

6. Do the interactions with employment services and other institutions facilitate school-to-work transitions? Experiences of young people in Bulgaria, Czechia and Poland

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusion of disadvantaged youth in the labour market is becoming an important policy challenge in most countries in Europe (Cinalli & Giugni, 2013; Hvinden et al., 2019; Sirovátka & Spies, 2017), not only due to the disproportional disadvantage of youth in the labour market during the economic downturns but also because specific subgroups of young people face multiple disadvantages.

The research on transitions from youth to adulthood refers to the on-going de-standardization, reversibility, individualization and fragmentation of school-to-work transitions, which are associated with an extended time spent in education, pluralization of their lifestyles, growth of female employment, demographic changes, labour market flexibilization and welfare state changes (Chevalier, 2015; Walther, 2006).

These issues all call for an individually tailored approach from school-to-work transition policies, as well as measures that meet the needs of the specific vulnerable subgroups of youth with multiple disadvantages. In addition to low qualifications and lack of work experience, labour market barriers include health, psychical and social problems, addictions, debts and living in socially excluded communities, which appear in individual and group specific combinations (van Berkel et al., 2018; Caswell et al., 2017). Addressing such complex barriers requires individualization of the service and provision of wrap-around-services suited to the individual and group specific needs of clients.

Overcoming such complex barriers presupposes personal involvement and motivation of the youth and building a relationship of trust between service providers and the youth (van Berkel et al., 2018; van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007; Lodemel & Moreira, 2014). This is only possible if Public Employment Services (PES) apply a genuinely individual approach, seriously taking into consideration the subjectivity of young people, including their abilities and aspirations, and enabling them to take part in choosing interventions (for example, Andersen et al., 2017; Sirovátka and Spies, 2017).

In contrast, the on-going activation policy reforms incline towards the work-first approach, which largely prevails across countries in Europe and also outside (van Berkel et al., 2018; Bonoli, 2011; Caswell et al., 2017; Hansen, 2019; Lodemel & Moreira, 2014). Thus a controversy emerges between the need for a genuinely individualized, enabling approach on the one hand, and, on the other, the work-first coercive approach applied in practice that is focused on disciplining the unemployed with the help of coercive and punitive measures and standardized treatment of clients. Findings show that in most countries standardized treatment (people-processing approach) prevails over the genuinely individualized approach (van Berkel et al., 2018; Caswell et al., 2017).

In this chapter, we examine the interactions between young people and the labour market and social policy institutions with the aim of answering the question ‘how do employment services and other institutions in three countries that represent post-socialist transition regimes (Bulgaria, Czechia and Poland) support young people in effective school-to-work transitions?’ When exploring this question, we included the subjective perspective of the youth.¹

We are interested about the policy effort in terms of the sufficient scope of active labour market policy measures, their targeting at the disadvantaged young people and their (mis)match with the abilities and ambitions of youth.² Because labour market integration of disadvantaged youth is one of the main policy goals and an individual approach respecting their abilities and aspirations is most needed in their case, we focussed on young people who have suffered multiple disadvantages and marginalization in the labour market. Identification of the policy failures in the above respects constitute a crucial contribution of the study.

We focus on three countries that are examples of post-socialist transition regimes. Studies show that active labour market policies in these countries are less developed when compared to Western Europe and the US (for example, Hora et al., 2019). However, existing research does not capture the similarities and differences in the policies among the countries in this regime so far. Some other chapters in this volume do provide such an insight and in this chapter we contribute to this by examining how the subjective experiences of disadvan-

taged young people within the labour market and social institutions are similar or different.

We analysed a unique dataset from the NEGOTIATE project.³ We conducted 44 in-depth, qualitative interviews with young people in Bulgaria, Czechia and Poland (15 interviews in Czechia and Poland, 14 in Bulgaria). It includes youth and young adults who are marginalized in the labour market, typically due to a combination of various individual handicaps and contextual obstacles. A focus on these young people who face multiple barriers in the labour market helps us to identify more reliably various policy gaps/failures in addressing these barriers. We conducted a content analysis of data based on the typologies pre-defined in the theoretical section. In particular, we focussed on two typologies. The first typology classifies the situations in which young people find themselves in the labour market in terms of their abilities and ambitions, whilst the second recognizes the various types of pitfalls and failures of the institutional set-up and the policies expected to help young people have successful labour market participation.

2. THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS: YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES AND LABOUR MARKET POLICIES

Young people who are in transition from school to the labour market find themselves in a sensitive life-time period. They are portrayed in literature as an outsider group within the increasingly segmented labour markets (Doeringer & Piore, 1971; Emmenegger et al., 2012; Hvinden et al., 2019; Piore, 1972) or a 'new social risk group' which is disproportionately exposed to 'new social risks'⁴ (Bonoli, 2005; Chevalier, 2015). At the same time, they are portrayed as a group that receives relatively little policy support and has fewer social rights. This is mostly apparent in their poor access to income support during unemployment and less employment protection. The social protection responsibilities are often shifted to families. However, it depends on the country's welfare regime (Chevalier, 2015; Gallie & Paugam, 2000; Hora et al., 2019).

In addition, along with the long-term unemployed, young people represent a core group addressed with coercive measures. One reason is that policymakers think it is easier to make young people accept coercive measures in comparison to other groups. The other reason is the empirically, non-contested assumption by policymakers of the lower expectations of young people towards job conditions and the high danger of their work ethic causing inactivity (Crespo & Serrano Pascual, 2004).

Such coercive measures have more flexibilization effects on the labour market, as they increase the number of unstable jobs. In that way, specific forms of exclusion like stigmatizing, being pushed into poor quality jobs or

parking⁵ are often associated with activation programmes and compulsory workfare-like measures in particular (Caswell et al., 2017; Lodemel & Moreira, 2014; Nicaise et al., 2016). The agencies involved, primarily Public Employment Services (PES), are treating the clients based on their subjective assessments of the client's compliance and cooperation. They are providing those assessed as non-compliant with the rules and requirements, including disciplining or repressive sanctions and measures (Moreira, 2008). Such measures establish unequal social relationships between institutions and their clients, thus harming the client's autonomy. At the same time the abilities and ambitions of young people are neglected (Bothfeld & Betzelt, 2011; Sirovátka & Spies, 2017).

In a broader perspective of labour market policies for young people, based on Sirovátka & Spies, 2017, we distinguish three types of policy failures of Active labour market policy (ALMP) measures provided to the young people. The lack of support for disadvantaged young people in terms of scope and coverage or the poor quality of the support provided is the first type. A second type of policy failure is mistargeting of the policies – although there are suitable policies they are not accessible to certain groups of young people, who need them mostly because of legal barriers (for example they are not registered with the Public Employment Services for various reasons, in particular because of sanctions imposed on them⁶) or administrative/procedural barriers (job mediators, caseworkers do not consider it appropriate or effective to provide them with certain job offers or training). In addition, conditionality principles sometimes lead to a 'clientelist' approach when policymakers prioritize those who appear compliant with the institutional rules (Sirovátka & Spies, 2017).

The third policy failure is the most important one because it is most strongly associated with the coercive approach to young people. It is a mismatch between policy assumptions and principles on the one hand, and the abilities, ambitions and emerging strategies of disadvantaged young people on the other hand. This typically emerges due to negligence or misunderstanding of the needs of young people by policymakers, which results in providing them with inappropriate measures such as coercive activation policies (Sirovátka & Spies, 2017).

A mismatch thus emerges between the activation measures which are coercive and standardized in substance, and the (lack of) abilities and ambitions of some groups of young people. It implies stigmatization and de-motivation of the youth and young adults due to several reasons. Firstly, the participants dislike coercive activation measures and lose their ambition. Secondly, they are often much less attractive to employers due to the negative signalling effect of such programmes. Finally, they lose trust in their own potential, and in institutions. These all reinforce the process of their labour market marginali-

zation, and the destruction of their autonomy and potential to act (for example, Sirovátka & Spies, 2017).

Such policies not only shape people's identities, but a reverse causality is also present. That is, the cooperation or resistance of young people shapes policies and their outcomes. As Spies (2017) explains, the extent to which there is a match between the assumptions made by policymakers about young people, and the self-assumptions of young people about themselves ('theory about themselves') largely determines the effectiveness of policies and interventions. Personal experience gained in the process of interactions with the institutions involved is the central issue in this respect.

Based on Spies (2017), we are able to distinguish four typical situations when policies towards young people neglect their needs and fail to be effective (see Scheme 1). The policies either neglect the (lack of) abilities of young people (first dimension of the typology), or they neglect the (lack of) ambitions of young people (second dimension of the typology). The combination of the above mentioned dimensions produces specific groups of policy beneficiaries who are vulnerable to particular policy failures. First, there are young people who have ambitions towards labour market participation in a way that the social system defines as normal (to accept poor jobs) and who are also able to work (conformists) but they lack opportunity to access the jobs, while the policies fail to provide such opportunity. Second, there are young people who have ambitions to work even in poor jobs but they lack abilities (dependent) while the policies in place fail to help them. Third, there are young people who lack both abilities and ambitions (survivors), while the policies fail to build their self-confidence and encourage their ambitions, as well as fail to improve their abilities. Fourth, there are young people who possess abilities but whose ambition does not correspond to mainstream society's view of a 'normal job'. These can be higher-level criminals or they can also be innovative entrepreneurs in the normal economic sense (entrepreneurs). They prefer only to participate in particular activities (for example, entrepreneurship) and develop their ideas instead of accepting poor/low quality jobs. However participative, co-creation policies and support for such alternative solutions are lacking and only coercive measures are imposed in a standardized manner.

As a consequence of the above-mentioned policy failures, non-compliance and non-take up of the measures offered to young people emerges due to the deliberate decisions of young people themselves. This is not only the result of the rational decision by the youth when taking the costs and benefits of cooperation with PES into consideration, but also because young people feel disrespected by PES and prefer to sidestep official channels and enter peripheral labour markets. This is a so called 'self-assertion strategy' (Parys & Struyven, 2013) and may be considered as an 'unintended policy success' because some

Table 6.1 Classification of labour market situations faced by disadvantaged young people

| | | Abilities | |
|-----------|------|--|--|
| | | Low | High |
| Ambitions | High | Dependent (need support for abilities) | Conformists (ready for work, need opportunity/access to work) |
| | Low | Survivors (need support for abilities and ambitions) | Entrepreneurs (ready for work, prefer alternative solutions, need recognition and participation) |

Source: Authors, based on Spies (2017).

youth sidestepping coercive measures may engage in more meaningful activities, including local community work (Fryer & Fagan, 1993).

The studies in the area of front-line work⁷ arose as a reflection of the recent developments in activation policies which emphasize some specific aspects of activation, in particular, the interaction between individualized activation work and governance contexts. With the focus on disciplining the unemployed seen in many countries (with use of coercive and punitive elements), the policies contain both ‘people-processing and people-changing technologies’ that are generally standardized and incompatible with a genuinely individualized approach responsive to the needs of clients (Caswell et al., 2017), in particular in institutions like PES which apply the New Public Management (NPM) approach. The role of the indicators for performance is increasing, typically with pure focus on simple targets like quick job placement. It neglects the quality and tenure of labour market placements. Then, cream-skimming practices represent a strategy that enables front-line workers to meet strict assessment criteria within a given timeframe (van Berkel et al., 2018). The above policy failures are context dependent emerging with the specific constellation of the policies and labour market situation. Neglect of young people’s subjective perspectives leads to the failures of labour market integration policies because the change in the motives and desired actions of young people cannot be achieved solely by coercion.

In our study, we deal with the interactions of young persons with PES (as well as other actors like NGOs, job agencies, employers) in the three post-socialist countries: Bulgaria, Czechia and Poland. Several studies show the weaknesses of the school-to-work transition in countries representing a post-socialist regime (sometimes labelled a ‘transitional regime’). The education system provides some vocational specificity, as well as broadly accessible general education at least at the secondary level. However, the quality of vocational education is usually low and the institutional linkages with the labour markets are weak. Employment protection and unemployment

protection are provided at a modest level bearing features of dualism. ALMP measures are provided in a modest scope and coverage, and lesser generosity and quality (Eichhorst & Rinne, 2018; Hora et al., 2019). The country chapters on policies in this volume (see chapters 8–11) confirm these findings while also highlighting that policy constellations are to some extent different in the countries in focus. In Bulgaria, young people seem to be most vulnerable in the labour market due to their significant presence in the informal economy, unfair practices by employers, the poor supervisory role of the state and the emphasis of PES on fast activation with the use of sanctions (Krasteva, in this volume). In Poland, young people suffer from labour market dualism and an abundance of temporary and poor-quality jobs. Similarly, in Bulgaria a significant problem is over qualification. Young people often avoid registration and cooperation with Public Employment Services due to stigmatization and ineffective support (see chapter 11). In Czechia, young people generally have a better position in the labour market than in Bulgaria and Poland, except for several disadvantaged categories of youth, who suffer from a lack of support by PES (see chapter 8). The scope of ALMPs in terms of coverage/participation is much higher in Czechia and Poland than in Bulgaria: it is at a similar level to the UK and Spain but lower than in Germany, Norway and Switzerland (Hora et al., 2019). Thus, comparison of the three countries in focus may bring lessons on young people's interactions with Public Employment Services in different labour market and policy contexts.

3. DATA AND METHOD

We focus on the interactions of young people with labour market institutions and assess the support provided to them in terms of the sufficient scope of active labour market policy measures, their targeting of disadvantaged young people and their (mis)match with the abilities and ambitions of youth. When doing so, we adopt an analysis of the young people's perspective and seek to identify the policy failures at the frontline of policy making in respect to those three aspects: scope, targeting and (mis)matching of the policies, and how these policy failures appeared in various situations faced by young people in terms of their abilities and ambitions for labour market integration. We used two typologies for coding and interpreting young people's perspective in these respects: a typology of their individual situations, and a typology of perceived policy failures (see theoretical assumptions). At the same time we were open to any new coding categories that might emerge.

The data for our analysis in this chapter contains 44 qualitative interviews conducted in 2016 with young people in three countries, Bulgaria, Czechia and Poland, as a part of the NEGOTIATE project. In the survey, purposeful sampling was applied, with a focus on the insecure position in the labour

market. All individuals in the sample were marginalized young people with multiple problems, and in need of help from employment offices and other institutions. The selection criteria included age (at the time of interviewing they were between 20–25 years old) and the experience of early job insecurity (experience of long-term or recurrent unemployment, or of an insecure job) during the transition from school to labour market. We used various sampling techniques: in Bulgaria, the researcher's personal contacts and a professional recruiter were used. This allowed respondents from various places of residence (big cities, small towns, villages) and different ethnicities (Bulgarian, Roma, Turks) to be reached. It should be noted that it was difficult to reach disabled people in Bulgaria. In Czechia we organized interviews via non-governmental organizations working with specifically disadvantaged target groups like Roma, and via PES to their clients. As a consequence, those recruited via PES included typically unemployed youth with multiple employment barriers from majority populations from big cities, while those recruited via NGOs included young Roma people from small cities. In Poland we used the researcher's personal network, NGOs (long term unemployed) and social economy entities (people with disadvantages) to recruit from various groups. We attracted a relatively diverse group of respondents with a predominance of urban residents and university graduates, reflecting the high ratio of students in Poland.

We provided the respondents with a small reward for the interview, as well as with a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity. Signed informed consent was sought from all participants. We conducted semi-structured interviews with the use of a uniform interview guide/scenario in all three countries.

We asked the interviewed young individuals about the problems they faced in school-to-work transition, and their strategies to overcome the problems, as well as about the support they received from various actors and policies that helped them in their transitions to the labour market. We analysed the information provided with the use of axial and open coding, where we worked with pre-determined typologies of the situations in which young people find themselves, and the policy failures that they may reflect/perceive (see theoretical assumptions).

In the following section, we present the findings from these interviews in Bulgaria, Czechia and Poland, and in the conclusion we summarize the similarities and differences among the countries.

4. FINDINGS: INTERACTIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH EMPLOYMENT SERVICES IN THREE COUNTRIES

4.1 Bulgaria

4.1.1 Young people in a labour market context

The first step in exploring how interactions with employment services affect school-to-work transitions of young people is to find out what abilities and ambitions they have. This can be done through presenting their educational background and labour market position.

Most of the young people in the Bulgarian sample (9) had a secondary education at the time of entry into the labour market. The majority of them (7) had completed vocational secondary schools in various fields, including economics, agriculture, tourism, art. Only two of them had been using the skills acquired in school (those from the art schools). One had tertiary education; four of the interviewed young people had basic or lower than basic education, i.e. they were dropouts from school (Nadja, Emil, Silvia, Bogdan). The main reason for this was poverty. For some young women, the lack of education was a result of early childbirth (Nadja).

From the youth's narratives, it becomes evident that having a secondary education (even vocational) is not enough for finding a job, because in most cases employers required work experience or a higher education. In addition to this, some young people interviewed assessed the training they received in vocational school as insufficient for exercising the profession.

By the time of the survey, only two participants had managed to find jobs with work contracts (Darko, Nikola), three of them had developed businesses of their own (Maxim, Ivo, Hristo), two had worked as part of active labour market programmes (Galina, Silvia), and the other seven were still unemployed or had brief, intermittent periods of employment. The jobs usually offered to the young people in the sample were low-paid, temporary or seasonal. They worked, for instance, as bartenders or waiters in seasonal employment, unskilled workers, fruit pickers, shop assistants, etc. They changed jobs many times.⁸ In addition, each interviewee had some experience in the grey economy sector where they worked without a formal employment contract.

It is notable that most of the respondents made a realistic assessment of their own shortcomings (lack of education, lack of experience) and how these affected their careers. For women, a negative factor with regard to finding a job was having young children:

...Everywhere they kept telling me that I have a child, and there is no way to get a job because I will have to be away if the baby gets sick, etc...I was looking all the

time, but nowhere ... everywhere the door closed when they heard that I had a child (Desislava).

Almost all respondents were motivated to work and it was a very important aim in their life. Work for them is a source of freedom, independence and self-confidence.

‘I felt really free when I worked; not even thinking about how much money I would make, I just knew that I had a job’ (Dragan) and ‘When I had a job, I felt more confident, I felt useful’. (Desislava)

Work had an essential place in young people’s understandings of a ‘happy life’. The notion of an ideal job and a happy life figures prominently in the survey results, as summarized in Darko’s words:

... to do work that you want to do in order to be happy; if possible, a good enough income as well, and in these circumstances, to be calm and happy, that is the most important thing. (Darko)

Individuals who had dropped out of school stated that a lack of education was the main obstacle to finding a job. That is why two of them had enrolled in night school in order to obtain a secondary school diploma. Believing that a higher education gives a better start for finding employment, other individuals (Darko, Milica, Hristo) had enrolled at university. All these young people felt that it was hard to combine learning and work, but despite this they were willing to try.

Some of the young people had completed vocational secondary school so they had a desire to work in their speciality but were uncertain that they could apply in practice what they had studied in theory at school (Desislava, Dragan). Therefore, they felt they needed additional training or an internship after finishing school.

Some individuals (Nadja, Silvia, Emil) had to support their own family or their parents and siblings and they were ready to accept any kind of job. There were also young people who, after periods of unemployment or changing from job to job, had the intention to develop their own business. In other words, they needed support in developing their entrepreneurial ambitions.

Although young people were all ambitious to find a job, almost all of them were concerned about the quality of work and the employer’s attitude and mentioned low pay or bad working conditions as reasons for quitting or not accepting jobs.

4.1.2 Interactions of young people with institutions

a. *Scope of the measures*

Nine out of 14 respondents had been registered at PES in some period of their life but only four had received unemployment benefits. Two of those registered at the PES participated in courses (English and conflict resolution) and two had taken part in municipal programmes for community service work which lasted for six months; a further respondent had been an intern under a programme for people with education but without work experience. Five of the respondents had never been registered at a PES and the reasons they indicated for this were self-confidence (Milica, Maxim, Nikola) or the conviction that state institutions could not help them (Dragan, Emil).

The experience of interviewees with the employment offices had convinced them that institutional support was insufficient or, in some cases, that they could not rely on it for help. The interviewed youths had received no job proposals at all or had found the offers they got unacceptable. During the period in which Desislava was registered at the employment office, she received a single proposal for part-time work (for two hours per day). Atanas also claimed that he had not received assistance in finding a job from PES.

The youths who were included in activation programmes expressed their dissatisfaction that their work was only temporary and they would again be left unemployed after the end of the programme:

In general, it [the programme] does not help young people because they [the employers] hire them for six months or less. (Galina)

There was limited scope too with regard to the opportunities for training. During the time when Hristo was registered at the employment office, he was interested in taking a foreign language course but was unable to join the course due to the programme's age limit.

In addition, due to their insecure labour market position most of the respondents did not meet the conditions to receive unemployment benefit. All four respondents who had received such benefits (Desislava, Darko, Ivo, Hristo) evaluated them positively as an important source of income. But the size of the benefits, according to them, was insufficient. For instance, while Desislava was registered as unemployed, she had received compensation amounting to 6 leva per day (equivalent of 3EUR).

b. *Targeting of the programmes for young people*

Some cases described by the interviewees show that the measures had limited coverage in the more vulnerable categories of youths: those low-skilled and without education. For example, Nadja (dropped out of school at 17, ISCED 2) had learned that the programmes offered at the time she was looking for a job

through PES were not for people with a lower education. Emil, who dropped out of school before finishing primary education (ISCED 1) and could only do unskilled work, also felt no support coming from the state. In Emil's view, the state does not provide adequate support for people who are lacking education.

At the same time, many of the young people interviewed believed that employment offices were able to provide only low-skilled work for people who cannot cope by themselves and can rely only on state support. This conviction was confirmed by people who were working for these institutions. Dragan had never visited the local PES, because, according to his friend who works at this office, they only offer 'work that is low skilled and paid...'

Along with this, in the interviews we could identify a cream-skimming effect – a programme that can be qualified as successful but is actually addressed only to those young people with secondary and university education, i.e., those with abilities that can easily be activated. An interesting case was Ivo, who found a job through his own contacts and initiative as an intern in an NGO. Later, this organization applied for an internship programme for young people with higher education and with no work experience, and Ivo's internship was extended, but this time the payment came from the state. The employer certainly benefited from the programme, but it is also clear that Ivo succeeded in getting an internship without the intervention of the state. This case is an example of an unintended policy success because it supports the employer and enables the interviewee to continue the internship.

c. Adequacy or mismatch to young people's abilities and ambitions

As shown above, the respondents differ in abilities, ambitions and needs and we can therefore classify them into one of the four types described in the theoretical frame.

The first type discussed in the theoretical section includes young people with ambitions and abilities to work, but who did not have such an opportunity (conformists). Under this type, we can group those participants who had studied in vocational high schools and looked for employment in their specialty but did not find it (Nikola, Desislava, Milica, Dragan). The main reason for that was due to lack of experience (Desislava) but a shortage of vacancies and low quality of jobs offered were also mentioned. Nikola and Milica were more successful in finding work, but had to change various temporary precarious jobs.

Some of the youths had low education levels but were employed (mainly in the grey sector) or were actively looking for a job (Nadja, Silvia, Emil, Atanas, Darko). They could be classified under the second type (dependent) – i.e. young people who had ambitions, but lacked abilities.

Two cases (Bogdan, Galina) might be classified under the third type – i.e. young people who were lacking in both abilities and ambitions (survivors).

Galina was passive in looking for a job but the employment she found under a programme for ‘activation of unemployed’ (working six months as a cleaner at the municipality) had not changed her motivation to work or changed her possibilities to improve her education.

Three cases (Ivo, Maxim, Hristo) can be classified under the fourth type (entrepreneurs). These were young people who had both abilities and ambition to work; however, their ambitions differed from the usual jobs which were proposed by the employment office. At the age of 25, Ivo created his own art school for children and started to work in agriculture as an additional means to cope financially. After periods of unemployment and various jobs, Maxim created his own online store. And Hristo opened his own jewellery shop. The various situations in which the young people found themselves indicate different implications for the adequacy of the policies.

The available institutional support was assessed by most interviewees to be unsuitable, or not corresponding to the abilities and ambitions of the young people. Darko (dependent), for instance worked for two years in a choke and transformer factory, where he reached a ‘pretty good’ level and received an offer for a very low-skilled job:

The job proposals I received ... for instance, jobs like cleaning and that sort of thing, were unacceptable, both in terms of the salary and the work itself. (Darko)

Low-skilled jobs were even proposed for the youths with higher education. For instance, Ivo (entrepreneur) with a bachelor’s degree from the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts and with a Master’s degree in Pedagogy received offers for car mechanic jobs. Here neither the abilities nor the ambitions of the young individuals were taken into consideration.

In addition, some respondents thought that the opinions and interests of jobseekers were disregarded.

[S]he [the civil servant] strives to express her opinion about me, to say what is best for me. An example of this is that she registered me as looking for work as a store-house clerk, although I did not like that [job]. I wanted her to list the things that are available, that are in demand, but she said that only this job is applicable for people without education. (Nadja, dependent)

Some of the respondents were enrolled in training courses (Atanas, dependent and Bogdan, survivor). Despite the opportunity to increase their knowledge, the young people were disappointed because the course was not related to a job upon completion. In addition, youths who wanted to improve their qualification and enhance their confidence to work in the field of their vocational high school specialty were not given this opportunity. For example, Dragan (conformist), who has a diploma from a vocational school for Hospitality

and Tourism, wanted to raise his qualifications as a waiter, but the PES in his hometown did not offer such courses.

4.1.3 Outcomes of policy performance

The experience of the interviewees with PES changed their opinion about the social role of the state; most of the interviewees shared that their confidence in this type of institutions had decreased. Most of them stated that they would no longer seek help from this institution and would continue to search for work by themselves, with the help of their friends and relatives. The reason for this was the lack of job proposals due to the character of the Bulgarian labour market (but also due to the weak links between employers and PES) and the disrespectful attitude of the institution, an attitude that in some cases is felt to be discriminatory. Silvia, who is Roma, was dissatisfied with the services provided by the Public Employment Office because she was convinced that its employees treated the unemployed Roma people differently. Desislava said that there was no communication between her and the staff at PES, and none of them were interested in the opinion of the young who were unemployed:

Just submit documents and wait. And then comes the long waiting. (Desislava)

The poor quality of the support provided is also evident from Darko's comment about his communication with PES staff:

There is no communication at all, they simply check off an activity as done; in my opinion, it is not the officials themselves who are to blame but the system itself is like that. (Darko)

The youths who had contact with PES were disappointed. There were some who never even considered registering. Five out of the 14 interviewed had never registered as unemployed at the employment office and had never sought help from state institutions. Some of the respondents were confident that they could manage on their own (Milica, Nikola, Maxim) and some of the respondents additionally expressed doubts that the state institutions could help those in need (Emil, Dragan).

Overall, the respondents did not consider PES as a source of opportunities that could improve their situation in the transition from school to work. The PES was seen as the last resort for finding employment, because the respondents believed that the work and positions offered there were low paid and did not match their needs and abilities. The interviews generally revealed the respondents' lack of trust in the state policies for supporting the unemployed and increasing employment.

4.2 Czechia

4.2.1 Young people in a labour market context

About half of the young people we spoke to did not finish secondary-level education. They stated that it was due to low interest in school so they decided to stop attending the school. They also perceived the poor quality of the school and they stated that they had behavioural problems. According to the young people, an incomplete education crucially influenced their labour market situation (for example, they did not meet the formal requirements for the job). Radek, Jakub and Klára discussed whether vocational training or high school is enough to get a job. Some young people completed vocational education but they could not find a job in the studied field (Vanda, Elena). Others could find jobs in the studied areas, but only low-quality jobs with unacceptable or poor working conditions (Barbora, Radek, Klára).

Almost all our respondents had problems finding work or accepted jobs that they would otherwise not choose, for example, not matching their qualifications, poor working conditions, and unstable. Some women (Karin, Barbora, Sofie) had a baby during their education or briefly after it ended. Single motherhood influenced their lives and their chance to find work. Some others (for example, Elena) mentioned various mild temporary or permanent health problems. Several respondents were ethnic Roma, and perceived it as another barrier to getting a job.

Youth usually considered more job characteristics together (wage, employer, distance, working conditions). Harsh working conditions, employers' negligence (employers did not care about employees), and nasty behaviour led to reduced trust, reduced motivation, and quitting jobs. Several respondents refused to do particular work, including demanding and monotonous jobs in a factory (Dušan, Vanda, Klára, Radek, Petr), specific product selling positions (Jakub), hard work in the building industry (Roman, Kvído), cleaning jobs (Jana), long working hours (Kvído, Jana, Vanda), or jobs without an employment contract (Barbora, Jakub). Young people were sometimes afraid that accepting such work would mean that they could not later shift to better jobs (Kvído).

Young people saw work as essential to their life goals. They needed money to live a decent life (Vanda, Klára, Albert), have security (Barbora, Dušan, Jana), and be independent. Working meant 'general improvement in life' and 'not to live like my mates'. Young people used to link work to desired outcomes, such as 'having a small house with a garden', 'having a peaceful life', 'better life for my children', and 'going on holiday abroad'. The overall declared readiness of the interviewed young people to accept the job was high, with a few exceptions (due to studying, etc.). However, they had reservations due to the quality of work offered. Family circumstances were essential,

contributing positively (financial support) and negatively (lack of guidance, expulsion) to young people's situations and ambitions.

Several youths dreamed about having a 'standard job' (Jakub, Jana), or doing specific professions (Elena, Roman), for example, driver, or being entrepreneurs. Vanda and Sofie would like to have work matching their education. Young people wanted to do something sensible, enjoy work, and build a career (Vanda, Jakub, Radek, Kvído, Dušan, Klára, Sofie, Jana) or be active (Vanda, Roman, Karin, Klára). Others admitted that they did not have any work goals because they were limited by other life circumstances, for example, children (Petr, Barbora). Other respondents (Kvído, Petr) were skipping from job to job (job hoppers); they tried various things, learned from experience, and looked for (more) suitable positions.

Some young individuals had personal development goals which were realistic, to various degrees. Some studied or intended to begin their studies soon to achieve Secondary Education or get additional education. Young people stated that it was difficult to combine school and work. This was due to time restrictions, the need to switch between work and school activities, and financial limits (Barbora, Jana, Sofie, Roman, Kvído, Petr, Dušan). Completing education was perceived as a gateway to better jobs and a decent life (Bohouš). However, some respondents (Albert, Jakub, Barbora) completely abandoned the idea of returning to school (although they were willing to take a short training course).

4.2.2 Interactions of young people with institutions

a. Scope of the measures

Most of the young people assessed job-search assistance as insufficient, useless, or non-existent, while a minority (Albert, Elena, Klára) evaluated it positively. Appointments at the employment office were described as brief and formal and were focused on administration. Meetings usually included checking whether young people had found a job and arranging the date of the following appointment.

Our cooperation was that I enlisted there, and they told me: 'come after three months,' and so I came after three months, and they asked me if I found work. I said: 'no,' and they told me to come in another three months. (Radek)

Young people would welcome concrete job tips but PES workers rarely provided them. An essential tool the employment office uses is 'job recommendation'.⁹ Some young people would like to get recommendations to improve their chances. However, Kamil argued that job recommendations were not functioning well because employers always refused him.

About half of young people went through some active labour market policy measures. Young people appreciated combining (re)training courses with financial support. However, they also criticized some aspects of these measures: the insufficient length and quality of the courses (Petr, Klára) and when PES refused to pay for the training. This was usually because the unemployed could not guarantee a job in advance. Others mentioned that only if they had a job in advance could they then undergo PES-funded training (Kvído, Elena, Radek and Petr). The usefulness of the training was related to the perception of using the gained qualification (Albert, Vanda, Klára). Participation in subsidized employment was helpful for Bohouš and Karin as this gave them the opportunity to get one year of work experience and learn something. This meant they had their first real job and would get a permanent job afterward. For others, it did not lead to a permanent position, or later there was no use for the gained qualification (Klára left the job herself, and Petr was fired after the state-subsidized period).

Some respondents (for example, Albert, Vanda, Dušan, Roman) criticized social benefits as they were hard to access and the benefit level was insufficient (typically around 4500–6000 CZK, representing roughly one-third of the minimum wage). Young people were not often eligible for (temporary) social assistance because they were living with parents or siblings who had a confirmed or past but currently unavailable (thus fictional) income (Dušan, Elena, Albert).

b. Targeting of the programmes

We noted both ‘too good to benefit’ and ‘too bad to benefit’ issues in targeting policies.¹⁰ PES workers assessed young people and decided about help/enforcement in job searches and access to active labour market policy. Petr and Dušan thought that help is reserved for the disadvantaged, while active (short-term) unemployed people are left on their own. Peter argued about the importance of proving activity and behaving politely.

Some people get a lot of recommendations for bad work, but no one forced me. The truth is that I behaved politely, I told them what I wanted and I had already arranged the work interviews. (Petr)

Vanda argued that PES workers were overburdened with high workloads, which reduced the opportunities for assistance. They had to choose whom to help and whom not to. Young people who were left alone were allowed to follow their strategies (Petr, Jana, Klára) and they perceived low activity from PES workers as an advantage. On the contrary, PES workers targeted job search activities to a few more disadvantaged, but they forced these people (for example, Kamil, Radek) to do bad work which the youth did not appreciate.

Kamil, Albert, Karin, Roman, Jakub and Radek all stated that they did not get ALMP offers or any other help beyond basic job search assistance. Roman noted that he was denied participating in the training because he had not been unemployed for long enough.

Some young people admitted they were not actively looking for any help and they had no idea about potential opportunities (Jakub and Karin). Others said they missed relevant offers because they did not care enough (Klára) or the offers collided with their other activities and plans (Dušan).

c. Adequacy or mismatch with the young people's abilities and ambitions

We tried to classify our respondents according to the typology provided in the theoretical section. The first group of people had ambitions and abilities but lacked opportunity. These respondents completed secondary education and were inclined to work in the studied jobs, but they were unsuccessful in obtaining or maintaining employment (Vanda, Jakub, Kvído, Radek, Barbora, Klára). Employers required work experience, and youths did not have the opportunity to develop their competencies in work (Kvído, Radek).

The second group of young people had ambitions, but they lacked abilities (dependent) (Roman, Dušan, Sofie, Elena, Albert, Kamil). Dropping out of school or an unwillingness to work in the studied field (Klára, Kvído, Elena, Roman) caused them to lack competencies. Other young people (for example, Petr) had learnt the skills during work but lacked a corresponding vocational education and training certification. Those people often worked in simple manual jobs, where few competencies were necessary, and there was relatively little to learn. The dependent aspired to personal development – they were working in manual jobs until they gained some qualification and then they planned to shift to a better job.

I want to find some cleaning job or warehouse job, working part-time in two years and then working in health services for sure. (Sofie)

Many respondents lacked both ability and ambition (survivors). Concrete reasons/circumstances differed (Bohouš, Albert, Kamil, Karin, Sofie, Jana). Lack of motivation to study resulted in them dropping out of school. This led to a lack of competencies and low interest in doing jobs in the studied fields. Discouragement and feeling inferior were essential themes in some stories (Bohouš, Karin, Klára, Jana).

I thought that it could not happen that I could find work and develop into someone different. No. (Karin)

The fourth category is 'alternative entrepreneurs' (their ambitions differed from regular norms of employment). Petr's flexibly combined the various options (for example, jobs, training, PES registration), he frequently changed his job, and he was not keen to accept any authority: 'The reason is that I often stopped liking it, or I found something more interesting'. Moreover, some long-term work on the side/in occasional jobs can be classified as an individual alternative lifestyle. Their ambition did not correspond to mainstream society's view of a 'normal job'. For example, they refused legal employment with unacceptable working conditions (Barbora, Elena, Radek, Jana). Instead, they went their own way, accepting what they found interesting, rather than accepting offers from the employment office.

Due to maturing and altered circumstances, some young people changed from careless adolescents to young adults with life ambitions (for example, Bohouš, Karin and Jana). Young people perceived their situation differently:

This [referring to the past] was my dark period. I left home, and I lived in the squat for a year with my mates...I loafed around for three years, racked up significant debts that I have to repay now... and had some drug episodes lasting for half a year... it was not easy...However, I developed a lot last year since I've been working. (Bohouš)

Young people sometimes aspired to one activity and rejected other options. For example, they did not want to study further or work in their original profession (for example, cook, bricklayer) but they were willing to try other professions. These preferences also tend to develop over time.

PES workers rarely took the ambitions of young people into account when considering an appropriate form of help. A significant problem identified by interviewees concerned the employment office workers enforcing their views, instead of incorporating the perspective of young people (Petr, Radek, Kamil, Jana and Karin). We notice that this was more often the case with the survivors and those involved in alternative entrepreneurship.

They listened to me, but they were not even minimally willing to fulfil my needs, absolutely not...they forced me according to some plan of theirs and their timetable. (Petr)

It has to be emphasized that not everyone shared such experiences. Some young people described situations where PES workers asked them about their

needs or conveyed that PES workers did not force them to do anything against their will (Elena, Jana, Jakub).

When I was registered before, the lady was very good. She even asked me what I wanted to do... I asked the lady for some specific jobs, and she gave me a paper where there were only those specific professions listed. (Jana)

Young people wanted to partake in the selection of appropriate jobs and appreciated it when the job offers were attractive, relevant, and matched their qualifications or competencies. Kvído, Sofie and Vanda criticized the fact that PES workers gave/sent them a general list of inappropriate job offers.

...you feel stupid when you come there, and employers tell you: 'What are you doing here? This job is not suitable for you. You are not from this field, you have no work experience, and we are not interested in you'. (Kvído)

Some complained that they were not offered appropriate jobs, although there were jobs available. The offered positions were mainly of low quality and often worse than offers that they found individually in available private databases (Radek, Elena, Barbora). Young people complained that they were being sent to workplaces where 'no one is willing to talk to them' or where the jobs were, in fact, unavailable (Kamil, Roman, Jana). Kamil, Petr and Jana criticized the pressure to accept 'anything', even 'bad' jobs. Sometimes young people were denied or discouraged from training¹¹ (Petr, Radek, Roman) or forced to take a course which they perceived as useless (Petr, Karin).

4.2.3 Outcomes of policy performance

Some young people (for example, Bohouš, Roman, Karin) presented a low orientation and personal ability to set goals or change their situation without outside help (these can be seen as dependents or survivors). They were too passive in their interest in various ALMP measures, and as a result, they did not receive anything. They would need concrete, direct, and individual offers. By contrast, Elena and Vanda learned to rely on themselves when they realized that employment office clerks would not help them. Petr and Elena mentioned they had refused available offers and had found alternative employment offers. Similarly, Dušan said that he preferred to go for an occasional job rather than to sit at home with meagre financial support. People who were more active stated a higher motivation to change their situation (we assume them to be conformists, and some of the dependent or alternative entrepreneurs).

Vanda, Radek and Petr felt a general discomfort while they were interacting with PES workers. We noted some opportunistic behaviour of young people towards PES workers (misusing, manipulating, or working on the side). For example, young people disguised living in the same household with another

person or pretended compliance and that they were interested in formal offers. At the same time, they were not interested, or they even secretly worked on the side. Some respondents mentioned that this was a result of low support provided. In addition, some would need more help from PES workers in negotiations with some employers. For example, PES workers forced the young people to accept the job even though it was apparent that the job offer was poor and the employer was not a respectable person.

Several young people had experiences of being expelled from the employment office (usually for six months). The reasons for expulsion included 'missing an appointment' (Barbora, Dušan), 'attending school' (Jana), 'refusal of a suitable job' (Kamil), 'non-compliance during an active labour market policy programme' (Klára), or conflict when working on the side. After expulsion from the employment office, the young people were denied social benefits and they had to pay social insurance contributions themselves for the period of expulsion (otherwise, they would be paid by PES). Because they lacked help from the employment office during the expulsion period, their social insurance debts would grow (Bohouš), and employers sometimes refused to hire them because they were not PES clients (Albert, Kamil). After the expulsion, Kamil, Klára, Jana and Barbora temporarily accepted an undeclared job or a formal job that they would not have previously considered in order to lessen financial hardship. Young people were sometimes uncertain whether they could return to the employment office at all, after an expulsion (Jana, Albert).

Some young people avoided cooperation with PES due to previous bad or disappointing experiences, a lack of trust or negative expectations. For example, Albert decided not to visit the employment office as he expected that PES would not help him. Jakub argued that the unemployment insurance benefit was so low that he would do anything rather than retake the benefit. The other reason for the non-take-up of employment services was that young people felt mistreated by the employment office, for example, harsh administrative barriers and the efforts needed to tackle them. As a result, the young people were not always successful and they gave up (Petr).

4.3 Poland

4.3.1 Young people in the labour market context

Half of our respondents finished secondary vocational education (economic, logistics, construction) and half of them continued their university education (Ola, Ela and Krysia in full-time mode and Iga, Anna, Witek and Halina in extramural mode). The university level was too demanding for Jan, Iga and Dominik, which ultimately led to them reorienting their careers. Graduates assessed their secondary education as inadequate for the labour market, where professional experience was a key asset. In respondents' opinions employers'

expectation of work experience was a proxy for competencies. In some cases they contrasted work experience with their educational experience, especially in technical secondary schools (Jurek, Kuba, Dominik), where they were taught more theoretical knowledge than the skills required by employers.

Interview participants also showed some difficulties in reconciling studies with work (Dominik, Halina, Alicja) and were facing very high intellectual requirements (Jurek). Financial constraints required a combined work-study approach (Iga, Anna, Ela), and only two students were working in jobs related to their specific educational background. The educational disruption was caused mostly by medium-term health problems (Sandra, Jan), long-term family problems (Ela, Halina) or disability (Anna), and for two whose illness changed their career paths (Jan, Sandra). Despite educational needs, their personal situations forced Sandra, Iga, Ela, Krysia and Halina to earn a living. For example, Ela and Halina had to leave the family home because of family conflicts. Living with parents caused a negative impact of having low motivation to look for a job, but created an opportunity to not have to take low-quality jobs given that their basic needs were being fulfilled. In Witek's case he has a mechatronic engineering diploma but could not find a decent job offer and stayed with parents.

All interviewees in the Polish sample had work experience, but some remained passive in the labour market (Jurek, Krystyna, Halina, Alicja). Many respondents ceased contact with Public Employment Services (Kuba, Ola, Ela, Krysia, Halina, Alicja) and directed their job search efforts solely towards Private Employment Services. Just three people out of 14 were registered as unemployed (Jan Witek and Dominik). The decision not to enrol resulted from cohabitation with parents that secured their financial independence or from studying (Ola, Ela and Krysia).

The predominant employment type was casual jobs under mandate contracts (Krysia, Alicja), and work placements (Sandra and Agnieszka). Only Iga and Anna had long-term employment contracts and described their work as matching their educational background. An important occupational experience of illegal work was prominent and only Sandra, Aga, Witek and Ela did not accept this type of work. General evaluations of employment were negative, both in terms of the available positions (low-paid, poor employment conditions, no chance for permanent contract) and for the self-assessment of qualifications and skills. Initial contact with employers revealed competence gaps and lack of experience among interviewees. Recurring failures in finding suitable employment prompted Sandra and Alicja to emigrate (Dominik and Halina had considered going abroad).

The studied narratives fall into four life goals: family and relationship, work (position, type of work), independence (including ideas about migration) and personal development and education (formal and informal). None of the young

individuals in the Polish sample were married or had children, while five were in long-term relationships. All future marital and parental decisions were postponed or thoroughly planned for times of financial security (Sandra, Aga, Halina, Alicja).

At the beginning we decided on a plan: rent together, decent jobs, then settle down and only after that have a child. (Alicja)

All respondents reported that they had a strong interest in finding a decent job as it was a good way to earn a living or fulfil other needs, such as a hobby or independence from parents. For those in long-term work placements, their aim was a stable full-time position. They described the aspirational process of finding a job as a long-term one, which started from being employed by a temping agency through several fixed-term contracts and finally getting a permanent contract. Vocationally educated respondents could wait for a suitable job over a longer period, working in low-paid and low-quality jobs in the interim (Dominik).

Employers highly influenced respondents' self-assessment and subsequent choices on the labour market, as in the cases of Kuba, Alicja, Ola, Krysia and Halina, all of whom had had difficult experiences in their first jobs, resulting in lower job-search ambitions and increased self-motivation in upskilling. Many young people continued their higher education as a combination of professional and developmental goals, where they were hoping that a university degree would be the key factor in their career path and enable them to lead a happy private life. Three interviewees (Iga, Halina and Krysia) had well-defined professional ambitions and pursued them without waiting for university graduation.

4.3.2 Interactions of young people with institutions

a. Scope of the measures

PES job search measures for young people both in terms of quality of job offer and matching their ambitions were assessed negatively (Jurek, Witek, Iga).

I don't think I'm the only one who thinks that the internships and training provided by the State Employment Service are a little bit pointless. (Witek)

There was no personal counselling and each encounter with PES clerks was anonymous, dominated by the need to fulfil procedures such as attending the meetings, screening and responding to job offers. Only a few – Jurek, Aga and Witek – reported that their first interaction had been helpful, and it was based on the employee officer's good first impression and their belief in PES.

Young people who received and accepted work placements were satisfied at the beginning but had to renew their placements every six months, up to three years (Aga) and never ended with an employment offer (Jurek, Aga). Training opportunities were limited and were offered selectively, as was the case with Aga, who took an advanced course in office software. Similarly, internships were seldom offered to people with long-term health problems and little work experience, as with Sandra, who participated in a three-month internship in an office and was paid (900 PLN per month) by PES.

Some respondents mentioned that employment and traineeship vouchers were an option which was mentioned by PES workers but they were unavailable during their visits. For the newly unemployed, one of the first options in their employment search was a jobs fair (Aga, Anna, Witek, Dominik). A positive example of both a proactive attitude and an appropriate usage of PES measures was true for Iga, who suggested her employer use PES subsidies to create a position for her. No social benefits were mentioned, mainly because all those who enrolled failed to meet the eligibility criteria due to the fact they were pursuing university studies or they were living with their parents.

b. Targeting of the programmes

We identified mostly negative opinions about targeting. Employment office staff preferred to address easy-to-use and available labour market measures over taking into account the diverse needs of youth.

I was looking through job offers from the employment office, there were very limited offers, like a welder, some kind of cook, so these were the kind of jobs that were not in my area of interest. (Jurek)

The partial disability that excluded him from his studied profession and lack of experience would have required more vocational reorientation or counselling rather than the work placements offered by PES clerks. The mistargeting of apprenticeships was also noticeable, especially for the respondents who were continuing their university education.

Because of my university education I could not apply for an apprenticeship from the employment office, so finally I did not count on it. So I rather did not look for any help. (Aga)

PES were not able to target their measures to those who were living and being supported by their parents like Kuba, Jan and Dominik and consequently they decided not to register with PES and they were not aware of the potential opportunities.

There were very few cases of people who were excluded from benefits for formal reasons. However Domink's case was poignant as he compared

his process of registration as unemployed (after his family benefit ended) to a queue of animals where they are waiting to be slaughtered.

A deteriorating relationship between young people and PES was a consequence of unavailability of financial resources for some of the desired instruments like employment vouchers, settlement vouchers, and vouchers to start a business (Aga, Anna, Witek, Dominik).

I went to a special job activation centre. And there, I couldn't say this person was competent or tried to help me. (...) She said yes it (employment vouchers) was available only until the end of August. So I thought to myself: I was here in August, but you didn't want me to register. (Dominik)

A unique example of tailored use of the settlement voucher is the case of Anna, who found employment in an NGO. However, her knowledge about this measure stemmed from her mother's employment in PES. Sandra (internship) reported that good communication and well-addressed needs were required in her return to the labour market. Both Anna and the other registered unemployed (Jan, Witek, Dominik) indicated health insurance as their main benefit.

Iga's story provides an example of an easily activated person (cream-skimming effect) who found work easily in the cosmetic industry without PES assistance. She used her competencies (on-going chemistry studies, extensive professional experience) as well as knowledge about workplace subsidies to advise her new employer on how to apply and reduce the employment costs.

An extremely important thread influencing job searches was university education (Ola, Ela and Krysia in full-time mode and Iga, Anna, Witek, Halina in extramural mode). Being a full-time student meant being ineligible for most of the ALMP instruments, such as internships, which was highly demanded by respondents seeking work experience. This caused an increasing gap between the employer's demands and PES measures. The lack of part-time job offers in the studied profession effectively expanded this mismatch and resulted in the employment of overqualified students in low-paid jobs (Ola, Ela, Aga). Receiving a maintenance grant from the university influenced labour market behaviours because money shifted the job search to part-time jobs and made it possible to balance studying and living independently (Ola, Ela, Halina).

c. Adequacy or mismatch with the young people's abilities and ambitions

We applied the criteria from the theoretical part to divide young adults from Poland into four different types. Conformists are people in a situation where they had both ambitions and abilities to work but they were lacking opportunities. Aga, Witek, Krysia and Dominik graduated from university, but could not find adequate employment due to lack of sufficient work experience. All of

them enjoyed family support during education, which limited their willingness to look for a job and gain experience. Iga and Ela were forced to earn a living so they accepted black market jobs. In Aga's case, she had been waiting unsuccessfully for almost three years (fourth consecutive apprenticeship in public administration) for employment.

In the second group the dependent individuals had ambitions, but they lacked abilities like Sandra and Alicja, who temporarily emigrated for work. Jurek, Jan and Iga dropped out of university and only Iga gave herself a second chance to re-enter the university. While Ola, Ela and Dominik combined part-time work with studies, they also had an additional source of income from university maintenance grants.

Jurek, Kuba and Jan all lived with their parents and made up the third group who were lacking in both abilities and ambitions (survivors). Jan could not understand the reasons why the school he attended allowed him to graduate, as he had a visual impairment that excluded him from working at heights (a certification to work at heights is mandatory in 90 percent of construction vacancies). Jurek has repeatedly experienced educational failures. The technical secondary school did not provide him with the relevant qualifications. He entered university twice but failed to graduate. Kuba was a person with a safe life at home, who showed no interest in getting a permanent job but was focused on earning some extra money illegally to support his hobbies.

The fourth group (alternative entrepreneurs) includes Anna, who took advantage of specific active labour market measures which were available for the disabled and held a managerial position in a social cooperative. In Anna's case self-determination got her where she was. Her mother (employed in PES) knew how to use ALMP and had personal relationships with the NGO, which led to the acceptance of a project work organization (entrepreneurial attitude). As a full-time employee, her work depended on being successful in obtaining subsidies for projects in the non-profit organization. The only reported shortcoming was the difficulty of accepting a fixed-term contract, stemming from the external scheme that funded her employment at the NGO.

We may classify a few respondents into different types taking into account the subsequent stages of labour market entry. As already pointed out, early encounters with the demands of the labour market (mostly work experience) and mediocre assistance of PES changed the ambitions and perceptions of their competencies over time (Jurek, Aga, Iga, Krysia, Halina). Health problems resulting from dropping out of the labour market (Sandra, Iga, Alicja) or the inability to find a job in the profession (Jan) were important events in these narratives. The most dynamic case was Iga, who started as a dependent, but after a couple of years of professional experience and new studies, found a dream job in a cosmetics lab.

The prevalent experience of PES was its callous bureaucracy that privileged formal service more than counselling. The overall perception of being uninterested from the job centre's staff led to an often indicated mismatch between the ALMP and the ambitions of the respondents. One general PES database of job offers was outnumbered by low-skilled job offers (Aga, Jurek) and was incompatible with the ambitions of young people.

In almost all the cases (Sandra as an exception), we did not encounter an individualized offer adjusted to a person's needs and preceded by a thorough analysis of their situation. Employment office workers followed their procedures when young people were looking for their first employment:

And have you found any employers with the help of the jobcentre?

Not yet. So far I visited only once and it was preliminary. I also received an invitation to a job fair, which will take place in November.

Are you going?

Yes, it's always worth going. (Witek)

Based on the job vacancies register, public employment staff offered a list of vacant posts. The evaluation of this measure (job search) is unequivocally negative, as the PES criteria for candidate pre-selection did not reflect the actual employers' criteria which was applied in job interviews. In this sense, the job-search visit became just a frustrating and meaningless administrative requirement.

What they offered me..., I was rejected in a minute because I did not pass the medical examination. I did not know the criteria. (Jan)

Job fairs were another option for direct contact with employers, but most of the respondents identified it as an effective employment measure. The training provided by PES proved to be useless, as in Aga's story where participation in a one-month 'advanced' computer course unrealistically raised expectations of a career change to a highly in-demand occupation, i.e. a graphic designer.

Only in Sandra's case was an apprenticeship offered by PES positively evaluated as an opportunity to re-enter the labour market after a long-term employment gap which was caused by her health problems.

It is a form of activity of a person looking for a job and it signals proactivity to a prospective employer. (Sandra)

Iga by herself used her knowledge about the employment grants and successfully applied for money on behalf of the company where she started working.

4.3.3 Outcomes of policy performance

The overall assessment of PES measures stemmed from the respondents' negative experiences, but they also came from the assimilated opinions of close relatives about PES ineffectiveness and the lack of attention paid to the youths. In many cases, this led to the abandonment of contacts with the PES (Kuba, Ola, Ela, Krysia, Halina, Alicja). Despite disappointing experiences, some interviewees contacted PES only to get health insurance (Iga, Witek, Dominik, Alicja) or apply for an apprenticeship after a period of long-term health problems (Sandra). Thus, the employment office became more used as a social security provider than a labour market transition facilitator.

Periodically renewed work placements in different departments and institutions gave the interns a feeling of initial stability (Jurek, Aga), but gradually became a source of frustration that ultimately transformed into an unequivocally negative evaluation. At first, Witek and Dominik had positive opinions about PES, but later changed their evaluations after further interactions with PES clerks and finally lost their trust in PES. Only for Iga (cosmetic lab) and Anna (NGO) were the services provided by PES seen positively.

A large group of respondents (Kuba, Ola, Ela, Krysia, Halina, Alicja) revealed agentic labour market behaviours and focused only on direct job searches and private employment offices. The interviewees shared a strong belief that independent job seeking and networking were more effective in finding a decent job, and Iga, Halina and Krysia all successfully found jobs in their desired profession by themselves.

The ALMP measures were highly limited, both in terms of job search and upskilling. As parents supported our respondents with the daily costs of living, opportunistic behaviours, such as illegal work (Jan, Dominik, Alicja, Kuba) or temporary labour migration (Alicja), became apparent. Some young people (Jurek, Kuba, Jan) lived from day to day in a kind of passive limbo, manifested by a lack of desire for personal and professional development, which separated them from PES activities.

5. CONCLUSIONS

We have shown how disadvantaged young people in the three countries perceive and assess their interactions with labour market institutions and how employment services in three countries support them in effective school-to-work transitions.

Disadvantaged youth in all three countries share similar problems and they face multiple barriers to good-quality jobs. The key obstacles include human capital deficits, the lack of education (in several cases they are drop-outs like in Bulgaria and Czechia) or disability (Czechia and Poland). For those with secondary education (and also in Poland the university graduates), low

quality or inappropriate types of education, as well as lack of work experience play an important role. In some cases other barriers are also present, such as poverty (in Bulgaria), disability (in Czechia and Poland), family circumstances like early childbirth, lone parenting, and non-native/Roma ethnic origin (in Czechia and Bulgaria). Those who have vocational or no secondary education mostly had no job prospects, while the higher educated can get only low skilled jobs. In Poland, young people with tertiary education cannot find jobs in the field they studied. Often, young people live with their parents. Whilst this provides them with economic security and the chance to avoid poor jobs, their job-search activity declines sometimes. Young people are struggling through and often they accept poor, non-desired jobs. Sometimes they work in the black economy in order to gain work experience and money and/or are hoping that they will shift to better jobs in the future. Some young people (examples found in Czechia and Poland) are aware of their lack of education so they try to combine work and schools but they find this very hard.

Evidently, these young people need individually tailored support, but unfortunately the policy failures discussed in the theory section are visible in all three countries. The first one is lack of support, insufficient scope/reach and quality of measures. In principle, PES should provide young people with unemployment benefits, job matching, counselling, and ALMP measures such as vocational training and hiring/wage subsidies for job experience or permanent jobs. In contrast to these expectations, young people are typically not eligible for unemployment benefits, and if they are eligible they assess the level of these benefits as low. They also complain that they get little or no real job offers from PES (more often in Bulgaria and Poland than in Czechia). Because of these reasons young people in Bulgaria and Poland often do not register at PES and instead rely on their own job-search efforts and social networks. By contrast, young people in Czechia do not avoid PES.

Some young people in all three countries participated in the active labour market policy measures and appreciated this participation (more often in Czechia). But these measures are rarely available to them due to the lack of funding or to rigid eligibility criteria or to program provision time volatility. Summing up, young people in Czechia used the wide support from PES and ALMP measures while in Bulgaria and Poland they often avoided cooperation with PES.

Young people in all three countries also reported the second type of policy failure i.e. mistargeted measures emerging from the strict requirements on participation in support programmes or from the policy delivery practices on the front-line. This policy failure is combined with the insufficient scope of the programmes: for ALMP, programmes were selected either for the more educated and more 'easy to employ' young people (Poland), or for those educated but without work experience (Bulgaria), or both such groups (Czechia); while

the low educated youth who need the programmes the most do not get access. In addition, in Czechia some young people stated that they were considered as ‘too good’ for the programme; this means that they were expected to find jobs without the support of the programme.

The most important policy failure is the mismatch of the support provided with the abilities and ambitions of young people. Young people from all countries complained about the formal and bureaucratic approach of public employment services, the lack of genuine individual support and no recognition of young people’s abilities and ambitions. They are being pushed into undesirable jobs of low quality and are thus not provided with other options, with no respect for their ambitions or desires to find meaningful, good quality jobs. Those who need to improve their abilities did not get access to the kind of programme needed or the programme was assessed as insufficient as it did not lead to a real job. Although we interviewed young people during a period when ‘Youth Guarantee schemes’ were intensively implemented in the countries, still, neglect by PES of abilities and ambitions of disadvantaged young people appeared the key problem from their perspective. The most sensitive to such neglect by PES were those young people who possessed abilities and had ambitions but whose ambitions were different from what the frontline workers at PES considered as the norm (we labelled them as entrepreneurs). In some cases, former participants in the measures complained that job experience or training was not sufficient to have a meaningful job because of insufficient length and quality. In Bulgaria, participation in training courses and community programmes were assessed as useless in terms of employment prospects. Similarly, the internships provided in Poland to young people in the public sector were heavily criticized since they did not lead to permanent employment.

The combination of the employment barriers and policy failures implies demotivation, i.e., a lack of trust in PES institutions and a non-cooperative approach of young people, to the extent that in some cases they ended their cooperation with PES and avoided them in the future. Young people sometimes cheat PES officials and benefit from the systems in order to cope with their financial difficulties. They often work in the informal economy in Bulgaria and Poland, sometimes turning to their social networks or other actors like NGOs for support and sometimes giving up searching for legal jobs entirely. Some young people, however, mentioned that they had succeeded in gaining jobs because they had learned how to struggle during negotiations with the employers and how to forge their own way. On the other hand, the interactions with employment offices often led to exclusions of many young people from the employment register because they were not cooperative enough, as in the cases of Czechia and Poland. This means that they lose access to all forms of support and eligibility for ALMP measures, despite the fact that it is these

young people who actually need the support the most, while in Bulgaria many disadvantaged young people do not even register with PES.

We conclude that there are more similarities among the countries than differences in that the types of policy failures and their reasons are very similar, as well as the consequences of these policy failures for the strategies of young people in the labour market. Although in Bulgaria and Poland disadvantaged young people complain more often about poor job offers and poor support provided by PES than in Czechia, it is apparent that young people who face multiple disadvantages in all three countries lack sufficient support for their abilities and ambitions, as well as job offers fitting their self-image. This finding represents a challenge for labour market and social policy institutions alike.

NOTES

1. This means how young people themselves perceive and assess support provided to them by PES and the other actors.
2. Ability is seen as consisting of human capital (competences), social capital (network and resources), and the ability to see, create and use opportunities (all resources available to the individual to achieve something). The relevant content of this ability depends on someone's ambition (what he/she wants to achieve) in terms of social participation in the labour market (Spies 2017: 34–35). Ambition for social participation in the labour market is seen as an intention and effort to achieve a specific position in the labour market (Spies 2017). It may be related to the broader/general life ambitions of young people.
3. Negotiate project: NEGOTIATE Negotiating Early Job Insecurity and Labour Market Exclusion in Europe, Horizon 2020 (2015–2018) grant agreement no. 649395, coordinator NOVA, Oslo Metropolitan University.
4. Lack/depletion of skills, inability to combine family and employment, poor access to opportunities and social rights.
5. Parking is a negative effect of the ALMP measures targeted at the most disadvantaged groups: participation in these measure represents a negative signal to the potential employers. Thus, parking/waiting effect is prolonging the individual unemployment spells (for example, Brodtkin, 2011).
6. Like expelling them from the register and eligibility for support due to 'non-cooperation'.
7. This means support PES provided through direct interactions with the clients, like job mediation and counselling.
8. As Imdorf, Pohlig and Zander show in their chapter in this volume, previous job-hopping was evaluated by Bulgarian employers more negatively than unemployment, which made finding a job even more difficult.
9. Job recommendation is a specific job-search measure. The public employment office worker finds a job place which is according to his/her assessment relevant for concrete unemployed. He/she gives the unemployed person a form with a recommendation from PES and the unemployed person is obliged to go to this concrete employer and ask them for work. The employer is obliged to fill in the

- form with the result of the meeting (for example, reasons for refusing) and the unemployed person has to bring the result (form) back to PES.
10. Some people are denied help because PES workers expect that those youth are able to find jobs without help while other young people are denied help because PES workers assess their job chances as minimal even with help.
 11. PES workers stated reasons such as insufficient length of unemployment, low demand of profession for potential training and that training will be available only in the distant future (need to wait).

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