



Make the Growth  
Inclusive toward  
EU integrations

# NEET Youth in Montenegro Situation Analysis







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Ministry of  
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## **NEET Youth in Montenegro**

**Author:**

Stevan Kandić

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Elvira Hadžibegović

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## Abbreviation list

<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUROSTAT</b>	Statistical Office of the European Union
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>IDF</b>	Investment and Development Fund
<b>LAP</b>	Local Action Plan
<b>LFS</b>	Labour Force Survey
<b>MEDT</b>	Ministry of Economic Development and Tourism
<b>MONSTAT</b>	Statistical Office of Montenegro
<b>ME</b>	Ministry of Education
<b>MSY</b>	Ministry of Sports and Youth
<b>NEET</b>	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
<b>NSSD</b>	National Strategy for Sustainable Development
<b>SOPEES</b>	Sectoral Operational Program on Employment, Education and Social Policies
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>EAM</b>	Employment Agency of Montenegro



# Introduction and methodology

**D**uring 2021 and 2022, the Montenegrin economy significantly recovered from the GDP drop caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The economy cannot provide a sufficient number of workers, especially during the summer months, so the employers are increasingly trying to hire them from abroad. Despite this, according to the 2022 data, approximately 32,200 young people in Montenegro are unemployed – they are not currently engaged in education, unable to find employment, or not actively seeking employment at all. This group of young people is called **NEET** (Not in Employment, Education or Training).

Activation of this group represents a major challenge for public policies. The ageing of the population, migration of young people and decrease in the labour force population require this youth group to join the labour market. The national authorities, however, rarely reach out to this group or cover only a small share, mainly those who actively seek employment.

The aim of this report is to provide an insight into the institutional approach to this issue through various data collection methods and techniques, map the NEET youth in Montenegro at a specific point in time, and identify the key barriers to school-to-work transition or youth involvement in formal and non-formal education.

The research for this report was conducted as a part of the project “Make the Growth Inclusive towards EU Integrations – Empowering Civil Society to Effectively Contribute to Inclusive Local Growth“, implemented by Forum MNE and Center for Youth Education, financed by the European Union and co-financed by the Ministry of Public Administration.

In order to collect the most comprehensive findings, the data collection process consisted of two parts.

The first section, **desk research**, aimed to present the position of the NEET youth in Montenegro and therefore analyzed the position of NEETs in terms of policies, institutions and quantitative data on NEETs collected by the national institutions.

When it comes to the level of policies, we outlined the strategic and legislative framework for the implementation of youth policy in Montenegro. As for the institutional level, we mapped the key institutions designing the policies that affect NEETs and presented some of the most significant ongoing and future measures supporting youth employment.

In addition, we presented the youth unemployment trends in Montenegro, as well as the proportion of NEETs in comparison with the region and the EU countries. The data used in this section were collected from two sources: the data for 2020 and the previous period were obtained from the *Young People not*

in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) – Mapping and Policy Pointers analysis, prepared by ILO (International Labour Organization) in 2022, while the data for the 2021–2022 period were derived from the calculations based on the Labour Force Survey (LFS) data, provided by MONSTAT.

The second section, the empirical research, consists of two segments, namely the qualitative and quantitative one.

The qualitative segment of the research aimed to identify the opinions of the youth on the subjects that impact employment – we talked with young people about (non-)formal education, career counselling, skills in demand in the labour market, and gaining work experience.

This segment of the research involved the implementation of four focus groups with young people aged 15 to 26, primarily from central Montenegro<sup>1</sup>. Each focus group comprised 4 to 9 participants with various social and demographic characteristics, totalling 24 individuals. The focus groups were conducted in person and lasted from 90 to 120 minutes

The focus groups aimed to provide a better insight into the problems of young people, their competences and skills, as well as the barriers when accessing some form of education or the labour market. The opinions of the focus group participants should be read bearing in mind the context in which the data was collected and the nature of such data.

In that sense, it must be stated that the goal of this segment of the research was not to quantify, but to provide a better understanding of youth perceptions. The information collected during the group discussions represent the opinions, thoughts, beliefs, assessments and impressions of the young people we interacted with. These personal accounts are not necessarily fully aligned with the factual situation on the ground and cannot be generalized.

This segment of the research aims to provide an in-depth understanding not only of the participants' perceptions concerning certain circumstances, opportunities or policies, but of the reasons behind those perceptions.

The second segment of this empirical research was the quantitative research (survey) which included analysis of the responses provided by young people aged 15 to 30, some of whom fall into NEET category. The questionnaire was designed to determine whether and to what extent young people specialize outside formal education, how they search for employment and specialization opportunities, and which form of support in specialization/employment they value the most.

The data were collected using the Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) technique, i.e. by distributing the survey online. Taking into account the specific characteristics of youth and the difficulties in finding those belonging to the NEET category, we used the snowball sampling technique, which implies that participants in the survey find suitable contacts and recommend them for the survey. Thus, the number of persons included in the survey increased with the expansion of the initial pool.

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1 Socio-demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Annex 1.

105 responses were gathered from young people using this method<sup>2</sup>, including those belonging to the NEET population. Even though the survey aimed to quantify the responses, due to the limited sample and the fact that it was not representative, the results of the survey may only serve as an indicator of the direction of youth opinion and a supplement to the qualitative research.

The report is divided into *six chapters*, reflecting the logic of the research: the introduction presents the goal and research methods; the first chapter, *Understanding NEET youth – defining the concept* contains the definition of the term, characteristics and status of NEETs. The second chapter, *NEET youth – public policy perspectives*, offers an insight into the provisions of the Montenegrin legal system concerning NEETs, while the chapter *NEET youth – institutional levels and support programs* analyses the roles and actions of institutions in the process of integration of youth in the education system or the labour market.

The fourth chapter, *NEET youth in Montenegro*, contains an overview of the most recent data on the rate of NEETs, lists the numerous diverse sub-groups within this population and provides comparisons with the data from the previous period. The fifth, most extensive chapter titled *Opinions of the youth* contains the findings on youth perceptions and opinions on formal and non-formal education, career counselling, skills that are in demand and preferred in accessing the labour market, and work experience.

Finally, the sixth chapter, *Recommendations*, gives an overview of the most significant research findings and the recommendations stemming from those findings.

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2 Socio-demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Annex 2.



**I Understanding  
NEET youth –  
defining the concept**

**M**ore and more often we hear the term NEET youth, policies and measures aimed at their activation and entry into the labour market. In order to understand the characteristics of this category of young people and their needs, we must first go back a few steps and recall how and why this specific term was introduced.

The **unemployment rate**, which represents the percentage of unemployed individuals in the total number of active residents, is commonly utilized as a key indicator of the labour market's situation. In Montenegro, the assessment is based on:

- **Survey unemployment rate** obtained from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), conducted by Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT);
- **Registered unemployment rate**, published by the Employment Agency of Montenegro (AEM).<sup>3</sup>

However, after the global economic crisis in 2008, and in response to changes in the labour market and a growing unemployment rate, especially among young people, there was a need to prioritise this issue and additionally review existing policies and measures in this area. The economic and financial crisis made it even more challenging for young people to enter the labour market, and the period of their transition from youth to adulthood was significantly longer and more complex. Young people face prolonged institutional education, inadequate employment, difficulties in obtaining employment status, slow socio-economic independence, delayed family formation, and weak involvement in social decision-making processes.<sup>4</sup> All of the above have led decision and policy makers to realize that standard monitoring of the unemployment rate and youth activities is not sufficient. It has been evident that we can distinguish various categories among young people - within this demographic, you have those who are officially not part of the workforce, a substantial number currently engaged in education or some form of learning, and a significant portion not employed, not in the education system, and not receiving additional training.

The term “NEET” has emerged in the 1990s. However, it gained more significant prominence in relevant policies with the aforementioned changes. As a result, the NEET rate is now cited as one of the indicators to measure progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

NEET<sup>5</sup> is an acronym in the English language that refers to young people not employed and not enrolled in the education or training system. While the term is often associated with discouraged or inactive youth “trapped” in the transition phase following formal education, the fact that it represents a common name for an extremely **heterogeneous group** of young people entails certain challenges in its definition and measurement, which are still not unified at the international level. The International Labour Organization and EUROSTAT have attempted to develop a collaborative approach to measuring the NEET rate, conceptualized as “**the percentage of the population of a given age group and**

<sup>3</sup> *Guide on Manner of Determining Survey and Registered Unemployment Rate, Statistical Office of Montenegro - MONSTAT, 2015*

<sup>4</sup> *Youth unemployment in Montenegro, Employment Agency of Montenegro, 2022*

<sup>5</sup> *Not in Education, Employment, or Training*

sex who is not employed and not involved in further education or training”<sup>6</sup>

When mapping the NEET population, a particular challenge is the consideration of numerous variables needed to create a realistic picture. These include defining terms like “training” and determining the *status of inactivity*, which depends on the period during which a young person has not sought employment and/or is not ready to accept a job offer. This duration can vary from one to four weeks, depending on the research methodology.

Furthermore, variations were noted in defining the age range of young people belonging to the NEET population, closely tied to different classifications of youth in diverse contexts. Another challenge arises from the distinct characteristics and needs of the NEET population in the younger (15-24) and older (25-29) cohorts, which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections of this publication.

**Given the challenges mentioned earlier, it is important to invest additional efforts in identifying and defining the NEET group to enhance the development of relevant policies. It’s worth noting that this group is highly dynamic, consisting of several categories that largely depend on the population’s structure. Therefore, we emphasize the significance of clearly defining and regularly monitoring the NEET rate in Montenegro. This step is crucial for gaining a clearer insight into the structure and needs of this population, which is ultimately the goal of this analysis.**

<sup>6</sup> “The percentage of the population of a given age group and sex who is not employed and not involved in further education or training.”. What does NEETs mean and why is the concept so easily misinterpreted?, ILO, 2015, available at: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_343153.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_343153.pdf)



**II NEET youth –  
public policy  
perspectives**

The NEET population consists of young individuals with diverse characteristics, needs, and experiences. Various public policies, ranging from educational, social, and economic to youth policy, aim to improve their position in society. This report specifically analyses those directly related to youth, with a focus on their employment and education.

**The national-level strategic framework** for implementing youth policy is outlined in the *National Youth Strategy*. The most recent strategy covered the period 2017–2021, with one of its six defined key priorities focusing on youth employment: “Young people achieve economic and social security through improved access to labour market and employment”<sup>7</sup>. One of the measures envisaged within this priority aims to reduce the inactivity of young people, specifically using the NEET rate as an indicator of success. While the adoption of the new strategy was initially planned for 2022, it has not yet taken place, and its draft was made available for public discussion in July 2023<sup>8</sup>.

Two overarching strategic documents that acknowledge the NEET youth population in Montenegro are the *National Strategy for Sustainable Development by 2030*<sup>9</sup> and the *National Employment Strategy 2021–2025*<sup>10</sup> through the introduction of the Youth Guarantee program.

The *National Strategy for Sustainable Development by 2030* identifies the achievement of economic and social security for youth as a priority, aiming to facilitate their access to the labour market and job opportunities, enabling and motivating them to actively participate in Montenegro’s development. Under the NSSD Action Plan, within Measure 2.5.2, titled “Ensure Social Stability and Reduce the Poverty Rate”, one of the sub-measures specifically addresses the NEET population. This is sub-measure 2.5.2.2, aiming to “Significantly reduce proportion of young people not covered by employment, education and training”.

The overall goal of the *National Employment Strategy 2021–2025*, adopted in December 2021, is stable and sustainable employment growth, which is based on equal opportunities for access to the labour market, decent work, further development of knowledge and skills and greater social inclusion.

In order to achieve the overall goal, four operational goals were defined:

- **Operational goal 1:** Achieve employment growth and invest in high-quality and safe jobs by enhancing the business environment;
- **Operational goal 2:** Foster the creation of knowledge and competencies aligned with the demands of the labour market in the digital age;
- **Operational goal 3:** Improve the position of unemployed individuals in the labour market through efficient services, active employment policy measures, and the strengthening of social inclusion to reduce poverty;
- **Operational goal 4:** Ensure the efficient functioning of the labour market.

<sup>7</sup> *Youth Strategy 2017–2021*. Available at: <http://www.strategijazamlade.me/>

<sup>8</sup> *Draft of Youth Strategy 2023–2027*. Available at: <https://www.gov.me/dokumentacija/44a0874f-5e59-406b-8551-b06cd305646e>

<sup>9</sup> *National Strategy for Sustainable Development by 2030*. Available at: <https://www.gov.me/dokumentacija/6852d215-af43-4671-b940-cbd0525896c1>

<sup>10</sup> *Strategies, plans, analyses and reports, Employment Agency of Montenegro*. Available at: <https://www.zzzcg.me/strategie-planovi-analize-i-izvjestaji/>



Under the third operational goal, the Strategy outlines measures specifically aimed at enhancing the position of young people in the labour market. It acknowledges young people as a particularly vulnerable group of individuals affected by the adverse consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in terms of unemployment. Specifically, the Strategy states that *Unemployment and inactivity of young people can lead to negative consequences, such as a higher risk of future unemployment, lower future earnings, intergenerational poverty transmission, and the loss of human capital. Additionally, young people are often found in non-standard workplaces, such as platform-based or short-term jobs, where they lack access to adequate social protection. Therefore, it is necessary to take appropriate policy measures and introduce special programs exclusively for this population. These programs should incorporate an individualized approach, providing support for inclusion in the labour market. The goal is to ensure that no one is left behind by creating opportunities for youth employment, promoting youth entrepreneurship, and simultaneously developing their specific skills, including digital, green, language, and entrepreneurial skills, as well as career management skills.*

One of the performance indicators for monitoring the achievement of the Strategy's overall goal is to increase the youth employment rate, with a target of reaching 35.0% by 2025. Simultaneously, the Strategy aims to decrease the proportion of **young people under the age of 29 in registered unemployment to 20.3% by 2025.**

**The legislative framework** addressing youth issues in Montenegro is established by the **Law on Youth**<sup>11</sup>. While it doesn't explicitly recognize NEET youth as a distinct category or directly address employment issues, its significance lies in regulating the creation and implementation of youth policy. This includes the measures and activities aimed at improving the social position of young people and creating conditions to fulfil their needs. The law defines youth as *persons between 15 and 30 years of age.*

At the local level, support for young people is provided through **youth local action plans** (LAP). In 2021, all 24 Montenegrin municipalities had a LAP or local strategy for youth. However, while prescribed measures aim to increase employment and educational level among young people, including the NEET population, NEET youth are often not recognized as a distinct category deserving focused attention. Additionally, the fact that 13<sup>12</sup> municipalities did not specify the funds allocated for LAP implementation—whether provided, intended from the municipal budget, or through donations—further underscores the shortcomings of the current approach.

Furthermore, since the employability of NEET youth depends to a large extent on the quality of the skills they acquire within the framework of **formal education**, it is important to mention the **strategic documents** related to this area.

While there are a number of strategies and documents intended to improve the educational system, there is no comprehensive strategy for this sector.

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<sup>11</sup> Law on Youth, "Official Gazette of Montenegro", Nos. 025/19 of 30.04.2019 and 027/19 of 17.05.2019. Available at: <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/e1ac770f-706f-4ba9-99e3-790b64ba464f>

<sup>12</sup> NEET Youth Position in Montenegro, NGO Prima, 2021. Available at: <https://nvoprma.org/assets/files/Studija-opoloajuNEETmladihuCrnojGori2021..pdf>

However, two noteworthy documents should be mentioned:

- [Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education 2020-2024](#)<sup>13</sup> adopted with the goal of establishing a quality and inclusive vocational education system with an effective management and financing system, serving as the foundation for lifelong learning, economic and social integration, and the personal and professional development of individuals.
- [Strategy for Adult Education in Montenegro 2015-2025](#)<sup>14</sup> is a strategic document that aims to foster a culture of learning, seeking to improve and increase human capital that will significantly contribute to economic development, reduce unemployment, contribute to development of civil society, and enhance the quality of life for every citizen.

**Skills mismatch between the education system and the labour market, as well as the lack of job creations, are still key obstacles to growth and competitiveness in Montenegro<sup>15</sup>. The skills mismatch manifests itself at secondary and higher education levels, and stems from high transitions from VET into higher education and programmes that are less relevant to labour market needs. It seems an oversupply of higher education graduates, particularly in professional fields that are in low demand, such as law, business and the humanities, is producing a high level of graduate unemployment.<sup>16</sup>**

Considering all these factors, it is important to highlight the set of laws aimed at enhancing the quality and accessibility of education, spanning from preschool to professional education, in alignment with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal<sup>17</sup>.

Vocational educational system underwent substantial changes. In this regard, the [Law on National Vocational Qualifications](#) of December 2008, and the Law on Amendments to this Law of June 2016<sup>18</sup>, mark milestones in shifting the focus in the educational system to learning outcomes, with the objective of achieving maximum employability of the population.

In 2017, the Ministry of Education initiated additional reforms to the education system, including Vocational Education and Training (VET). The most significant change is the introduction of [dual VET](#), signifying considerable progress in enhancing school-to-work transitions through work-based learning. This approach entails simultaneous learning and working with an employer for VET students, who receive a monthly payment for their employment.

It is also important to mention the [Law on Adult Education](#)<sup>19</sup>, adopted in 2017,

<sup>13</sup> *Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education 2020-2024*. Available at: <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/3f8ece83-b549-4c84-8ae9-a8620ff67928>

<sup>14</sup> *Strategy for Adult Education in Montenegro 2015-2025*. Available at: [https://epale.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/strategija\\_obr.odraslih.pdf](https://epale.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/strategija_obr.odraslih.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> *Skills Mismatch Measurement in Montenegro*, European Training Foundation, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> *Education Sector Analysis 2015–2020, UNICEF Montenegro and Ministry of Education of Montenegro, Podgorica, 2022.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*

<sup>18</sup> *Law on National Vocational Qualifications*. Available at: <https://wapi.gov.me/download/c7fbc41d-a5e6-4056-b8fa-c5982ea8d611?version=1.0>

<sup>19</sup> *Law on Adult Education*. Available at: <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/439c7ed8-b8b6-4c79-9cbc-1988c42551e4>

which regulates the education and learning of adults. In the context of this Law, an adult is defined as a person older than 15 years of age who meets the conditions for inclusion in the adult education program. Exceptionally, persons under the age of 15, who do not have the status of a student, can be included in primary education programs for adults. As one of the goals of adult education, the Law recognizes retraining, additional training, and professional training for both the unemployed and the employed in the labour market. It also emphasizes the inclusion of the most vulnerable population groups through various forms of education and learning for their integration.

When it comes to those who have completed university education, the most significant practical impact was achieved through the [Law on Professional Training of Persons with Acquired Higher Education](#)<sup>20</sup>, which was adopted in 2012. The law applies to persons with acquired higher education who do not have work experience and who are registered as unemployed at the Employment Agency of Montenegro (EAM). The training lasts nine months and is recognized as a twelve-month work experience, which is a requirement for passing the corresponding professional exam with acquired higher education. The goal of the program is to facilitate the school-to-work transition of young people by providing opportunities for additional acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies. The program enables young people to work in the private and public sector, thus contributing to the reduction of youth unemployment.

The Professional Training for Graduates (PTG) program, operational since 2013, annually involves approximately 3,000 university students<sup>21</sup>, constituting the majority of graduates in each generation. Despite allocating about 0.2% of Montenegrin GDP<sup>22</sup>, to the program, an impact evaluation conducted by the ILO in 2022<sup>23</sup> showed that [it does not significantly enhance employment opportunities or earnings](#) for participants after completing the program. As a recommendation from the evaluator, there is an emphasis on the necessity to rationalize the expenditure of funds within the program, redesign it, and integrate it into a new support mechanism for youth employment. Further details will be discussed in the next chapter, specifically within the section on [Youth Guarantee](#).

**Future public policy interventions by the state administration should focus on accelerating ongoing policy reforms, including the expansion of childhood education, the reforms of vocational education and training (outcome-based curriculum, scaling up of the three years dual education programmes, expanding work-based learning for the four years programmes), remodel the adult training system (including the offers of adult training provided by EAM), and introducing career education and guidance at all levels of the education system.** <sup>24</sup>

20 *Law on Professional Training of Persons with Acquired Higher Education*. Available at: <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/3001ff9c-561b-483a-a908-739013707d85>

21 *Research - Youth Unemployment in Montenegro, Employment Agency of Montenegro, 2022*. Available at: <https://www.zzzcg.me/strategije-planovi-analize-i-izvjestaji/>

22 *It represents greater financial resources than the combined funding for all other active labour market measures.*

23 *Impact Evaluation of the Professional Training for Graduates (PTG) programme – Montenegro, ILO, 2022*. Available at: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms\\_842069.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms_842069.pdf)

24 *Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) - Mapping and Policy Pointers, ILO, 2022*



**III NEET youth –  
institutional levels and  
support programs**

The Law on Youth defines youth policy as “a set of measures and activities that state bodies, state administration bodies, local self-government bodies, non-governmental organisations, student/pupil parliaments and other legal entities undertake to improve the position of young people, their personal and social development and inclusion in society.”

According to the same law, the responsibility for implementing public interest in the field of youth policy lies with the Government, the relevant ministry, and other state and local bodies. The leading role is objectively assigned to the competent ministry, namely, the **Ministry of Sports and Youth (MSY)**. Specifically, upon the MSY’s proposal, the Government adopts a program to achieve public interest in the field of youth policy at least once every two years. This program is a specialized document mandated by law to ensure the implementation of public interest in the field of youth policy. Simultaneously, the MSY is responsible for the actual implementation of this program.

The MSY plays a leading role in both the creation and implementation of the Youth Strategy, as it is listed as a key stakeholder for the implementation of the vast majority of measures outlined in the strategy.

Furthermore, at the local level, the MSY oversees the alignment of Local Action Plans (LAPs) with the Youth Strategy. Municipalities are required to submit draft LAP proposals to the Ministry, and they are also obligated to provide reports on the implementation of these action plans.

The Ministry also plays a crucial role in collaborating with the NGO sector to enhance the position of young people. Specifically, the analysis of the needs, position, perceptions, and perspectives of young people conducted in 2020 served as the basis for determining priorities in the Ministry’s work. Building on this document, a sectoral analysis was conducted. The objective of this analysis was to identify priority areas of public interest in the field of youth policy and allocate necessary funds for financing non-governmental organizations’ projects. The analysis revealed that the non-governmental sector plays a crucial role as a partner in addressing the following priorities for young people:

- **Implementation of innovative youth entrepreneurship projects;**
- **Organization of activities for young people in youth clubs or centres, with an emphasis on activities that promote youth participation;**
- **Capacity building of employees working with young people.**

By establishing these priorities, the MSY indirectly enhances the status of the NEET population through funding of civil sector projects. The majority of these identified priorities address the challenges faced by this particular demographic.

Additionally, other state administrative bodies are involved in addressing NEET youth needs. These bodies, considering their scope of work, develop programs and activities that positively impact the NEET youth population.

Thus, the **Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare**, in collaboration with local communities, launched an initiative to develop a **local approach** to address the issue of unemployment. The emphasis is on supporting communities in finding

solutions to challenges in their local labour markets, with the goal of better aligning the active employment policy with the specific needs of those municipalities. This measure was implemented to enhance the overall effectiveness of the employment policy in Montenegro.

Through the mentioned initiative, the drafting of the local employment strategy and the corresponding action plan for the period 2021 – 2025 has been completed for a total of 21 municipalities. The Ministry, in collaboration with the Employment Agency of Montenegro is responsible for the creation of annual action plans. Technical support for these activities was provided through the project “Further development of local employment initiatives”, financed by EU-IPA funds within the Sectoral Operational Program on Employment, Education, and Social Policies 2015-2017 (SOPEES).

As in the case of the activities of other ministries, it is often a matter of ad-hoc support related to projects that focus on empowering and strengthening the capacities of young people and their competences for entering the labour market. There are numerous municipalities that implemented such projects through cross-border cooperation programs.

Moreover, under the aforementioned SOPEES program, supported by the EU, the grant scheme “Support to employment in less developed municipalities in Montenegro” was implemented. The objective of this scheme was to provide assistance to employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises in the private sector in less developed regions and areas of Montenegro. This support aimed to generate new jobs and enhance skills development in alignment with the specific needs of these businesses. While this program does not formally represent a local support initiative, it specifically targeted the needs of less developed municipalities, indirectly influencing the creation of jobs. These jobs, in turn, can contribute to the economic inclusion of the NEET population through planned training and employment programs.

The [Ministry of Education](#) (ME) also plays a significant role in reducing the NEET rate among young people. Its scope of work includes efforts to address the mismatch between the skills that young people possess and those in demand on the labour market.

For instance, the Ministry of Education is currently working on aligning curricula, particularly for secondary vocational schools, with the needs of the labour market by incorporating elements of dual education. Additionally, efforts are being made to promote student enrolment in educational programs, enabling them to acquire qualifications for in-demand occupations. Nevertheless, there appears to be a [need for a more systematic collection and distribution of information](#) related to labour market issues. This would not only have impact on the enrolment policies but, more importantly, provide prospective students and their parents with relevant and current information about the prospects of various occupations in the labour market.

While information related to career and professional orientation has a certain foundation in the formal education system, “second chance” educational programs are not sufficiently or adequately developed. This is even more signifi-

cant since these programs are most relevant for enhancing the employability of young people without qualifications, a fact currently insufficiently recognized by the creators of employment policies in Montenegro. This primarily refers to:

- **Functional education programs** through which those who left school early, i.e. individuals who did not finish primary school, have the chance to obtain a formally recognized certificate of completion of primary school;
- Short **professional training programs**, which in ideal cases are carried out by employers in a real work environment. Although these programs are represented among the standard services of the active employment policy of EAM, it seems that they do not realize their full potential.

To enhance their effectiveness for young people without or with low qualifications, these programs should be specially designed and promoted to meet the specific needs of this targeted youth population.

One of the activities within the education system for young people is **career counselling**. It is a process that lasts throughout all levels of education, and for which different actors are responsible. Since the 2014/2015 school year, 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup>-grade elementary school students in Montenegro have the option to choose “Professional orientation” as an optional subject. The prerequisite for offering this subject at school is that there is a teacher who has completed accredited training approved by the National Council for Education. In 2015, the professional teachers training programs “Professional orientation in primary schools” and “Career orientation in secondary schools”, were accredited. In the 2016/2017 school year, the program “Career management skills in secondary vocational schools” also received accreditation. Schools formed career guidance and counselling teams<sup>25</sup> comprised of teachers who completed the training. These teams are expected to engage in a series of activities, including informing the teachers’ council about career guidance and counselling, establishing the team itself, creating the annual plan and program of the team’s work, ensuring support from the school administration, seeking input from parents and other relevant stakeholders, and providing career counselling and guidance to students according to the planned programs.

Furthermore, the National Euroguidance Center (NEC)<sup>26</sup>, established in 2017 as part of the Ministry of Education and the European Network of National Centres, promotes the European dimension in this field, provides information on education and career guidance systems in Europe and encourages mobility through information on learning and training opportunities in European countries.

The Office for Career Guidance and Counselling (CGC) supports school teams with CGC manuals, guides and questionnaires for students, and carries out research in order to prepare further activities. This office provides continuous support to school teams for career guidance and counselling, which exist in every primary and secondary school in Montenegro.

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 25 *Career guidance and counselling in vocational schools: Handbook for vocational schools’ teachers*, Ministry of Education of Montenegro, 2017. Available at: [http://www.europasscrnagora.me/euroguidance/images/dokumenti/Karijerno%20vodjenje%20A4\\_1.pdf](http://www.europasscrnagora.me/euroguidance/images/dokumenti/Karijerno%20vodjenje%20A4_1.pdf)

26 Webpage available at: <http://www.europasscrnagora.me/euroguidance/index.php>

In addition to the two previously mentioned ministries, the Employment Agency of Montenegro (EAM) plays a central role in the labour market by facilitating the matching of supply and demand through employment mediation. Moreover, EAM provides various opportunities for professional guidance and job search assistance, offering information and counselling to its beneficiaries, including young people.

In addition to the two previously mentioned ministries, the central role in the labour market is played by the [Employment Agency of Montenegro](#) (EAM), as its main task is to match supply and demand in the market through employment mediation. Additionally, EAM offers a number of opportunities for professional guidance and job search through the provision of information and counselling to its beneficiaries, including young people.

Young people are proportionally represented in active employment policy programs, constituting 37% of beneficiaries offered by EAM, while simultaneously accounting for 36% of registered unemployed individuals. If we take into account that young people are the only specific category for which specialized measures have been designed, apart from those intended for professional rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities, we can conclude that they are certainly in the focus of employment policymakers.

Nevertheless, EAM faces numerous challenges. Primarily, [insufficient attention](#) is given to [young people without qualifications](#). Although this category of young people can participate in all available measures, provided they meet the eligibility criteria, the only active employment policy program tailored to this group, aimed at enhancing their professional competences, consists of short-term professional trainings provided by authorized institutions. These trainings typically include both theoretical (30%) and practical (70%) components.

The newly established online registration platform, initially designed for the registration of potential seasonal workers, could be useful in solving the problem of low participation of young people, particularly those with limited qualifications. This service can facilitate the registration process, adapt it to the needs and habits of young people, and enable online registration from remote rural areas. This platform will be presented to the general public and promoted.

To address this, EAM must undergo adaptation to meet the challenges of modern Montenegrin society, currently undergoing digital transformation. This preparation will ensure the institution is equipped to fulfil its role in implementing new, more efficient youth support programs.

The primary challenge is the [reform of the organizational, procedural, management and service delivery structures](#) of the EAM.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, EAM management should be prepared to [redistribute the human resources](#) within the institution, prioritizing an increase in staff dedicated to direct beneficiary contact over management and administrative positions. This adjustment is crucial, particularly in response to the implementation of the Youth Guarantee program, for which the EAM serves as the main implementing partner in Montenegro.

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<sup>27</sup> *Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) - Mapping and Policy Pointers*, ILO, 2022



The **Youth Guarantee** is a program launched by the European Commission initiated in 2013 and reinforced in 2020<sup>28</sup> as a political commitment of all EU Member States to give all young people under the age of 30 a **good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship** within four months of either leaving formal education or becoming unemployed.

The Youth Guarantee has created opportunities for young people at the EU level and acted as a powerful driver for structural reforms and innovation. In a period of seven years, the percentage of young people neither in employment nor in education or training across the EU decreased approximately by 1.7 million.

The revised Youth Guarantee encompasses **four phases**:

- **Mapping and early intervention** – Youth Guarantee should be designed and implemented jointly through partnerships involving governmental institutions at central, regional and local level, the private sector business sector, education and training institutions, NGOs and youth associations, given the cross-cutting nature of youth employment policies;
- **Outreach to unregistered NEETs** – involving design of the outreach programmes for the hard-to reach NEETs, identifying the best way to involve partnerships between the social services, employment services, community groups and youth NGOs to reach out to marginalised NEET groups;
- **Preparation i.e. new activation measures** – prevention measures to tackle early leaving from education and training by disadvantaged; strengthening of the existing, and more intensive measures of active employment policy for less advantaged young people such as NEETs with low and medium levels of education;
- **Offer** – labour market integration through making quality offer to young people.

The Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans<sup>29</sup>, published by the European Commission (EC) in October 2020, proposes the implementation of Youth Guarantee schemes in the Western Balkans in four phases throughout the 2021–2027 period with financial support provided from IPA funds. The mentioned stages include:

- **Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans**;
- **Preparatory work** – capacity building of stakeholders and authorities, resources made available, mechanism and systems enhanced, feasibility and technical studies;
- **Pilot phase** – to test the measures that have been planned on the new intake of NEETs who have been identified through the outreach program in a selected number of local authority areas;
- **Rollout to full implementation** – based on the evaluation of the pilot phase, modifications will be made to the Youth Guarantee plan, and commence with its full implementation.

The implementation of the first phase of the Youth Guarantee program in the

28 *The reinforced Youth Guarantee*, European Commission. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en>

29 *Questions and Answers: Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans*, Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro. Available at: [https://www.ceas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/pitanja-i-odgovori-ekonomsko-investicioni-plan-za-zapadni-balkan\\_me](https://www.ceas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/pitanja-i-odgovori-ekonomsko-investicioni-plan-za-zapadni-balkan_me)

Western Balkans countries will commence once the countries commit to set up inter-ministerial task forces involving relevant stakeholders to design Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans. In Montenegro, the initiative to introduce Youth Guarantees followed in 2022, with the establishment of an intersectoral Working Team that gathers representatives of the [Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare](#) (program coordinator), [the Employment Agency](#), the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Sports and Youth, as well as representatives of the civil sector. Although Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan was initially expected to be finished and adopted in 2022, the process is still ongoing.

The first [Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan in Montenegro](#) is intended to cover the period from 2023 to 2026<sup>30</sup>, with the piloting of the service provision system planned for 2025 and 2026. This timeframe will allow for:

- [Implementation](#) of necessary changes in the legal system;
- [Adoption](#) of required policy reforms within the EAM for managing the Youth Guarantee service provision system and establishment of a monitoring mechanism;
- Development of a plan for introducing the Youth Guarantee based on lessons learned from the piloting phase. The piloting of the Youth Guarantee service provision system will be conducted in three regions (northern, central, and coastal).

An important institutional partner in improving the position of the NEET population is the [Ministry of Economic Development and Tourism](#) (MEDT). Its primary focus is to support the creation of conducive economic environment, ultimately leading to increased employment rates and a more competitive market. Representatives of the Ministry are involved in creating policies relevant to young people as part of their regular activities.

However, more notable efforts are evident in ad-hoc initiatives and funding programs aimed at promoting youth entrepreneurship. For instance, in 2022, the Youth Employment Support Program was developed to enhance the educational, training, and employment opportunities for young people in Montenegro prior to the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. The program included five measures aimed at enhancing the employability and employment prospects of young individuals<sup>31</sup>.

This ministry not only manages the standard funding program for non-governmental organizations, but also serves as the responsible program authority for various grant schemes funded by the EU. These schemes are implemented by the Directorate for Finance and Contracting of the EU Assistance Funds (CFCU).

The best example of this support is the grant scheme titled “Enhancing the Competitiveness of SMEs through Support for Women and Youth Entrepreneurship,”

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 30 Representatives of the Employment Agency participated in the meeting of the Working Team for the introduction and implementation of the “Youth Guarantee” program. Available at: <https://www.zzzcg.me/predstavnici-zavoda-za-zaposljavanje-ucestvovovali-na-sastanku-radnog-tima-za-uvodenje-i-implementaciju-programa-garancija-za-mlade/>

31 The measures included, among others, support for the training and employment of young people for inspection work, support for young people in agricultural development, and grant schemes for youth employment. Available at: <https://wapi.gov.me/download-preview/8def027b-cd7b-441f-81c5-7ac720c4bfd8?version=1.0>

with a total value of 300,000 euros. This scheme aims to strengthen the capacities of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) managed by women and young people through direct grant support, with the aim of contributing to economic growth.

Through the Program for Improving the Competitiveness of the Economy for 2022, the Ministry has planned the implementation of measures that should contribute to a better environment for the economic activity of young people and women, especially through specific support lines for equipment procurement. However, there is a lack of clear recognition and tailored support for young people seeking to start businesses, particularly those with limited opportunities.

Among the institutional bodies, it's important to highlight the **Investment and Development Fund**<sup>32</sup> (IDF), established by the Government and operational since 2010. The Fund's activities and financial support are aligned with the Government's work program, aiming to create conditions for greater employment, increased work activity, and employee mobility, particularly through support for special target groups. One of these key groups is young people.

Recognizing the importance of fostering entrepreneurship, the Fund established credit lines aimed at incentivizing target groups to launch their own businesses under more favourable financing conditions than those offered by commercial banks. As of the end of 2022, it was reported that over the previous 18 months, 128 projects to enhance youth entrepreneurship had been implemented, with a total value of approximately 24 million euros.

In 2023, the introduction of an investment loan program for young entrepreneurs<sup>33</sup> was announced. This initiative aims to stimulate the establishment and growth of micro and small businesses owned by Montenegrin citizens under the age of 35. The program is specifically tailored to support young people, facilitating their successful entry into the entrepreneurial sphere. Loans provided by the program can be used for various purposes, including investments in fixed assets such as construction facilities, equipment, long-term crops, and intangible assets like patents, copyrights, and franchises, as well as for working capital.

Significant obstacles faced by young people when applying for loans provided by the Fund include limited access to collateral, inadequate technical knowledge, lack of experience, and appropriate guidance in developing a business plan, as well as navigating the required administrative and technical procedures. In recent years, the Fund has shown a greater openness by offering tailored support to special target groups, with particular emphasis on young people and women. This, along with the proposed transformation of the IDF into a **Development Bank**<sup>34</sup>, could further facilitate access to financial resources for citizens interested in entrepreneurship.

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32 Available at: <https://www.irfcg.me/>

33 *Development loans for micro, small, and medium-sized businesses*, Investment and Development Fund. Available at: [https://www.irfcg.me/images/documents/Linije\\_2023/PRG-13-6\\_Razvojni\\_kredit\\_i\\_za\\_mikro\\_mali\\_i\\_srednji\\_biznis.pdf](https://www.irfcg.me/images/documents/Linije_2023/PRG-13-6_Razvojni_kredit_i_za_mikro_mali_i_srednji_biznis.pdf)

34 *Radović for Daily Vijesti: The Development Bank will enable more funds from the EU*, Daily Vijesti (06.08.2023.). Available at: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/ekonomija/668424/irena-radovic-za-vijesti-razvojna-banka-ce-omoguciti-vise-novca-iz-eu>



**IV NEET youth  
in Montenegro**

The percentage of NEET individuals in the overall youth population correlates with general trends in the Montenegrin economy. Namely, from 2015 to 2018, the NEET rate decreased slightly from 23.4% to 21.0% of young people.

Subsequently, this indicator reached its peak at 26.6% of the total youth population in 2020, coinciding with the downturn of the Montenegrin economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following year, 2021, was characterized by stagnation, with the NEET rate remaining at 26.5%<sup>35</sup>.

A significant decline in the NEET rate was recorded only in 2022, which represents the year of recovery of the domestic economy - according to LFS data for the given year, the NEET population comprised slightly less than a quarter of the total youth population, i.e. 23.2% of them, which is about 32,200 young people aged from 15 to 29 years.

For comparison, EUROSTAT<sup>36</sup> data for 2022 indicate that the average NEET rate in the EU is 11.7%, with Romania (19.8%) and Italy (19.0%) reporting the highest rates. Among Montenegro's neighbouring countries, EUROSTAT has data from 2022 only for Croatia and Serbia, and in both countries the NEET rates are lower than in Montenegro, with Croatia recording a rate of 13.3% and Serbia 15.1%.

In order to better understand the characteristics of NEET youth in Montenegro, the table below presents data that more closely describe the composition of this population group. The table was created based on LFS data for the period 2020-2022.

**In 2022, the NEET population among young people comprised 23.2%, totalling approximately 32,200 individuals aged 15 to 29.**

Year	Age		Gender		Educational attainment			Labour force status		Region		
	15-24	25-29	Men	Women	ISCED 0-2	ISCED 3-4	ISCED 5-8	Unemployed	Inactive	Coastal	Central	Northern
2020	51.1	48.9	51.1	48.9	11.7	60.2	28.1	51.4	48.6	17.4	44.2	38.4
2021	48.6	51.4	54.9	45.1	8.5	63.3	28.1	53.5	46.5	19.6	42.0	38.4
2022	53.3	46.7	54.6	45.4	7.2	66.6	26.2	58.6	41.4	11.8	47.9	40.3

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the NEET population (data presented in %)

<sup>35</sup> In absolute values, this share amounts to about 35,900 young people aged 15 to 29.

<sup>36</sup> Participation rate of young people in education and training by sex, age and labour status (incl. NEET rates), EUROSTAT. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat\\_lfse\\_18/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_18/default/table?lang=en)

The composition of NEET youth in terms of age underwent significant changes between 2021 and 2022. While the percentage figures suggest a rise in the number of NEET youth aged 15-24, the absolute values reveal a different scenario. The NEET population within this age bracket remained nearly unchanged (decreasing from around 17,400 to 17,100 in 2022). However, the percentage difference emerged due to a **sudden decrease in the NEET population among those aged 25-29**, who entered the labour market during the recovery of the Montenegrin economy<sup>37</sup>.

In terms of gender structure, **the proportion of men** in the NEET group in 2022 is higher than that of women (54.6% versus 45.4%), which is almost identical to the previous year's results. This information sets Montenegro apart from the predominant trend in European countries, where the NEET population is mainly composed of women. Regarding educational attainment, the data reveal relatively **high rates** of NEET youth among **university graduates**<sup>38</sup>. Additionally, the proportion of youth with tertiary education has notably increased since 2020<sup>39</sup>. These findings highlight several significant phenomena that must be considered when discussing the NEET population, including the rising level of education and the growing challenges young people encounter when entering the labour market. Furthermore, it suggests that reforms within the Montenegrin educational system may not yet be effectively reducing the NEET rate, and additional measures may be necessary.

**Within the NEET youth demographic, a significant proportion consists of graduate students, with a noticeable trend indicating an increase in their representation since 2020 compared to previous years.**

Examining the employment status of NEET youth reveals two distinct groups: the **unemployed** and the **inactive** i.e. young individuals who are not part of the labour force population and are **not actively seeking employment**. In recent years, there has been a noticeable trend towards an increase in the proportion of NEET youth who are unemployed. In 2020, they accounted for 51.4% of the total NEET youth population, a figure that rose to 58.6% by 2022. The decrease in the proportion of inactive NEET youth during this period can be attributed primarily to a significant decrease in the number of men in this category, dropping from 8,600 in 2021 to 5,700 in 2022. Additionally, it's worth noting that the **proportion of women in the inactive NEET youth** category remains **higher** than that of men, largely due to family responsibilities.

In terms of geographical distribution, the largest proportion of NEET youth resides in the central region of Montenegro, accounting for 47.9% of the total, followed by 40.3% in the northern region, while the smallest portion is found on the coast, comprising only 11.8%. The most significant decrease in the percentage of NEET youth between 2020 and 2022 occurred on the **coast**, suggesting that the **labour market is most active** in this area of Montenegro.

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37 A decrease in the number of NEET youth within the 25-29 age group was observed, dropping from approximately 18,500 in 2021 to about 15,000 in 2022.

38 The corresponding rate in the EU in 2020 was 10.7% and in Montenegro 28.1% (*Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) - Mapping and Policy Pointers*, ILO, 2022)

39 For example, the proportion of NEET youth with tertiary education was 21.1% in 2017.

While the information that 47.9% of NEET youth resides in the central region<sup>40</sup> is significant, it does not indicate which region has the highest NEET youth population rate. The central region may have the largest number of NEET youth simply because it is the most densely populated area of Montenegro. Therefore, to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the NEET population, it is necessary not only to analyse data on NEET youth cross-tabulated with socio-demographic subcategories, but also to consider the number of NEET youth as a subset of the larger group – the **general population of youth aged 15 to 29** in Montenegro. This data is provided in the table below.

Year	Age		Gender		Educational attainment			Region		
	15-24	25-29	Men	Women	ISCED 0-2	ISCED 3-4	ISCED 5-8	Coastal	Central	Northern
2021	20.2	37.5	28.3	24.6	8.6	30.9	38.3	22.8	23.2	35.0
2022	20.0	28.4	24.6	21.7	7.3	27.5	29.1	11.9	23.0	32.6

Table 2: NEET rates (data presented in %)

According to LFS data for 2022, the NEET status is notably more prevalent among individuals aged 25-29 (28.4%) compared to those aged 15-24 (20.0%). This trend is intuitive as a significant portion of individuals under 24 are still pursuing education and therefore not classified as NEET. Interestingly, the NEET rate among individuals aged 15-24 remained relatively stable across both periods, while there was a marked decrease in the 25-29 age cohort, dropping from 37.5% in 2021 to 28.4% in 2022. This suggests that older individuals within this cohort have become more active in the labour market with the recovery of the Montenegrin economy. Additionally, it's worth noting that men are more frequently part of the NEET cohort; in 2022, nearly one in four men and one in five women aged 15-29 were classified as NEET.

When it comes to the regions, NEET individuals are most prevalent **in the northern region**, with almost **a third of young people** (32.6%) residing there in 2022 belonging to the NEET group. Similar proportions apply to **a quarter of young people** in the **central region** and **one-ninth** of those in the **coastal region**. Comparing the last two rounds of the LFS survey, we observe that nearly the entire decrease in the NEET rate during the 2021-2022 period occurred due to increased **employment on the coast**, where the NEET youth population was halved (reducing from 22.8% to 11.9%). In contrast, the decrease in the northern region was marginal, while in the central region, it remained nearly unchanged.

As previously mentioned, NEET represents a common term for a **heterogeneous group of young people**. It cannot be observed in a one-dimensional manner, as it encompasses various factors, characteristics, and needs of the individuals within it. Consequently, the NEET population is typically divided into **7 subgroups**.

<sup>40</sup> See previous paragraph.

Within the group of unemployed NEET youth, we distinguish between **short-term unemployed**<sup>41</sup> and **long-term unemployed**<sup>42</sup>. Inactive youth are divided based on the reason for their inactivity into five different groups:

- **Discouraged young people** – They believe there are no job opportunities and have stopped looking for employment;
- **Young people with illness or disability** – They are not seeking employment due to illness or disability, including those receiving social support;
- **Inactive young people due to family responsibilities** – They cannot work because they are caring for children or incapacitated adults;
- **Inactive for personal reasons** – This group includes those who take care of friends or non-relative persons, desire more free time, prefer not to work full time, move/change their place of residence, take extended vacations, or focus on travel, hobbies, or other activities like volunteering;
- **Inactive for other reasons** – This heterogeneous group includes the most vulnerable, as well as those who can afford not to work.

When discussing the NEET population, it is recommended to analyse each subgroup individually rather than treating them as a single percentage.

Due to the change in regulations, and therefore the LFS questionnaire, the data for the period from 2021 are not comparable with earlier ones. Therefore, the table below shows the categorization of NEET persons for 2021 and 2022.

Year	Unemployed NEET		Inactive NEET				
	Short-term unemployed	Long-term unemployed	Discouraged	Illness or disability	Family responsibilities/ care	Personal reasons	Other reasons
2021	23.2	30.3	7.8	3.2	8.4	6.1	20.9
2022	25.6	33.1	9.8	1.3	6.7	8.8	14.7

Table 3: NEET youth by subgroups (data presented in %)

As stated earlier, the overwhelming majority of NEET youth are **unemployed**, meaning they are **actively looking for work**. Their collective share was 53.5% in 2021, increasing to 58.7% in 2022. However, despite the decrease in the NEET rate during the observed period, there was only a slight decrease in the number of unemployed NEET individuals, from 19,200 to 18,900 young people in 2022. Within the group of unemployed individuals classified as NEET, a higher percentage of those unemployed for more than one year was recorded compared to short-term unemployed individuals in both observed years. This is concerning because long-term unemployment often leads to a decline in the knowledge and skills that young people possess, making it even more difficult for them to find employment.

A larger percentage of both short-term and long-term unemployed individuals are men. In 2022, according to LFS estimates, approximately 11,900 men and 7,000 women belonged to this group. Additionally, NEET youth with ter-

41 Young people seeking employment for less than a year.

42 Young people seeking employment for more than a year.



tiary education have a higher likelihood of experiencing long-term unemployment. This can be attributed to two factors: firstly, young people with higher education may be more selective in their job search, seeking positions that meet their criteria for earnings and working conditions, given the level of education they possess. Secondly, this data may also suggest an oversupply of university graduates, which the Montenegrin economy cannot absorb with its current characteristics. Furthermore, long-term unemployment is notably more prevalent in the northern region of Montenegro compared to other areas.

Inactive young people constitute a significant portion of the NEET population, with the largest percentage falling into the category of those who are detached from the labour market for other, unspecified reasons. In 2021, this group accounted for 20.9% or 7,400 individuals, decreasing to 4,500 the following year. This raises particular concerns since without clearly defined causes, it is not possible to create a quality response. Additionally, it's worrying that one in ten NEET individuals are discouraged, perceiving insufficient opportunities or lacking the necessary skills for employment. Surprisingly, the majority of this subgroup comprises individuals aged 15-24 who are just entering the labour market. According to LFS estimates, this age group accounts for approximately 2,000 out of a total of around 3,200 discouraged young people.

Unlike the unemployed, the majority of inactive NEETs are women. According to LFS estimates, about 7,200 of them were inactive in 2022, compared to 5,400 men. Among those inactive for family reasons, women make up a particularly significant portion, accounting for approximately 30% of women aged 15 to 29.

**Of particular concern is the observation that, in both 2021 and 2022, a higher percentage within the group of unemployed individuals classified as NEET remained unemployed FOR MORE THAN ONE YEAR compared to those who were short-term unemployed.**

**Every tenth NEET individual in Montenegro is discouraged, meaning they believe they lack sufficient opportunities or skills for employment**

The background consists of numerous diagonal stripes in various shades of blue, ranging from light to dark, creating a dynamic, geometric pattern. A white rectangular box is centered on the page, containing the title text.

**V Opinions  
of the youth**

**A**fter presenting the analysis of the available data on policies, institutional forms of support and characteristics of the NEET population in Montenegro, this section will provide an overview of their opinions and findings of the qualitative and quantitative research.

The analytical part of the report focused on several subjects that can be grouped into five areas: formal and non-formal education; career counselling; development of skills in demand in the labour market, and work experience.

It should be, however, noted that the limited time available for the focus groups and the group interview dynamics prevented equal representation of all the topics. Although we were interested in hearing the responses to all of the topics, we allowed participants to decide which ones deserved more time and discussion. This implies that certain issues cannot be considered non-problematic just because they were not discussed in detail. As stated above, the quantitative research data was used to supplement the focus groups findings.

### Formal education

Formal education, which implies the knowledge acquired in schools and universities, represents the most important investment in human capital. The set-up of the education system, quality of education and length of schooling directly impact an individual's level of knowledge and skills, and thus also the labour market supply.

At the same time, the relationship between education and the labour market has to be a complementary one, and the strategic documents regulating these two sectors in Montenegro intended to stipulate that.

As presented in the section with the desk analysis findings, the process of the education system reform started and achieved certain progress. This part of the research focuses on the extent to which the Montenegrin education system offers youth the opportunity to gain knowledge and competencies and its alignment with the actual demands of the labour market.

We started the focus group discussion by asking about the perception of the education system in Montenegro.

The participants from all four focus groups included in the research believe that the Montenegrin education system in principle **cannot adequately prepare a young person for the labour market**. The factors that impact this can be divided into three groups: systematic, personal and material.

Young people report that the **main systemic characteristic** of formal education in Montenegro is that it is **outdated**, with one participant from Nikšić saying:

*“...Everything is on an inferior level, at least that’s my opinion. Everything is a set routine, as if it were not the 21st Century. Nothing has changed in the last fifty years, no one puts in any effort, even*

**Participants in all focus groups included in the research agree that the Montenegrin education system does not adequately prepare young individuals for the labour market.**

*the conditions for education are very bad in 90% of the cases...“  
(female high school student from Nikšić, 19)*

Even though it is often pointed out that the Montenegrin education system, unlike the ones in the western countries, provides comprehensive general knowledge, that is also predominantly perceived as a flaw, as it causes a **curriculum overload**:

*“...We can’t properly do the work for 14 school subjects at the same time. It is so hard, I mean, I have high grades and all that, but I can barely manage...” (female high school student from Nikšić, 19)*

Along with the outdated teaching methods and the curriculum overload, the participants from all four focus groups see *the lack of practice* as the key problem of the Montenegrin education system. A female student from Podgorica reports:

*“...As for the university studies, I would prefer if we had more practical work or public lessons where we would have more opportunities to interact with relevant people, that would be my only complaint.” (female university student from Podgorica, 21)*

The participants agree that the Montenegrin education system does not encourage creativity, but instead rewards repetition and conventional thinking. They claim that in schools and universities they were expected to *“learn only from the book, which is not only non-practical but often boring”*. They further say that the teachers rarely ask the students to apply critical thinking and *“use their brains”*, which causes stagnation of the students’ skills and knowledge.

Additional problems in gaining practical knowledge are related to the fact that, even when it exists as a part of the education system, it is not implemented in a way preferable to students. Most participants report that the **mentors are not interested** in working with the persons who are in the process of education, and that practical work is reduced to a mere formality, *“so that we take a photo as a proof that the project was implemented”* (female, 16 years of age, high school, Podgorica). The following example provided by a female student from Rožaje is very illustrative:

*“...This ‘practice’ is not an actual practice in the true sense of the word; I heard that a lot of students had negative experiences with that type of work... Even though you may formally be a trainee, you can’t really learn about the way the institution operates, as no one really wants to dedicate some time to guide you through the institution’s method of work. And then there is not much sense to it...” (female, 21 years of age, faculty, Rožaje)*

The situation in **vocational schools** is slightly better, as their curricula include practical work in tourism, hospitality or crafts. A female participant from Cetinje highlights:

*“...Throughout the four years of education we learn about the whole process of starting a business. When we leave school, each one of*

*us can start something on our own. We even draft and submit our business plans to the teacher, which she returns once the year is over so we can even put them into practice. It is really useful...”(female, 17 years of age, high school, Cetinje)*

Even though the mentioned systemic flaws have an impact on all the youth in the education process, **vulnerable groups** such as the Roma and the Egyptians are **especially affected**. Through the focus groups, we managed to obtain valuable observations from the youth belonging to these communities.

The education-related problems of the Roma and the Egyptians take two forms: on the one hand, they experience neglect by the education system, as they are allowed to pass through it to **showcase the society’s “inclusiveness”** of this population group. However, by doing so the system creates individuals who do not possess the skills and knowledge required for the labour market. One participant discussed this:

*“...Nothing is really solved, but only addressed in a superficial way. This refers to the education system of Montenegro, because I am personally familiar with such examples, and there are still children - not only from the Roma community - that somehow manage to complete primary education but cannot even write their names, which is a huge problem...” (female high school student from Podgorica, 17)*

Of course, the challenges related to accessing formal education that are faced by the members of this community are much broader. First of all, the financial situation of a large number of Roma and Egyptian families should be noted, as they, as our participant puts it, **“can’t afford to educate their children because of the finances”**. (female high school student from Podgorica, 16)

Finally, there are also the limitations imposed on the young Roma and Egyptian people by their environment, primarily their parents and families. According to one of our participants: **“The biggest problem is that the parents don’t really want to let their children go to school. They didn’t go to school themselves and now they can’t see the point of sending their children there, why would their children need that in their lives.”** (female high school student from Nikšić, 20)

The second group of factors, namely the **personal ones**, primarily refer to the **lack of organization, inadequate teaching staff and lack of expertise of the teaching staff**. The participants report that these factors are rooted in the systemic flaws of Montenegrin education. One of them describes the situation at the faculty:

*“...The professors are late, they don’t show up or they don’t inform us that they won’t show up; the exams are being postponed at short notice, the schedules are being changed as well, so for example in this semester we have two different classes scheduled at the same time...It is all so chaotic...” (male university student from Ulcinj, 23)*

The participants stress that the **teaching staff need support programs** to be able to contribute to the development of the young generations. Even though

they admit that a large number of teachers perform their tasks and duties professionally, they say that many do not know how to transfer the skills and knowledge required for the labour market.

One of the major problems is the lack of interest among some of the teaching staff, and members across all four groups provide examples:

*“...The question is who exactly gets to work with our children, right? Some teachers are simply not interested in what the child in front of them might be facing, whether that child suffers peer violence outside the school... The teacher has a curriculum to follow, goes through the lecture and then heads home...” (female high school student from Podgorica, 17)*

Furthermore, young people highlight that *“there are teachers who really don’t have a clue”*, do not like their jobs and or want to teach young people, who are only interested in getting paid their wage and finishing their working day as early as possible, and *“if they are nervous, they vent it on us”*, in the words of one participant (female high school student from Nikšić, 15). The participants also report that the teachers *often swear and use violence*, especially towards junior students, and influence students by expressing attitudes which are far from the ethical values they are supposed to promote. As one participant stresses:

*“...I witnessed a situation where a teacher said to the students that they should not befriend the poor as they would bring them down to their own level...” (male high school student from Podgorica, 18)*

Another challenge that can be categorized under this factor is the *“school ranking”*, caused by the society’s pressure and advocated by some teachers. Namely, a number of participants state that some teachers, even when speaking to them, say that some schools, for example general-program high schools, are better than the ones they attend, which has a negative effect on *their motivation*.

The labour market balance suffers even greater consequences given the fact that *some young people do not enrol the vocational courses they prefer* because of the pressure coming from their parents or peer group and choose the general options instead, such as general-program high schools or the university course on law or economy, perceived by the society as being more prestigious. This phenomenon is well described by one of the participants:

*“...We have a class for the future mechanics, for example, but he did not enrol there because that’s where those who can’t get anywhere else go, and he was a good student and that is why he went to the general-program high school...” (female high school student from Nikšić, 17)*

The material factors most often relate to *old school facilities*, excessive *student numbers* in some educational institutions and *inadequate school inventories*. One focus group participant says:

*“...The roof started to leak with the first rain, yet the teachers said that it had been renovated. There are so many flaws...” (female high school student from Nikšić, 17)*

school student from Cetinje, 16)

The participants also report that the students themselves do not take much care about the education facilities:

*“As for the school itself, the classrooms could really do with some renovation because they are in bad shape. Everything is broken and people don’t pay much attention (...) Kids from other high schools come over all the time, they break the windows and doors, shout, disturb the classes and I think that something should be done about it “.* (female high school student from Nikšić, 15)

### Non-formal education

If we consider the examples presented above, it becomes clear that the education system in Montenegro is predominantly focused on acquiring theoretical knowledge, while practical teaching, if any, is only present in its rudimentary form.

However, since practical knowledge is highly valued by potential employers and is hard to gain through the official education system, young people steer towards **non-formal education** as a useful way to learn practical skills. Because of this, we decided to speak with the focus group participants about their opinions on these forms of education.

Each of the four focus groups included participants who were pursuing non-formal education at the time or had pursued it in the past. They **gave a positive assessment of non-formal education in most cases**, acknowledging at the same time that it can **only supplement, rather than replace formal education**.

They pointed out that it additionally developed the skills required for the labour market, such as team work, flexibility, critical thinking or leadership. At the same time, non-formal education led to **networking with other people and getting potentially useful contacts** for future career, so one participant said that *“she made so many friends throughout Montenegro purely because of the workshops“* (female high school student from Cetinje, 16).

One female participant from Podgorica states that opportunities for non-formal education are far more frequent than before:

*“..When I was 14 or 15 it was unthinkable for me to go to Budva or Žabljak on a three-day seminar, and the kids and young people, for example those engaged in the work of my NGO, have the opportunity to do that now. They travel all the time, enjoy themselves, they go abroad, and that part of being trained abroad is especially useful.“* (female university student from Podgorica, 20)

**Focus group participants highlight that non-formal education contributes to the development of skills needed for the labour market, including teamwork, flexibility, critical thinking, and leadership skills.**

Even though young people predominantly have a positive attitude towards non-formal education, they also clearly see its negative aspects.

First of all, they report that the activities related to non-formal education are predominantly based in Podgorica and the central region of Montenegro, which puts the youth of the northern and southern parts of the country in an unequal position. Our focus group participant from Ulcinj and Petnjica explain:

*“Non-formal education is virtually non-existent in my town. There is no such thing in Ulcinj, from time to time some NGOs come to visit us, like once in two years, and that’s about all. We don’t even have a youth club, unlike most of the other towns in the country. (...) I did not even know what informal education is until I went to Podgorica, and then I got engaged in it, starting with soft skill workshops, programs etc.” (male university student from Ulcinj, 23)*

*“...The centre of non-formal education in Montenegro is in Podgorica. We need to ask the schools here to provide us with space if we want to organize training, but in Podgorica there is the resource centre, youth centre, youth club, many more options when it comes to finding adequate space.” (female university student from Petnjica, 20)*

At the same time, young people report that organizers of non-formal education workshops do the school ranking mentioned before. They say that it is usually the general-program high school students who get invited to workshops and trainings, while those from other schools are neglected. A female participant from Cetinje said:

*“...The general-program high school is important, that’s their main focus: their students get invited, while the rest are to complete secondary school and then get a summer job... They act as if those kids are the only ones interested in doing something and the rest are those who could not enrol the general-program high school, that’s their stance. I also completed primary school with top grades, I could have gone to the general-program high school, but I didn’t want to because I was more interested in my current school.” (female high school student from Cetinje, 17)*

A major problem is the fact that some of the organizations engage in non-formal education not to improve the skills and knowledge of young people but to achieve their own lucrative goals. A focus group participant from Podgorica describes her experience:

*“...I proposed several workshops, and she (project coordinator) replied – yeah yeah, the next one is yours. We took a photo and that was it, I never heard a word about it again. I could have stayed home and enjoyed myself or gone somewhere else, but I went there to make a contribution, only to be used for that photo so they could send it to the donors, as it turned out.” (female high school student from Podgorica, 17)*



The participants mentioned the potential limitations related to participation in these forms of education, as a number of organizations demand that **participants use their own equipment**, such as laptops, which is out of reach of the young people of poorer background.

One of the limitations is related to the **information on the opportunities and resources** for non-formal education. Young people stress that it is very hard to enter the circle of those engaged in non-formal education, that getting information is not easy and that most of their peers do not even know where to look for such information. They say that they get most information from their peers who already participate in non-formal education, and that social networks such as Instagram and Viber groups<sup>43</sup> also serve as good sources of information.

The survey participants agree – when asked **about their preferred way of receiving information** about education and employment opportunities, 74 out of 105 answered that they preferred **social networks**, with 63 choosing the official websites of companies, organizations and institutions. **The official employment channels were the least popular** – with 43 out of 105 participants answering that the website of the Montenegrin Employment Agency was an acceptable source of information, and only 23 persons saying the same about appointments with employment counsellors. This was a **multiple-choice** question, i.e. a question that allowed multiple answers, so the number of answers received was higher than the total number of participants.

Finally, the limitations of the qualitative research methods should be reiterated – most of the focus group participants are engaged in various types of non-formal education. However, **that is not the case with the majority of their peers** – they say that *“they always meet the same people in workshops, because no one else wants to participate”*. One focus group participant explained:

*“...I am 26, so I am a bit older than them, and speaking from my experience I would say that the young people are very apathetic and that they generally do only what they really have to.” (female university student from Podgorica, 26)*

Young people stress that schools have to be more active in promoting these programs:

*“We spend half of the day in school and I reckon that it would be best to inform children in schools, through class teachers. We have been active in our Viber groups since the start of the Covid pandemic - I hope it is over now - but we still use them so we could share the links there.” (female high school student from Podgorica, 16)*

Non-formal education is important to the survey participants, with a majority of them (75 out of 105) saying that they **took part in a course, seminar or training in the past two years**. When it comes to getting a diploma or a certificate for a specific qualification, 53 participants stated that they **got a diploma**, 42 that they **did not**, while 10 participants were not sure. Most diplomas refer to **IT skills, foreign language certificates and attendance certificates for human**

<sup>43</sup> Such as the Viber group of the Youth Club Budva, mentioned by several participants from all four focus groups and the young people who filled out the survey questionnaire.

rights courses.

Even though the share of those with non-formal education experience is high, that is primarily attributable to the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. The rebuttable presumption is that this share is much lower among the general youth population.

### Career counselling

Learning and developing skills for a secure career path management is defined in the European Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies<sup>44</sup> as one of the priorities when designing the national policies in the field of career guidance.

Youth career counselling, recognized by the Montenegrin system during formal education and also after its completion, should contribute to the higher efficiency of youth in the labour market and higher employability.

As indicated in the desk review findings, Montenegrin schools and universities have career services, along with the national services for career counselling provided by the Montenegrin Employment Agency. Through qualitative and quantitative research, we attempted to find out to what extent these services helped young people identify their own capabilities, skills and interests and make decisions concerning their education and professional pathway.

Still, young people say that, when it comes to the process of selecting courses and occupations, they ask their **parents and siblings for advice**.

*“The biggest support comes from the family, it is the most important. People are usually judgemental and will judge whatever we do, so I think we have all realized that we should not pay any attention to that.” (female high school student from Nikšić, 17)*

*“For example, my elder sisters told me about the school subjects in the economic high school, they told me about the courses and so on. “ (male high school student from Nikšić, 15)*

Young people, though, claim that sometimes their **families' opinions** can also be a **limiting factor**, especially when the parents' desires do not match their choices. Such cases are **more frequent in the minority communities**, as parents fear that their child will not fit in the new environment and will become victims of discrimination. One focus group participant from the Roma community describes his experience with starting high school:

*“My mom and dad supported me, but they didn't want me to leave the town – it's not your town, (...) you won't fit in, you will be discriminated against, you are Roma. (...) My dad dreamed about me becoming a physician, and then there's me, wanting to leave school. I only spent three days or a week, I am not quite sure, in the art school, the school that I initially wanted to attend, and then I de-*

<sup>44</sup> Council Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies, Council of the European Union. Available at: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/104236.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/104236.pdf)

*cided to enrol the medical school. “(male high school student from Nikšić, 15)*

Besides the parents, young people also mention **non-formal education**, such as visits to state authorities and international organizations and NGOs that enabled them to learn about their work and make decisions about their further education and career.

Conversations with the **individuals already working in the profession** they are interested in are also important. As one focus group participant put it:

*“...For example, the support or conversation with a cook can influence one’s choice of profession. I believe that experienced people can help us this way, because they have already been through it and surely know better than us“(female high school student from Nikšić, 17)*

Finally, some focus group participants highlight the support provided by their primary school **teachers and pedagogical staff**. Most of them, however, say that mentorship programs and career counselling are not sufficiently developed in Montenegro. According to them, parents should act mainly as emotional and financial support, and not professional.

The survey participants point out the **support of their friends and families** in finding adequate opportunities for (non-)formal education and/or employment – 84 out of 105 participants singled out this category. Since this was a **multiple-choice** question, they also mentioned the impact of **volunteering experience** (26 persons) and **traineeship programs** (24 persons), in addition to their families and friends. The figure with the data summary is included in the Annex.

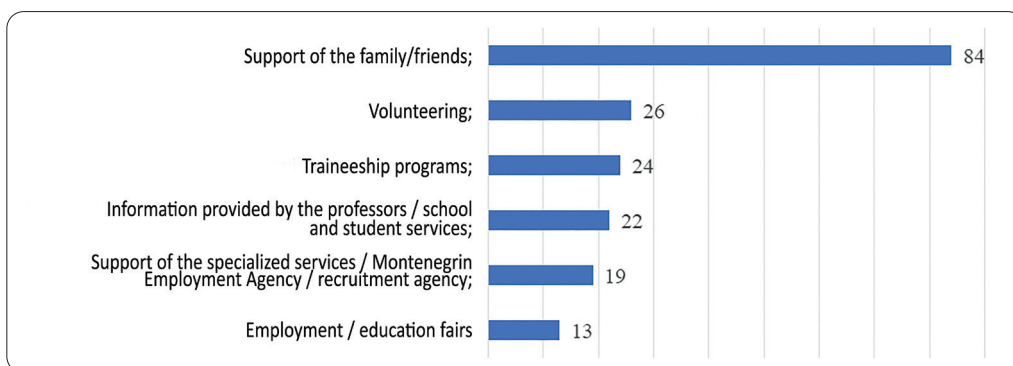


Figure 1: What type of support and assistance that you had or currently have would you select as the most important one when searching for adequate opportunities for formal education and/or other forms of education and/or employment? (multiple answers allowed)

As for professional counselling, young people said that they **lacked conversations with a professional about** future career paths when leaving primary or secondary school. One participant said:

*“...I wish there was someone besides school psychologists or peda-*

*gogues who actually do nothing in most schools anyway, who would act as a proper counsellor – a person who would sit with each final-year student, talk to those children and explain the opportunities, so that they know where to go next, because when they try to do it on their own, not everyone ends up making the right decision“ (female high school student from Cetinje, 17)*

University students are not satisfied with career counselling either. As described by a participant from Podgorica, there is a career centre at her faculty, but in practice it does not operate as a service available to students:

*“... I believe that the role of the career counsellor is very prominent in western countries, both at the high school level and afterwards, yet our pedagogues, psychologists and university staff take the role of administrative clerks, which is a topic in its own right that we could discuss for hours. I would say this answers your question – even though the resources are there, I am not quite sure that they are what they were expected to be“ (female university student from Podgorica, 20)*

Focus group participants mentioned the importance of **job shadowing**<sup>45</sup> and other opportunities to develop the skills required for a specific profession. However, their experiences related to the practical use of this method are different – although some of them believe that this form of work helps them acquire specific skills required for the profession they want to join, most think that such processes are implemented without a proper plan, which affects the quality of acquired knowledge:

*“...I thought that I would be given a list of options for gaining practical knowledge, but no, they never mentioned that. We still don't know when exactly the practical work is going to be held, we don't know our group, etc. As far as this is concerned, the school can't even provide the basic information in time and it is all too casual. It is generally very bad.“ (female high school student from Nikšić, 15)*

### Development of skills in demand in the labour market

The labour market, characterized by strong competition and constant changes, dictates the development of an individual's abilities. Because of this, the adoption and improvement of skills became a key responsibility of the young people themselves.

Focus group participants mentioned several sets of skills they considered necessary for the labour market that they and their peers often lacked, first and foremost **foreign languages**. They said that a large share of young people were not aware of the importance of learning foreign languages regardless of their planned career path, and neglected languages.

Young people highlight the importance of languages for communication with

<sup>45</sup> A type of training at work that enables the interested employee / trainee to monitor and observe another employee who conducts a certain task. This type of learning is usually used to integrate new employees in the organization or introduce them to their roles.

a large number of potential clients, since Montenegro is a tourist country. In addition, they realize that foreign languages are a precondition for education outside Montenegro and the region. A number of focus group participants said that they were not able to attend the courses abroad because they did not meet the language requirements, some of them stating that they were studying languages to continue their education abroad:

*“I have family in the United States, so I could rely on someone there, and I try to make the highest grade in English so I could enrol the best possible college there.” (female high school student from Nikšić, 19)*

Finally, the participants highlight the importance of languages, especially English, as the *lingua franca* in many private companies in Montenegro for in-house communications or communication with clients.

**Soft skills** are also seen as very important. According to the focus group participants, good and efficient team relations in today's highly competitive and profit-oriented work environment cannot be imagined without them. They also say that the full potential of other skills - languages, technical and professional expertise - cannot be fulfilled without these skills:

*“(…) Regardless of our grade or efforts at the faculty, I think that a person in our country can't get a good job without creativity and social capital, so I believe that this is actually the most important segment that we all have to work on.” (female university student from Petnjica, 20)*

*“(…) Communication skills, they are essential. I was the first one who had an issue with that, I study international relations so I need these skills for public speaking; when I had my first public presentation I almost fainted, but then I went to the school of rhetoric and now I have no problem with it.” (male university student from Podgorica, 22)*

Young people also point out the importance of **computer skills**, which is understandable having in mind the automatization and digitalization processes in the field of work. They do not have in mind advanced skills such as coding, which most of their peers are unfamiliar with, but mostly the **basic skills** such as the use of Microsoft Office™ package (Word, Excel, PowerPoint) or email.

All these skills, however, are not enough if young people are not **motivated** to acquire new skills. As one participant from Podgorica said:

*“(…) A young person definitely has to put in constant efforts, to strive, to lead, to give 100 percent at any given time because, as I said before – if they don't want to, they simply won't, perhaps those people wait for their relatives to find them a job at a state company with secondary school certificate or not even that much.” (male university student from Podgorica, 22)*

When it comes to skills acquisition, some also point out the importance of the

**gender aspect.** A female participant from Pljevlja states that in most parts of Montenegro it is predominantly men who receive support for upgrading the skills essential for employment, while formal education and having a diploma suffice for women. Of course, this has a negative effect on female students and increases the likelihood of them falling into the NEET category upon completion of formal education:

*“(...) Patriarchy lives on in Montenegro. There exists the opinion that men are the ones who have to find jobs, and as for women – well ok, if they don’t get a job, they get to be housewives, give birth to children and take care of them. I think it has to change, because women have fewer opportunities for employment (...)” (female university student from Pljevlja, 20)*

Participants in the survey were asked to estimate the activities that can help them with the transition to work or another form of education. Most of them, 66 out of 105, stated that the **work practice** while in school could largely help, while 59 also mentioned **language learning**. The table with the complete list of options is included in the annex.



Figure 2: To what extent could some of the listed situations help you with the transition to work or another form of education? – the number of questions answered with “To a large extent”

Even though young people were aware of the importance of developing the skills that are in demand in the labour market, most survey participants were not sure where to find such opportunities – only 35 said that they knew **where to look for opportunities to acquire additional skills**; 41 were not sure, and 27 said that they did not know where to look for opportunities to acquire new and improve existing competencies<sup>46</sup>. The participants reported that **they mainly used the Internet to search for such opportunities**, whether **YouTube** or **specialized platforms** such as **Coursera**, **Udemy** or **Edx**. If they sought them offline,

<sup>46</sup> As in previous cases, it is presumed that the share among the general youth population is even lower.

they usually did that through cooperation with Montenegrin NGOs.

Finally, the level of interest in this topic is illustrated by the fact that 32 out of 105 participants shared their contact information to receive more information about participation in the training program for the development of entrepreneurship, digital and soft skills.

### Work experience

The opinions of the youth on unemployment primarily depend on the environment they live in. As expected, participants believed that the situation was the best in Podgorica, as the administrative, financial and economic centre of Montenegro. However, those from Podgorica had a different perspective: they thought that the uncontrolled migration of the population from other parts of Montenegro had a negative effect on their town and increased living costs beyond what was affordable for the young people entering the labour market:

*“(...) The worst thing that the country did to itself, a masochist thing to do – we centralized everything in Podgorica and now neither Podgorica nor the country is functional, I mean you can’t even get a taxi when you need it. These are trivial things, yet they say a lot about the dysfunctional nature of our community. You can’t find a parking place, the apartment prices go up to 2,000 Euro per square meter, it speaks volumes about the acute overpopulation of the capital which is also reflected in the labour market and everything else.” (female university student from Podgorica, 20)*

Those from the central region reported more employment opportunities for young people than before, but after being asked by the moderators to elaborate, they explained that these were mainly seasonal jobs or opportunities to work abroad.

Young people from the south pointed out that, despite the common perception that their region matched Podgorica in terms of wages and employment opportunities, the situation was more complex and less favourable for the youth entering the labour market. A participant from Ulcinj said that the coastal towns lived for *“four to five months per year and that’s it.”* Young people looking for employment usually find it in the tourism and hospitality sectors, offering solid wages during the summer months. This type of employment, however, is seasonal, not permanent, and does not provide material security, career development opportunities, officially registered years of service or creditworthiness:

*“Young people usually work during the summer season, I am a seasonal worker myself – you get those 3 or 4 months to earn as much as you can (...) So here we are, instead of going to work, we go out and say let’s go for a coffee, there will be a season next summer too, so we can live from what we earned this season until the next one. It’s not a good long-term strategy, it only works on a temporary basis.” (male university student from Ulcinj, 23)*

The problem of finding a job is most acute in the north, as succinctly described by a participant from Petnjica: *“People from the north come to work in Podgorica,*

*while people from Podgorica go to work abroad“.*

The main reasons behind youth unemployment, according to focus group participants, can be divided into two groups: **structural** and **individual**.

They report **the lack of job vacancies** as the biggest structural reason. They say that the education system, especially the social sciences departments, generates large numbers of graduates who do not manage to enter labour market due to the insufficient number of vacant positions:

*“(…) The constant annual influx of students enrolling each year set against the limited number of vacancies available at the labour market has a lot to do with the mismatch. And the number of vacancies does not increase, there are no new companies that would hire them. They keep talking about the investors who will create new jobs, but that is not happening. “(female university student from Petnjica, 20)*

The paradox is that the difficulties related to youth employment are also caused by **the improvement of the living standard and average life expectancy in Montenegro**. Young people report that growing numbers of the adult population opt against retirement because of the low pensions and remain active at the labour market. Such dynamics, combined with the previously described stagnation in new jobs, results in young people not finding enough openings in the labour market.

**The mismatch between the education system and the labour market** is closely related to the mentioned issues. Young people choose the faculties of economy or law *en masse*, ignoring the occupations that are in high demand in the labour market. A participant from Podgorica gave this example:

*“(…) Forest rangers are offered scholarships equivalent to Harvard (laughs). Along with that, they get financial support, they get sent abroad as they are in such high demand, and on the other hand there are 240 new people admitted to the Faculty of Economy each year, with as many as that who do not manage to get in. We can easily export economists, we have so many. “ (female university student from Podgorica, 20)*

A significant number of focus group participants pointed to **political influence** in the employment. Young people report that changes at the Montenegrin political scene did not help change the employment models in the public sector. Recruitment is described as non-transparent, and they add that political affinity can be a big advantage (or a disadvantage) in finding employment. They say that this is not the case in the public sector only, but that politicization of all spheres of life has impacted private companies, making recruitment dependent on political preferences. An example is provided by a participant from Podgorica:

*“(…) The leading private companies in Montenegro also had that problem, since they correspond with certain political parties so if you are not a member of the party in question you cannot work, I*



*will openly say this, in X or Y (the names of the Montenegrin companies, author's note). At the end of the day, there were instructions - if you don't vote for the party (...) it affects the private sector too. " (female university student from Podgorica, 20)*

Young people say that the unfavourable political climate impacts the attitudes towards certain ethnic groups in Montenegro, which may also have an effect on their employment prospects – in the words of one participant: *"People here hate each other, so all they ask is whether you are Albanian, Serb or Montenegrin"*.

They also believe that they are often **exploited in the labour market** due to their lack of work experience. A focus group participant from Podgorica reports with resignation that *"the problem with almost every vacancy announcement is that the first requirement is not any specific quality, but experience. No one will employ an inexperienced person, yet how can you gain experience if you have just completed your education... It's literally like being stuck in a limbo"* (female university student from Podgorica, 21). The level of wages is also related to this problem. Even though young people generally report that wages are very low in comparison to the costs of living, they also point out the additional problem of the young people entering the labour market being paid significantly less than those already doing the job. Some of them see this as a demotivating factor, so they decide not to participate in the labour market and wait for a better opportunity, thus entering the NEET category:

*"(...) They are being exploited for that wage. They get paid minimum wage for the jobs where more experienced employees get paid a thousand or two thousand Euro. They do the same work for 450 Euro, let's say. That is the biggest problem, they simply try to use your effort and skills and the fact that you are young, that you need money, that you have to make a living somehow, because you can't really rely on your parents forever, especially if you are from another town. " (female university student from Podgorica, 21)*

Besides the structural factors, a large number of young people recognize a significant part of the problem in themselves and their peers, i.e. in factors that could be described as individual: the main one being **the mentality**.

The focus group participants stress that the Montenegrin society generates young people who are not independent, but largely rely on their parents. According to a focus group participant's from Rožaje: *"We are taught the wrong way since young age; a wrong approach to life, later on to work and everything else, and when the time comes to go our own ways we are lost, unresourceful, we can't find our way and that is a big worry"* (female university student from Rožaje, 21). Such upbringing results in the fact that the average young person in Montenegro lives with their parents even after turning 30. Since their families provide a false sense of financial (and housing) security, young people feel less motivated to seek employment:

*" (...) We stay with our parents until we get married, and in a way we have that feeling of security and support from our parents as long as they can provide it (...) So they help us out until we are thirty plus and it definitely contributes to the fact that our young people*

*are simply less motivated because they don't face the issues their peers in the western countries do, where it's a failure if you don't move out from your parent's house when you turn 18." (female university student from Podgorica, 21)*

Besides the potentially counter-productive support from their parents, they report that jobs in the public sector are far more desirable than in private companies. They state that this is not only due to the working conditions, but because the public sector is still seen as more prestigious. For that reason, young people decide not to take up a job even if provided the opportunity and prefer to wait for the dream job:

*"(...) Working in state administration is considered the biggest success here (...) So that we become civil servants and get our wages, get leave on national holidays and free weekends. That's it, that's the main 'achievement' of every person in our society." (female university student from Podgorica, 21)*

Finally, our focus group participants believe that a large share of their peers are not interested in finding a job – as described by a participant from Ulcinj, *"they search for a job and pray not to find one"* (male university student from Ulcinj, 23). Even when they manage to find a job, a significant number of their peers do not show any desire for further knowledge and proving themselves in the job. Some participants say that the reason for that is the lack of prospects for promotion, poor working conditions and low wages, but also the lack of interest among youth. A participant from Nikšić describes in detail:

*"They do everything mechanically, routinely. They are not interested in learning about the core of their jobs. For example, my mother owns a bookkeeping office and when it comes to the employees, she usually chooses the ones who already have some experience and are a bit older, because even they are more interested in learning than the young ones, which is incredible." (female high school student from Nikšić, 17)*

As for the survey participants, they have a positive view of their employment prospects: 43 out of 105 believe that they will have a permanent job in 10 years' time, while 26 say that they will be self-employed, i.e. that they will start their own business. Only 2 participants thought they would remain unemployed for 10 years.

Just like their peers who took part in the focus groups, the youth recognized the advantages of public sector jobs. Therefore, a slightly higher number of those who responded to the question about the preferred job opted for local or national authorities over the private sector.



# **VI**

## **Recommendations**

Taking into account the presented research findings, we would like to point out the following recommendations:

- **Include measures specifically targeting the NEET population in strategic documents and legislative frameworks** – the adoption of the Youth Strategy is delayed, and the Law on Youth does not recognize NEET individuals as a distinct category. Therefore, it's essential for state institutions, with assistance from the NGO sector, that can provide expert support, to make greater efforts in order to timely create a favourable environment for reducing the NEET youth rate. This includes registering and acknowledging NEET youth as a special category in strategic and legal documents. Taking this step forward would involve monitoring indicators related to NEET youth and creating specific measures tailored to their needs.

- **Recognize the NGO sector as an important partner capable of facilitating contact with NEET youth and implementing support programs** – the NGO sector actively participates in drafting strategic documents and implementing specific policies related to youth empowerment. However, further efforts are required to enhance networking between state institutions and NGOs. NGOs have a more adaptable approach, focusing on local contexts and demonstrating a deeper understanding of the specific challenges faced by local communities and young people, as they engage with this population group on a daily basis through their activities. Moreover, it is the NGO sector that can provide examples of successful foreign best practices and innovative support programs with a potential for success.

- **Establish the practice of continuous data collection related to NEET youth** – this is essential for the effectiveness of public policies, which should be grounded in quantified data and facts. Therefore, it is necessary to periodically collect data pertaining to NEET youth, which should include not only the official number but also the structure i.e. demographic and socio-economic characteristics of this population. By doing so, institutions aiming to reduce the NEET youth population can develop local responses that yield the best results.

- **Carry out periodic monitoring and evaluation of support programs aimed at young people through the analysis of their actual results** – competent authorities must ensure responsible spending of budget funds. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce the practice of periodically evaluating the costs and benefits of individual programs. Programs that do not yield visible quantitative benefits should be redesigned or ended. This process should involve the creation of measurable quantitative and qualitative indicators, which should be monitored by both state institutions and the NGO sector. As an example of such analysis, we can refer to the report by the ILO on the Professional Training for Graduates. Despite the majority of beneficiaries expressing satisfaction with the program, statistical analysis showed that it did not significantly improve their employment opportunities or earnings.

- **Contribute to reduction of the number of NEET youth through the creation of policies aimed at specific groups within this population** - since NEET youth constitute a heterogeneous group, policies should be tailored for each subgroup individually. Additionally, the gender dimension and employment status, such as whether a person is unemployed or inactive, should be considered in policy creation. For example, since the population of inactive youth is predominantly comprised of young women, who may be engaged in caregiving responsibilities for family members, it is necessary to implement measures aimed at supporting them through social policies. This may involve initiatives to facilitate childcare, access to kindergartens etc.

- **Reform the activities of the Employment Agency of Montenegro** - the EAM needs to undergo transformation to effectively address the challenges ahead, particularly in implementing the Youth Guarantee program. This transformation should involve reforming organizational, procedural, and management structures, with a focus on increasing personnel dedicated to direct beneficiary interaction while reducing managerial and administrative positions. The EAM should actively engage with the NEET population, especially those who are marginalized and lack qualifications, focus on reaching out to inactive young people who are not actively seeking employment (e.g. establish mobile teams to connect with youth in rural areas). Additionally, in collaboration with secondary schools and specialized advisors, the EAM should intensify efforts to promote deficit occupations and highlight their prospects in the labour market. This would help reduce the mismatch between the education system and the labour market.

- **Continue the reform of the Montenegrin education system** - despite recent reforms, the Montenegrin education system is considered as outdated and inadequate in preparing young people for the labour market. While career and professional orientation information is somewhat integrated into the formal education system, 'second chance' educational programs are underdeveloped and insufficient. These programs are crucial for enhancing the employability of young people without qualifications, yet they are currently not adequately recognized by Montenegro's employment policymakers. Additionally, a key issue in the educational system is the lack of practical experience. There is a need to enhance practical teaching across all education levels, not just in secondary vocational schools. Furthermore, increasing the presentation of the practical value of theoretical knowledge and introducing innovative teaching methods would boost student motivation and cultivate new interests. As part of the reform process, the teaching staff, who are essential for driving the reform, should not be neglected. Efforts should be made to implement support and training programs for teachers and professors.

- **Collaborate with the NGO sector to decentralize the provision of non-formal education and enhance the information system on participation opportunities** - non-formal education has been recognized by focus groups participants and respondents as a desirable means of acquiring new skills. However, it is important to note that the majority of activities are concentrated in Podgorica and the central region.

Moreover, opportunities for informal education should be extended to students of secondary vocational schools, rather than focusing solely on grammar schools. One barrier to participation in non-formal education programs is the difficulty in accessing information and getting involved in such programs. It is essential to increase participation opportunities for young people residing in the northern and southern regions and to adopt a more proactive approach in communicating with them. Utilizing modern digital communication channels to promote information about such programs would be beneficial. Establishing youth clubs and centres equipped with modern facilities and technology, alongside organizing engaging events and promoting these clubs as social hubs, would further inform the youth population about potential opportunities.

- **Improve career counselling programs** - many focus groups participants have noted that mentoring and counselling programs regarding career opportunities are underdeveloped in Montenegro. Young people often express dissatisfaction with the lack of professional guidance at the end of primary and secondary school, where they feel they miss opportunities to discuss their future career paths. Even current students feel that career counselling is inadequate. It is crucial to improve the functionality of this support system and establish career centres in educational institutions where they are currently absent. Additionally, it is recommended to make participation in career guidance activities mandatory for high school students

# Annexes

## Annex 1: Participants profiles – focus groups

Municipality	Participant code	Gender	Age	Residence	Highest or current education degree
Focus group 1	FG1 N1	Female	15	Nikšić	HS (General program)
	FG1 N2	Female	15	Nikšić	HS (tourism)
	FG1 N3	Female	16	Podgorica	HS (medicine)
	FG1 N4	Male	18	Podgorica	HS (construction)
	FG1 N5	Female	17	Podgorica	HS (economy)
	FG1 N6	Female	16	Podgorica	HS (economy)
Focus group 2	FG2 N1	Female	18	Nikšić	HS (tourism)
	FG2 N2	Female	17	Nikšić	HS (General program)
	FG2 N3	Female	15	Nikšić	HS (culinary)
	FG2 N4	Male	15	Nikšić	HS (culinary)
	FG2 N5	Female	17	Nikšić	HS (economy)
Focus group 3	FG3 N1	Male	23	Ulcinj	Faculty of Political Science
	FG3 N2	Female	17	Cetinje	HS (tourism)
	FG3 N3	Female	16	Cetinje	HS (General program)
	FG3 N4	Female	20	Nikšić	HS (medicine)
Focus group 4	FG4 N1	Female	20	Petnjica	Faculty of Political Science
	FG4 N2	Female	20	Pljevlja	Faculty of Political Science
	FG4 N3	Female	21	Podgorica	Faculty of Political Science
	FG4 N4	Female	21	Podgorica	Faculty of Political Science
	FG4 N5	Female	21	Rožaje	Faculty of Political Science
	FG4 N6	Female	26	Podgorica	Faculty of Political Science
	FG4 N7	Female	20	Podgorica	Faculty of Political Science
	FG4 N8	Female	21	Podgorica	Faculty of Political Science
	FG4 N9	Male	22	Podgorica	Faculty of Political Science

## Annex 2: Participants demographics – survey

- Total number of participants: 105
- Gender breakdown: 81 female, 23 male, one person did not want to state gender
- Age breakdown: Average age of participants is 23.3 years; age categories provided in the table below.

Age group	The number of participants
15-19 years	22
20-24 years	42
25+ years	41

Participants' place of residence:

Region	NO. of participants	Municipality	No. of participants
South	20	Bar	10
		Budva	4
		Herceg Novi	1
		Kotor	3
		Tivat	2
Center	70	Cetinje	1
		Nikšić	8
		Podgorica	55
		Tuzi	4
		Zeta	2
North	15	Bijelo Polje	5
		Mojkovac	1
		Rožaje	8
		Šavnik	1

- The type of settlement participant resides in:

Type of settlement	No. of participants
Urban settlement	72
Rural settlement	29
Village	4



■ **Work status:**

Work status	No. of participants
School, studies and/or engaged in training and/or other form of education	38
Employed (part time/full time employment)	28
Studying, yet employed	21
Currently not in education, training or employment (NEET category)	9
Unemployed, yet engaged in training or other form of education	8
Other	1

- **Education status:** most participants, 59 out of 105, are social science graduates, with 19 being natural science graduates. Categories per the highest attained degree of education presented in the table below.

Highest attained degree of education	No. of participants
Elementary school or below	3
Vocational high school (three-year program)	1
High school (four-year program)	34
Post-secondary	2
University (basic three-year course)	33
University (specialist course)	19
University (master's course)	13





