 1 July 2017, the Law on Employment of the Republic of Lithuania was implemented to regulate the labour market and promote various services and support to the unemployed. Furthermore, the Employment Growth Programme 2014–2020 was established to reduce unemployment and include social partners and municipalities in problem solving ([Employment Growth Programme for 2014–2020 2013](#)). This programme contributed to a reduction in youth unemployment. Subsequently, separate cities developed their own employment growth programmes, including Vilnius (2019–2020); Kaunas (2021–2023); Alytus (2021), and Šiauliai (2021–2023) ([Vilnius Employment Growth Programme 2019](#); [Kaunas Employment Growth Programme 2021](#); [Alytus City Municipality 2021 Employment Growth Programme 2021](#); [Šiauliai Employment Growth Programme 2021](#)). These programmes were successfully implemented on a regional level.

Youth policy programmes implemented on the national level are:

- National Youth Policy Action Plan 2021;
- Action Plan for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee Initiative.

Throughout the next phase (2021–2027) of youth policy, the “Erasmus +” programme will encourage organizations and young people to focus on EU policy priorities in projects and participation. These priorities include: inclusion and diversity, ecology and sustainability, digital transformation, youth participation in democratic processes, and active citizenship ([Youth Policy 2021](#); [Kvieskienė et al. 2020](#)).

3.2.2. Youth Initiatives in Lithuania during COVID-19

During the pandemic, some existing Lithuanian initiatives directed towards youth have continued, while other new programs and projects have begun in rural municipalities.

In 2021, the **Širvintos district municipality administration**, promoting youth initiatives, employment of young people, and active participation in community life, announced a tender for financing youth initiatives.

The aim of this funding is to promote purposeful, responsible, and long-term youth activities, youth initiative, leadership, and citizenship. The tender can help solve problems faced by youth aged 14–29 in the Širvintos district, including NEET youth in this age category. The call for proposals would create conditions for youth integration into society and strengthen cooperation with youth organizations. Initiatives can be funded for those who wish to organize events, camps, forums, conferences, and seminars, or who wish

to publish, represent, and carry out sociological, statistical, qualitative, and quantitative research on the situation and problems of young people. These actions follow the main principles of youth activity: volunteering, autonomy, and self-government.

The initiatives can be implemented by young people aged 14–29, youth organizations, informal youth groups, and other youth work organizations and businesses ([Širvintos District Municipality 2021](#)). The proposed funding would increase NEET engagement in a variety of useful activities, thereby increasing the work qualifications of youth and helping them find a job.

On 8 June 2020, a meeting of the **Marijampolė Municipality Youth Affairs Council** took place, in which members of the Council discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. They made decisions related to developing Youth Voluntary Service programs and strengthening the Family Policy. The Council also discussed recommendations prepared by the Department of Youth Affairs, under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, regarding long-term measures for young people to reduce the negative consequences of the pandemic and quarantine.

According to the chairman of the Council, despite many disadvantages of the pandemic, young people acquired new skills during quarantine. One such skill is working with distance learning platforms, which will accelerate innovation in learning. Therefore, if a similar situation occurs in the future, youth may be able to better adapt to changed circumstances.

The following recommendations of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour were approved at the meeting: (1) Ensure that young people are informed about quarantine and its restrictions; (2) Ensure youth business support and youth employment programs; (3) Ensure the provision of physical and psycho-emotional health services in the Municipality; and (4) Support youth and youth organizations.

Subsequently to this meeting, a tender was announced for the evaluation and financing of youth summer camps and other non-formal youth education activities that will be funded by the budget of Marijampolė Municipality. Up to 1500 students will benefit from the youth summer employment program. Opportunities will also be sought to ensure the availability of child and adolescent psychiatric services at the Marijampolė Primary Health Care Centre ([Marijampolė Municipality 2020](#)). These proposed initiatives will contribute to the emotional state of NEETs and offer additional employment possibilities.

On 28 May 2020, the **Akmenė District Municipality Youth Affairs Council** took part in a meeting and discussed: the challenges faced by young people and organizations working with youth, how to implement this year's Municipal Youth Initiatives, youth employment summer and other programs, and additional important topics on youth participation and involvement.

The well-being of the district's graduates was analysed at the meeting. In terms of participation, students indicated that public events with politicians and municipal staff in the Municipality, meetings with the Municipality mayor, and the opportunity to apply in letters were helpful. The public consultation "I know—I get involved—I appreciate", organized by the government on 19th May 2020, was discussed. Opportunities were explored for youth involvement in the Akmenė district and participation in the decision-making process.

The prepared recommendations for long-term measures in the Municipality were approved, taking into account the COVID-19 situation. During this period, it is essential to support youth and youth work organizations, create favourable opportunities for youth employment during the summer, provide information and counselling, and ensure physical and psycho-emotional health ([Akmenė District Municipality 2020](#)). Since the majority of Akmenė district initiatives were intended for young people finishing school, these initiatives mainly aim to prevent young people from falling into the NEET category.

Trakai Education Center promotes youth welfare by establishing training/education institutions for NEET children living on the streets, for example, "Sodžiaus meistrai" in Rūdiškės, Trakai district. The Center also implements a European Social Fund (ESF) project,

initiated by the Ministry of Education and Science of Lithuania, designed to improve the education of students with special educational needs (Kvieskienė et al. 2021). In the first project, every year the school educates approximately 12 students who are threatened by blind-alley future or possible imprisonment. In the second project, all students with special education needs successfully complete the academic year, and their behaviours and feelings improve. The majority of these students live in foster homes. The budget for the projects consists of contributions from private sponsors, support for the development of material and intellectual welfare of the institution, and support of the government. Street and foster home children face special difficulties and often become NEETs; thus, the Center is a supportive institution in this rural area.

Children's temporary shelter "Turn yourself to children" has implemented the "Guaranteed start" project funded by the EU. This project is designed for occupational preparation and employment of young people. Young people in foster care, as well as children who have left foster homes and are unemployed NEETs, prepare to acquire a profession while living in a newly opened home. The youth are advised and taught English, computer literacy, and initial occupational skills. Thus, young people participating in the project are able to acquire professions, such as being a cook, waiter, bartender, or house cleaner. This meaningful project helps undisciplined young people with behavioural problems find a job, integrate themselves into the labour market, and meet employers' requirements. The project initially developed through a partnership between Giedrė Kvieskienė (Lithuania) and Einar Kjonar (Norway), and their agreement has continued for 16 years. Twice a year, the Norwegian club provides funds, and in 2014, a concert of support was organized for the ninth time. This commitment to moral and financial support further encourages the continuation of activities (Kvieskienė et al. 2020). The described shelter contributes psychological assistance and development of skills that are useful in NEET employment.

In summary, the Lithuanian initiatives are aimed at addressing various NEET aspects. The majority of programmes offer NEETs the opportunity to obtain useful skills, whether formally or informally. Such newfound skills will increase the chances that NEET youth find a job. According to OECD (2021b), Lithuania has developed a youth strategy plan, offers hiring subsidies to promote employment of young people, supports work-based learning, and has expanded mental health services. However, NEETs in Lithuania still face a lack of direct employment opportunities and additional income support.

3.3. Latvia

3.3.1. Latvian Youth Policy

According to the [Latvian Ministry of Education and Science \(2021\)](#), youth policy is a set of targeted measures implemented in various areas of public policy, in cooperation with different institutions promoting the comprehensive development of young people. These policies involve youth in education, employment, and society, thus improving their quality of life as well as furthering the development of the country.

The regulations of the Ministry of Education and Science stipulate that the Ministry is Latvia's leading public administration institution in the field of youth policy. The Ministry develops, organizes, and coordinates policies, while promoting cooperation between various parties involved with youth and providing training for youth specialists. At the local or regional level, local governments in Latvia are responsible for the implementation of youth policy, determining their competencies and rights under Youth Law.

[The National Youth Council of Latvia \(2021\)](#) works in close cooperation with leading ministries, institutions, social organizations, [The Agency for International Youth Programs \(2021\)](#), and youth centres to implement the needs of youth, especially during the tense COVID-19 situation.

Youth organizations (such as Mazpulki, Scouts, and Getogames) work in various fields, including environmental protection, health, participation, social inclusion, youth employment, sports, and hiking. An important goal of a youth organization is to create an environment in which young people can develop their skills and knowledge in a specific

field, develop personality, and find peers and friends. Youth organizations provide an opportunity for young people to participate in international projects, youth exchanges, social and environmental activities, and camps. Scouts are popular for hiking and camping.

Youth organizations are also key enablers of youth participation, inviting young people to become more involved in a variety of issues by expressing views and making suggestions. Young people also participated in voluntary work both before and during the pandemic, providing support to elderly people and other NEET youth. Youth organizations and non-governmental organizations thus help build a society that includes active and involved youth ([Latvian Ministry of Education and Science 2021](#)).

[The Agency for International Youth Programs \(2021\)](#) initiates cooperation between different organizations within the country and abroad, thus creating more possibilities for NEET youth. While coordinating the ESF project “Know and Do”, discussed below, the Agency has proven to be an important actor connecting self-government organizations, educational institutions, and enterprises to involve NEET in learning, training, and employment.

The National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021–2027 envisaged providing support for youth risk groups by promoting involvement in education, training and employment, obtaining individual support from municipalities, teenagers, and social institutions, reducing the ratio of youth risk group to 6%, and allocating 6,500,000 EUR to NEET youth. Also, local rural municipalities must increase opportunities for young people who have dropped out of the education system to adopt flexible and diversified ways of learning. An important aim of the plan is to ensure well-being and health protection while reducing the poverty risk of youth ([The National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021–2027 2020](#)).

National Guidelines for Youth Policy are currently under discussion and are being prepared in accordance with the National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021–2027 as well as research-based results set out in OECD and EU documents.

3.3.2. Youth Initiatives in Latvia during COVID-19

Preliminary data shows that resources already available in the education system have facilitated Latvia’s first response to the pandemic. Latvia has adapted existing structures and resources to recent policy work in addressing new challenges ([Education Policy Outlook: Latvia 2020](#)).

The aforementioned ESF project, “**Know and Do**”, is a specific support project for NEET youth to develop skills and be involved in education and training ([Know and Do 2021](#)). This project was initiated in 2015 and further extended to give more support to youngsters and organizations involved in the youth developmental process. This initiative is implemented together with the State Development Agency, Employment Agency, non-governmental organizations, regional self-governments, and youth centres. The project uses an individualized approach to assist NEET youth aged 15–29 years with learning and developing skills. Through the end of September 2020, 6,000,000 EUR were allocated for NEET youth to enhance their education and skills, ensuring better quality of life. The main target groups are youth from risk families, youngsters with disabilities and problems, young mothers, and drop-out students. 602 mentors and 244 programme managers have been trained for the project. Participants have access to consultations, participation in camps, cultural activities, help from an assistant, and special transport.

In addition to this project, a new proposal by the Agency for International Youth Programs, with financing of 430,000 EUR, has attracted 40 projects submitted by youth centres, NGOs, municipalities, government organizations, and youth organizations to overcome the consequences of COVID-19. The Agency organizes supervisions and seminars for staff involved in youth activities to overcome stress and crisis situations. Each participant is provided with two individual hour-long supervisions, if necessary, in order to work in-depth on the specific challenges faced in the workplace ([The Agency for International Youth Programs 2021](#)).

Input is also provided by another ESF project “**Support for the Reduction of Early School Leaving**” (Pumpurs). This initiative provides additional targeted support for distance learning and well-being of youth. Aspects of ongoing curriculum reform have been accelerated, as new distance learning materials are included with more innovative digital content (Pumpurs 2017).

According to OECD (2021b), Latvia has implemented many initiatives to support young people through the COVID-19 crisis, such as:

- The government introduced an allowance for job seekers who recently acquired higher education that will be paid for up to four months until June 2021;
- Youth hiring subsidies were in place before the pandemic, and no adjustments have been made in response to the pandemic;
- The previously discussed ESF project “Know and Do” that increases outreach to young NEETs has been extended through 2022;
- The government is working on the development of new employment and education strategies that will focus on ensuring continuity and an update of Youth Guarantee measures;
- A plan for Youth Policy 2021–2023 has been agreed upon;
- The employment service has widened access to online learning and vocational training, including the Massive Open Online Courses;
- The government diverted 7,120,000 EUR in funding to improve the population’s mental health.

In summary, Latvian programmes aim to prevent youth from leaving school early and improve the emotional conditions of NEET youth through face-to-face activities. The ideas are very relevant and timely, and due to these activities, the number of NEET youth has not increased as much as expected during the pandemic crisis. The projects are individualized and adjusted to youth and local needs with appropriately prepared staff for this work. However, even more initiatives should be offered to increase learning and development of new skills.

3.4. Estonia

3.4.1. Estonian Youth Policy

During the previous decade, Estonian youth policy was based primarily on the following two documents: “Development Plan for Children and Families for 2012–2020” and “Youth Development Plan 2014–2020”. Using the strategies proposed in these documents, the Estonian government targeted the social exclusion of young people. The two plans promoted youth creativity, employability, and social inclusion, and offered other opportunities to increase young people’s welfare (YouthWiki Estonia 2021).

In August 2021, the Estonian government approved the “Youth Development Plan 2021–2035”, which lays out youth policy goals for the next 15 years with a budget of 356.29 million EUR. The development plan sets forth four strategic objectives: (1) empower young people to be a creative and dynamic force in society; (2) protect young people’s rights and support their active citizenship; (3) provide high-quality youth work in all regions of Estonia and create opportunities for every young person to experience development, success, enrichment, and independence; (4) prevent isolation, exclusion, and disengagement among young people through confidence-building and a support network.

The fourth objective is the primary measure that supports NEETs, especially in rural areas. Actions to meet this objective include: ensuring all young people have support and equal opportunities; reducing the risk of youth exclusion and loneliness; understanding the causes of young people’s risky behaviour, and designing services based on young people’s actual needs. The strategy establishes a measurable target of reducing the share of NEETs aged 15–29 from 10% to 8.5% (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research 2021). To promote the social inclusion of groups at risk and reduce possible exclusion of NEETs, particular attention is paid to preparing measures that satisfy the specific health-related needs of young people who are not involved in education or training. Local rural

municipalities are required to increase opportunities for young people who have dropped out of the education system to take advantage of flexible and diversified learning pathways. New activities are also planned to raise awareness in society and reduce the labelling or stigmatisation of NEETs.

3.4.2. Youth Initiatives in Estonia during COVID-19

During the pandemic, Estonian youth organizations and their umbrella organizations provided information on safety measures, offered consultations on re-organizing youth-related activities, and advised on possible alternate activities. The municipalities funded and promoted youth work during the shutdown. They even offered additional funding in cases where NGOs were unable to provide youth support due to the pandemic (O'Donovan and Zentner 2020).

Special youth initiative "Hack the Crisis: Youth" was created, in which a COVID-19 themed hackathon was organized. This empowered young people with ideas and solutions for coping with the pandemic and minimizing its negative impact (Accelerate Estonia 2020).

Another example of good practice was provided by the Estonian Scout Association, which introduced an innovative smart hiking format for their annual spring hike. More than 500 participants took part in the hike and enjoyed a virtual campfire evening on YouTube (NGO Estonian Scout Association 2021).

Likewise, other youth centres and NGOs could reorient their work into virtual activities on various online platforms (Paabort 2020). To encourage more NEETs to join youth activities, additional resources are needed for camps, international youth work, organizing volunteer work, and training. NEET youth must be offered interest-based activities that can be initiated and led by themselves. Reaching rural NEET youth also requires mobile youth work, in which the young people are supported in the area where they live.

Estonia has four main types of activities to support rural NEETs:

- Youth Prop Up Programme "Tugila";
- Choice of Profession programme in Vocational Education and Training, which is a second chance transition programme;
- Apprenticeship programme for labour market integration, provided by the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund;
- Mobile counselling (MOBI).

Youth Prop Up Programme "Tugila" began in 2015 and is targeted for NEETs aged 15–26. The programme was initiated by the EU and co-financed by the ESF. It currently supports about 13,000 young people and assists them in 'returning' to society by raising their confidence and self-esteem. Activities are organized in local centres throughout all regions of Estonia, with each centre supporting up to 30 participants every month. The programmes provide help for individuals through Youth Prop Up each year (Tugila 2021).

The activities of Youth Prop Up are based on principles of social pedagogy and include: (1) identification of youth through mobile youth work or networking; (2) establishing a trusting relationship with individuals to help them realize their intentions; (3) empowering participants through possible youth work, assisting in their development of practical knowledge and skills, and facilitating their participation in the labour market; and (4) maintaining regular contact with participants for at least six months after they finish the programme to provide additional help, if needed (Tugila 2021).

Programme activities are meant to be exciting and interesting to participants in order to foster their creativity and improve their strengths. All activities are designed based on specific areas, such as sustainable work, networking, training, and mentoring, through theoretical and practical learning as well as self-assessment. This enables NEETs to take an active approach in implementing future activities in their own lives outside of the programme.

The **Choice of Profession programme in Vocational Education and Training** is a transition curriculum specially designed for young people who have dropped out of general or vocational school and are not working or studying. Participants who usually

have limited skills in career planning learn about the profession through practical work. They are offered counselling and remedial training in core school subjects, with a focus on developing useful competencies and transferable skills. The volume of studies is generally 30 ECTS (about 6 months), and 60 ECTS (about 12 months) for students with special educational needs. During the programme, students learn to adapt to and cope in different social environments, participate in the development of their career plan, and make choices from available options that are appropriate for their skills. According to the Estonian Education Information System, as of 2021, 20 out of 37 vocational schools have registered a Choice of Profession curriculum (EHIS 2021). After completing the transition programme, NEET youth can continue to attend a vocational school or enter the labour market.

The apprenticeship programme is a key initiative designed for integration of NEET youth into the labour market. The programme is provided by the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund with a small day and travel allowance. A NEET participant can apply for an apprenticeship in any company. Remuneration is provided to employers in order to attract companies to be involved in the apprenticeship programme. The duration of the apprenticeship is agreed upon between the person, the employer, and the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund based on the requirements of the position and the time needed to acquire practical skills for the work. A trainee can participate in an apprenticeship for up to 8 h a day and 40 h a week.

Aside from apprenticeship, the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund provides **mobile counselling (MOBI)** in all regions of Estonia, imparting information and knowledge that is useful for those seeking a job. This is also an important initiative because of easy access for rural NEETs. The aim of MOBI workshops is to share topics related to searching for a job, work requirements, and career planning. Often, MOBI workshops take place at remote locations, far from large cities, where access to the labour market and career information is limited. MOBI seminars focus on young people and people with reduced ability to work. With regard to young people, the activities also include youth's parents. MOBI is implemented in cooperation with municipalities, schools, and representatives of entrepreneurs and other interested parties. Participation by various interest groups in the events allows important and real-life topics to be addressed (Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund 2021).

In summary, in Estonia, a number of activities have been launched to respond to the needs of NEETs. The aforementioned initiatives aim to improve youth learning and vocational education, promote employment opportunities, and inform youth through organized workshops. Furthermore, these programmes provide mentoring and help raise self-confidence. However, the initiatives are not always coordinated, systematic or prompt. According to OECD (2021b), Estonia has implemented only a few possible initiatives, namely utilizing hiring subsidies to promote employment of young people and preparation of the national Youth Development Plan 2021–2035 to guide cross-sectoral and employment policies. All other categories, such as expanding mental health services and supporting work-based learning, have not yet been adequately addressed.

4. Conclusions

The general consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for young NEETs can be summarized as follows: deficit of social interaction, family-related tensions, problems caused by isolation at home, increased level of anxiety, and mental health problems. These issues have contributed to the rise of unemployment among vulnerable young people who are often less educated and socially disadvantaged.

Rural youth are a vulnerable group of people in terms of employment, mobility, qualification, and social exclusion, as compared to youth in urban areas. In rural areas, NEET rates are often higher than in cities. Furthermore, young women are more vulnerable than men. These young people are at risk of becoming socially excluded individuals with income below the poverty line and lack the skills necessary to improve their economic

situation. For this reason, the challenges faced by rural youth must be analysed and more attention should be focused on possible positive initiatives on the municipal level.

Growing emigration from the Baltic States, especially from rural municipalities, allows for the conclusion that these youngsters could not satisfy their needs, implement their opportunities, nor offer their input to further development of the countries. This negative trend indicates that it is very important to help NEET youth in rural areas.

During the pandemic, youth unemployment had dropped to a record low and the EU initiative—Youth Guarantee—was reinforced. However, almost all activities of this initiative are organized by government institutions and they lack youth engagement in practice.

The analysed initiatives for rural NEET youth in the Baltic countries, mainly implemented by municipalities or local government institutions, are intended to raise confidence and self-esteem in young people. Thus, positive emotions are encouraged and mental health issues are resolved. The initiatives of all three countries also promote mobile work, networking, development of knowledge and skills, and creativity. These qualities will help youth enter the labour market and thereby contribute to the sustainability of the countries' economies. Additionally, continuous learning must become the responsibility of the youth. A culture of learning should be encouraged and gradually developed, especially for youth from groups at risk.

Undoubtedly, implemented initiatives in all Baltic countries supported rural NEET youth in the Baltic countries. Nonetheless, the high youth unemployment highlights the need to find innovative ways to empower youth by providing different services, enabling flexibility of programs, and focusing on individualized NEET youth needs.

The performed research on NEET initiatives shows that it is necessary to prolong mentorship for NEET youth, involve more NGOs in practical work, enhance cooperation with different stakeholders, and involve institutions of higher education. Such integration would increase the quality and positive impact of youth initiatives in the Baltic countries. Different components of the support system must act together, rather than having scattered and separated elements on the state level.

One challenge in youth policy is achieving synergies, which have a measurable impact on NEET counselling and other services. One way to increase synergies and the quality of youth work is to train and re-train youth workers so that their professional competence and leadership skills adapt to changing circumstances. Lastly, there is a lack of systematic data collection, studies, and analyses on NEET topics to ensure comprehensive monitoring and research-based decision-making.

Our research has limitations and offers paths of future study. The case studies of three countries were analysed—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Thus, the initiatives of other countries or regions could be analysed in further studies. Moreover, a cross-country statistical analysis of NEET youth's activity status and education could be valuable and relevant in forming adequate conclusions and making decisions on youth initiatives. Such analysis could be performed in future studies, applying other methods and thus extending the qualitative case study approach of the current research. Overall, we can conclude that the on-going policy and initiatives demand a sound theoretical and conceptual underpinning through active engagement with research.

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