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EMPLOYMENT POLICY TRAIL IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

The article presents a policy trail in Bulgaria with focus on a programme funded under the Youth Guarantee initiative in which the aim is to support disadvantaged young people into employment (employment focus). In order to gather information on the participation of people in training and employment, qualitative methods are used - content analysis of documents and in-depth interviews. The article analyses the characteristics of specific program; access and barriers; possible benefits; learning lessons. Conclusions are made and possible actions are proposed (in a national / regional context).

Keywords

Policy trial – Employment – Bulgaria

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Introduction

As a tool for theorising policy, the motivation for policy trails lies in part in the contested space and power of the nation state. It is almost a truism now that contemporary society is more 'globalised' and interconnected – and that as a consequence the power of the nation state is reduced. However, the power of the nation state remains significant¹. Rizvi and Lingard² make the important point that policies are made through 'a range of complex processes that occur in transnational and globalized work spaces' which are then filtered through the national context. Cort³ suggests that the concept of the policy trail is closely connected to the concept of 'governance' which has 'gained ground in order to capture the changing relationship between actors in the policy process'. The concept of governance helps to shift our attention to policy processes which increasingly transcend national boundaries, and encourages paying attention to non-governmental actors (individuals and organisations) and private sector interests which are increasingly influential in the sphere of education and lifelong learning – at both a national and supra-national level, as well as to national governments themselves. As Melo et al⁴ note, 'the notion that policy can be 'trailed' also gives recognition to the complex nature and consequences for both political structures and agency of the prominent multi-scalar model of lifelong learning governance within the EU'.

The methodology of studying a policy trail, therefore, entails adopting a position of seeking to map the terrain the policy travels through rather than the policy itself, analysing how the policy is shaped through its journey. Part of this process is to interrogate the diversity and conflicts which permeate the policy process – how it is shaped, negotiated and contested – and also how it is engaged with at individual and organisational level⁵. This means investigating and analysing the effects of policy when it connects locations and people at different levels. For this article the point of entry to investigate the policy trails will be training and employment programmes, seeking to uncover the flow of policy relating to the organisation. The method of undertaking this will entail interviewing informants involved in the process of policy formation and enactment relating to the projects under scrutiny. Melo et al.⁶ write that the interviews – in their context of working with enterprises - allow investigators to gain 'insights on the enterprise governance environment from a broader perspective than that of the enterprise itself but also for pinpointing the moments when the enterprise plays an influential role as a governance actor in its public sphere'. Added to this, policy trailing is a particularly useful method for investigating the interaction between policy agendas and how they actually play out 'on the ground'.

¹ H. Dickinson, "From New Public Management to New Public Governance: The implications for a 'new public service'", *Financial Accountability & Management* Vol: 30 (2016): 175.

² F. Rizvi and B. Lingard, *Globalizing education policy* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 22.

³ P. Cort, "Trailing the unpredictable pathways of European Union lifelong learning policy", in *Adult education policy and the European Union: Theoretical and Methodological perspectives*, eds. M. Milana and J. Holford (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014), 127-140.

⁴ S. Melo, P.M. Tota, P. Cort, I. Studená and A. Larson, *Lifelong learning policy trails in Europe – Case studies final report, LLLight in Europe* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 2015), (21.02.2020)

⁵ J. Holford, L. McKenzie, P Cort, A. Larson, U. Brandi and R.L. Iannone, *Conceptual model and questionnaire, LLLight in Europe*, (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 2012), (21.02.2020)

⁶ S. Melo, P.M. Tota, P. Cort, I. Studená and A. Larson, *Lifelong learning policy trails...* 11-13

Research methods

The fieldwork was conducted in a big city during the period 3-5 May 2018. Nine in-depth interviews were conducted based on preliminary scenarios: 5 interviews with participants < 30 years, 3 of whom, with disabilities (two with 100% blindness and one with cerebral palsy); 1 with a provider representative (from the Employment Agency); 2 with staff members running the programme (from the Labour Office) and 1 with a representative at the level of the learning setting (Employer).

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into Bulgarian. All participants were provided with an Information Sheet and signed an Informed Consent Form. In order to preserve the participants' anonymity, the instructions for anonymization of the data were applied as follows: P=participant; PR=provider representative; SM= staff member running the programme; RLS= representative at the level of the learning setting.

Description of the context within the policy trail method has been undertaken

The National Implementation Plan for European Youth Guarantee 2014 – 2020 (NIPEYG) was adopted by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria on December 18, 2013 and updated in April 2014⁷ (in accordance with a Recommendation of the Council of EU from April 26, 2013.⁸). A partner approach was adopted for the implementation of NIPEYG, and framework agreements were concluded both at national level, between government institutions, including ministries and national organizations of employers, of workers and employees, and of youths, and at the regional and local levels (with all 107 labour offices throughout the country).

Coordinating Council coordinates and monitors the implementation of NIPEYG. The Council is headed by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, who determines its individual composition. Responsible for coordinating implementation at regional and local levels are the directors of the Directorate of Regional Labour Offices and of the directorates of the Labour Offices.

NIPEYG has three sources of funding: a) the state budget; b) resources from the European Social Fund (ESF), including those obtained through the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) under the implementation of Operational Programme Human Resources Development (OP HRD), c) resources from employers. In total, between from 2014 to 2020, resources from the state budget will be provided in the amount of BGN 388,972,695 (about € 198,872,603) for the implementation of active labour market policy; it is expected that more than 150,000 young people will be involved in employment and training. For the period 2014 - 2020, the funds allotted under the YEI to Bulgaria amount to BGN 106,261,946 (EUR 55,188,745). ESF will provide BGN 122,201,239 (EUR 63,467,057), including national co-financing amounting to BGN 15,939,292⁹ (EUR 8,278,312).

The objective of NIPEYG is that every young person aged 15 to 29 years inclusive, with a sub-group of people up to the age of 24, should receive a good proposal for a job, for

⁷ Doklad za izpalnenieto prez 2016 g. na Natsionalnia plan za izpalnenie na Evropeyskata garantsia za mladezhata 2014 – 2020 g, Sofia-Bulgaria, 2017. <http://www.yg.mlsp.government.bg/dokumenti/>

⁸ Official Journal of the European Union, issue 2013/C 120/01 from 26.04.2013, 2013.

⁹ National Implementation Plan for European Youth Guarantee (NIPEYG) 2014 – 2020 (Updated in April 2014), Sofia-Bulgaria, 2014. <http://www.yg.mlsp.government.bg/download/15119/>

continuing their education, for apprenticeship, or for internship, within four months after he/she becomes unemployed or leaves the formal education system. For this purpose, the young person is required to register with the Labour Office (LO). An individual action plan, defining the person's profile, will be prepared for each registered unemployed youth. In accordance with this profile, the youth will receive a proposal for a job (subsidized or on the initial labour market) or for training (for professional qualification, for acquiring key competencies, or for continuing education). For youths aged from 15 to 17 inclusive, the envisaged measures aim at return to the education system, and in some cases, acquiring elementary literacy.

Depending on the individual profile of youths (aged 18-29), they are provided with the possibility of obtaining the following services: individual consultancy by a case manager (in cases where a connection is made between youths and educational, healthcare, etc., institutions, as such contact is needed in order for the person to overcome obstacles to finding a job), individual psychological support, group consultation, participation in a Job Search Workshop (meeting with a psychologist to acquire knowledge and skills for seeking a job and presenting oneself to an employer) and participation in the labour market. The activity of the Job Search Workshop was positively assessed by respondents, especially by persons with disabilities: *"...their psychologist [at the labour office – interviewer's note (I.N.)] advised me... something that would give me an advantage. That I should show something untraditional, and she said the best variant was a video, a video clip that I could make. Containing what I can't and what I cannot do [the person is 100% blind – I.N.]. Then people will know about this. Because many people really don't know, the employers don't know, that a person with disabilities does not need anything special."* [BG1_P3 _120].

Youth mediators have been appointed in the municipalities (which employ them) with the highest numbers of inactive youths¹⁰ to reach the category of youths who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs): *"...in Bulgaria, there is quite a large percentage of such youths, who are not identified and about whom we have no way of obtaining information, except if we really look for them, like that, in the streets."* [BG1_SM1 _355]. The main activity of youth mediators is to mediate between the institutions and the economically inactive youths. These mediators collaborate with the labour mediators and the Roma mediators from the local labour offices: *"... if the youth mediator wants to ensure for himself access to the Roma ethnic group without the help of the Roma mediator... [Interviewer (I): Yes, someone should introduce him into the community.] Yes, exactly. It would be hard for him and there is a high risk he will not be received."* [BG1_PR_217]. Among the main obligations of youth mediators is to identify NEETs and activate them by providing support for starting a job, inclusion in training or returning to education. On the one hand, the work done with youth mediators is very positively assessed by the provider representative, because, *"... youth unemployment and inactivity is a problem not only of the Labour Offices.... It is a problem above all for the municipalities, because it is on their territory that the inactive youths are staying, who have no desire, or do not know how, or are discouraged; there is some reason for them to be inactive and to stay out of all the opportunities for social participation.... And a large share of the youths who are identified by the youth mediators later come to register with the Labour Offices. Because for us, it is very important to increase the number of registered youths. Because there are many job opportunities."* [BG1_PR _186]. On the other hand, according to a staff member running the programme, youth

¹⁰ Youth mediators work in 54 of the total 265 municipalities in the country. In 2016, a total of 95 youth mediators were appointed, who worked with 3,839 inactive youths.

mediators are too few to meet the needs of the Labour Offices. Another study¹¹ of youth employment in Bulgaria also emphasizes the important role of youth mediators for supporting labour market inclusion of inactive youths, especially from ethnic minority groups and the need of more mediators in all regions in the country.

There are three important distinguishing features in the action of the Youth Guarantee (YG) in Bulgaria compared with most European countries: 1) extension of the age range in Bulgaria (up to the age of 29 instead of 24, under the Youth Act of Bulgaria); 2) the gradual implementation of the YG, where the first stage gives priority to youths who are long-term unemployed or have been registered for long periods with the LO, instead of youths registered for up to four months; 3) Sofia-city (the district in which the capital city is located) is considered as separate from the South-western region; i.e., in the case of the South-western region, the criteria are applied for districts, and not for regions (NUTS 2) as in other EU member states.

As a result of the measures undertaken under YG, according to data of the Employment Agency (based on an Annual Review), *“unemployment among youths aged up to 29 has decreased from 15.7% in 2015 to 13.0% in March 2018... there is a large resource for working with youths who have basic or lower education, because they are 43% of all our registered unemployed. We have 2% with no education at all...”* [BG1_PR_292].

According to the provider representative *“....In fact, youths have always been a priority group. Regardless, even before the start of the Youth Guarantee. They were a priority group of active employment policy. In view of their inequitable position on the labour market. But the Youth Guarantee in fact created some more opportunities, including financial instruments for their inclusion in the labour market.”* [BG1_PR_224]. An example of this is the Procedure “Training and employment for young people¹²”, financed by OP HRD 2014 – 2020, which is examined in this policy trial. The programme is realized by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) through the Employment Agency (EA) in connection with the implementation of YG.

Description of the programme

Where does the programme fit in - with local/national/EU policy: national.

Name of the programme: Procedure “Training and Employment for Young People” financed by OP HRD 2014 – 2020.

Aims of the programme: Integration into employment of unemployed young people under the age of 29 years, including those registered with the Regional Labour Offices, by providing training and subsidies for continuous employment.

Duration of the programme: 2015-2020.

Usual length of the programme: 6 months full-time (40 hours per week) for each stage of the programme.

Main activities of programme: information campaign, training for professional qualification, offering subsidized employment, counselling and mentoring.

Forms of disadvantage of targeted participants: Unemployed youths aged up to 29 years registered with the Regional Labour Offices at the National Employment Agency. Priority

¹¹ V. Krasteva, Mladezhka zaetost i trudova nesigurност v Bulgaria (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN "Prof. Marin Drinov", 2019), 222.

¹² Proekt “Obuchenia i zaetost za mladite hora” <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/procedura-obucheniya-i-zaetost-za-mladite-hora/>

groups are those which: have primary or lower education; are long-term unemployed registered with the Labour Office for 12 months or more; have registered with the Labour Office as a result of activation in Operation Active, financed by OP HRD 2014 – 2020.

Required prior education level of participants, if relevant: Not higher than ISCED 3.

Funding and number of participants: According to the Implementation Report for 2016 for the NIPEYG 2014 – 2020¹³, the programme is financed through state budget resources for active labour market policy (under the National Action Plan for Employment in 2016), and also through resources under OP HRD 2014 – 2020. The total budget for operation Training and Employment for Youths is BGN 208,854,936 (EUR 106,738,353) for 2015-2020. In 2016, the funds expended for the schema amounted to BGN 37,634,596.71 (EUR 19,269,653). In 2017, they were BGN 40,000,000 (EUR 20,452,128). The indicative budget for 2018: BGN 30,000,000 (EUR 15,342,365).

The project is implemented in two stages. During the first stage, which started on 13.01.2016, direct employment was provided for youths registered as unemployed with the Labour Offices. The number of employers who applied for participation in the project amounted to 777, while the declared job vacancies were 12,976. The second stage of the project started on 28.11.2016. At this stage, in addition to direct employment, the possibility for training through vouchers was provided for unemployed youths. The number of applications for participation made by employers was 2,093 for the opening of 7,495 job vacancies. 2,788 youths underwent training, and the remaining 4,707 were hired to work.

In terms of the number of participants, a high share of the targeted population was covered by the programme. According to data published in the Annual Reviews of the EA, in 2016, the number of registered unemployed youths up to the age of 29 was 50,115 (youths up to the age of 24 were 19,738), and in 2017, the number of registered unemployed youths up to the age of 29 was 33,602 (youths up to the age of 24 were 12,920).

The beneficiary is the National Employment Agency

Activities are delegated to, and carried out by, employers. According to a staff member running the programme “...*the approved [by the MLSP – I.N.] employer has passed all the necessary procedures. He has been approved and then the information [how many and what kind of people he needs – I.N.] comes to us together with the application. Respectively, the training institution, the job vacancy, and then we establish the contact, as an intermediary, between the unemployed persons and the training institutions and respectively the firm that is under the Youth Guarantee, which will hire that person.*” [BG1_SM1_233].

None of the respondents to the in-depth interviews was familiar with the name of the programme he/she was included in, or with its funding and objectives. This information was obtained from the Labour Office and from official documents.

Access and barriers

Access to programme can only be obtained through the Labour Offices (LO) after the person registers. One can apply submitting the required documents; according to an interviewed official from the LO, “... *widespread publicity is lacking... here arises the big*

¹³ Doklad za izpalnenieto prez 2016 g. na Natsionalnia plan...23.

problem of insufficient informedness about the possibilities offered by the Labour Office... as a rule, only the persons who have become aware of the need and have turned to our institution... can get informed about vacancies and positions with us... And by word of mouth.” [BG1_SM2_280].

Another channel through which young unemployed learn about the opportunities to take part in the programme is the largest Bulgarian online job vacancies site, jobs.bg: *“I found it on jobs.bg and the owner of the firm where I work knows about this programme and they draw people who are in that kind of situation...” [BG1_P4_41].*

An existing practice is for employers to announce their job vacancies not only in the LO but also on the web platforms and on their own Internet pages: *“We find them [the candidates – I.N.] and send them to the respective Labour Office where the registration is. They refer him to us with letters of reference.” [BG1_RSL_44].*

The representatives of the LO, however, do not fully approve of such practices: *“the employers say that one of the conditions for applying under their proposal, for the job vacancy, is not simply to send a CV but also to be registered with the Labour Office in order to obtain a letter of reference. In other words, People come [to the LO – I.N.]... they have to be checked again through me. The fact that the employer has decided to say to them, 'go to the Office to have them send your letter', this is not a sufficient condition for the person to decide he can apply. After all, at the Labour Office level, I am the person who assesses whether the person is appropriate. But these are people saying, 'I want to work in this company, but I learned that I have to apply under the programme'.” [BG1_SM2_421].*

For their part, the LO try in various ways to advertise the job vacancies opened under programmes: *“...under the Youth Guarantee, every month we organize meetings with students, mostly those in the 11th and 12th grade, who will soon graduate, in order to inform them about the opportunities they can find with us.” [BG1_SM1_316].* Also, the labour mediators are instructed by the labour offices to meet with the youths more often than with other categories of unemployed: *“...you will meet them intensively in order to make them committed and that they learn that the responsibility [for entering the labour market – I. N.] falls not only on the institution but on them personally.” [BG1_PR_105].*

Certain requirements must be met to be included in the programme: *“The first criterion being that the persons are not in any form of training and are not employed. After they meet this criterion, I look at their education... checks made on the official sites of the MES [Ministry of Education and Science– I. N.], where one can check whether the person is a student. One checks at the National Revenue Agency (NRA) whether the person is employed. Respectively, when I check about him at NRA, I take the employment record book to see what he has been working, because if the person has already worked in his field of specialty... he is not fit for the programme, because this programme finances persons who have had no length of service in their field of higher education. From there, I check him up in the Trade Register and in CIELA, whether he is an agricultural producer, whether he is performing activities within the meaning of the law, whether he has a company of his own.” [BG1_SM2_373].* Another restricting factor is the category of completed specialty: *“the woman even told me that if you have studied anything connected with tourism, they would not even accept you...I mean, in the neighbourhood school they created some profile and my diploma is chiefly defined as 'technological tourism', but it is not my qualification title, meaning simply 'technological tourism' ... But then they saw [at the LO – I.N.] that I simply had a secondary education, and that's how I was approved for hiring.” [BG1_P5_115].*

The barriers to being included in the programme are mainly institutional. The employers pointed out the following restrictions of the programme: a) Criteria for choice of potential candidates: *“we must appoint people who are only from our LO... We cannot take him [if he is from another region – I.N.]”* [BG1_RLS _363]; b) The age limit: *“The other thing is that there are people in their 30s and the programme is up to the age of 29, and because of that one year, they fall under completely different programmes and criteria, and ultimately, they cannot use the programme.”* [BG1_RLS _371]; c) The desire to continue one's education: *“Education is essential. To our great joy, people mostly want to study, and precisely that age, up to 29, is the normal age at which people study. And it is a problem that you cannot accept someone who is studying.”* [BG1_RLS _376].

According to the representative at the level of the learning setting, the LO does not properly present the opportunities linked to the job vacancy submitted by the employer: *“...there is a kind of very strange correlation – the people who come from the LO have excessively unrealistic, big expectations, unlike the people who have come based on the job vacancy ads... In terms of expectations for salary, for working hours and so on and so forth”* [he means that the expectations of people coming to the LO are too high – I.N.] [BG1_RLS _322].

Participants' experience of accessing the programme

Not all the persons enrol voluntarily in the programme. Some respondents shared they felt they were being forced: *“... People go there as if they were forced to go. They frankly stated it, it's not just a feeling. You go there and you only watch the clock to see when it is time for you to finish, get up and leave...”* [BG1_P1 _175]. The probable reason for such feelings may lie in the fear of young unemployed persons that if they refused the offers of the LO, they would be penalized in some way and that would frustrate their future realization on the labour market. On the one hand, the participants themselves talked about having such a feeling, *“because they cannot find a job for me in this condition [the respondent is at the LO – I.N.], I have to take some course. Otherwise, you cannot be, say, on the labour market and sit and wait.”* [BG1_P1 _49]. On the other hand, the employers confirmed the existence of such cases: *“there was one case... the girl did not know what it was about. Somebody had phoned her and had said, ‘You should go to such and such a place, otherwise they will discontinue your registration’. And the girl came here literally terrified, because she had no idea why she had to come, where to come, and for what. And she was so shocked that we really could not conduct an interview.”* [BG1_RLS _407].

The representatives of the LO explain the feeling shared by the programme participants that they were pressured to take part in the programmes as due to the LO's desire to have the persons take a job quickly: *“At times it sounds to them [the intermediaries at the LO – I.N.] are pushing them a lot to start a course. We do it to motivate them on the labour market.”* [BG1_SM2 _481].

Participants' experience and perceptions of barriers to positive destinations in general, and specifically to the programme

The interviews made visible the following contradiction: on the one hand, the state claims it is promoting higher birth-rate; on the other hand, there are evident violations of the rules concerning employed pregnant women or mothers with one or more children: *“They want births, they want children to be born, but they do not help these people... raise their children by themselves [when they are employed – I.N.]”* [BG1_P1 _276].

According to Art. 26, par. 1, p.1 of the Ordinance on Medical Certification, a pregnant employee must go on pregnancy and childbirth leave obligatorily 45 days before the pregnancy due date. In fact, this rule is not obeyed, and employees are often dismissed by their employers long before the term set down in the Ordinance. The same practice is current as regards participation in training and employment programmes: *“What does that mean - I can't work? I can work, for instance, as a chambermaid. Why did they not allow me to take the course [she is referring to the practice whereby the interviewee has successfully passed only the theoretical part of the course – I.N.] Because you don't have to lie down on the bed to spread the sheets, you pull them from this side, you pull them from that side... I don't understand it. Because after the sixth month they [the employers – I.N.] must renew your contract, make it a permanent one. But they do not want to.”* [BG1_P1 _281]

Cases of violation of the law are observed with regard to people with disabilities. According to Art. 315 of the Labour Code, an employer who has more than 50 workers and employees is obliged to provide from 4 to 10 per cent of the workplaces per year as jobs suitable for people with decreased work ability. Concrete cases were shared with the interviewer regarding the programme: *“... recently, a man with disability, from another neighbourhood, the employer wanted to hire him, yes, he did hire him, but he hired him through this programme. The programme ended and he said to him, 'sorry', that was all, the programme is finished. And you have to go to the LO again and wait on the labour market, and you wait to be given a new programme through the office, if he can hire you, if he can't, I'm sorry... I wish there could be some kind of initiative. Not to have to wait only for programmes that you don't know if the state will allot... a programme that might come in April, or might come next year at this time.”* [BG1_P3 _338]. For their part, the employers' main concerns are related most often to the problem of dismissing a worker with disabilities from work: *“they don't hire me because I have a WCAC [a medical certificate from the Work Capability Assessment Commission – I.N.], because they say that it is much harder regarding people with WCAC, if they have to dismiss you from work, they won't be able to dismiss you from work. I said that I would work as much as two people, just to prove myself. And he refused. They refused to hire me at several places, because I have WCAC and a disability. It is as if the state is raising obstacles. Because if the employer wants to fire me, he won't be able to, they say, and things would become very complicated. So they prefer not to hire me.”* [BG1_P4 _26].

With regard to remuneration for work, the question arises whether the pay is high enough to motivate young people really needing, and wanting a job, to take part in the programme: *“No, no, I refuse, because I will not work for that kind of pay'. So I don't know if the people are maximally suitable, whether they are sufficiently motivated to say to themselves, 'Yes, I will work for 650 leva [BGN 650 or EUR 332 – I.N.], and then, with that service record, I can... [get a higher salary – I.N.]'. So in this aspect, I see things are twisting and turning. The motivation is not sufficient to organize things so that [youths – I.N.] will want to work in this specialty. In other words, we motivate them rather too much, we literally talk them into it [starting work – I.N.]”* [BG1_SM2 _435].

The payment that participants in the programme receive is assessed as representing an obstacle by the employers as well: *“they assumed 100 per cent of the costs, which was good – 100 per cent but up to a limit... For instance, if we have decided to pay someone a salary of 800 leva [BGN 800 or EUR 409 – I.N.] for his position, and the state determines that 600 [BGN 600 or EUR 307 – I.N.] is enough for him, we cannot hire him at 800 [BGN 800 or EUR 409 – I.N.]. And he actually receives the determined salary during the period of the programme.”* [BG1_RLS _280]. The interviewed participants also assess the pay as too

low: “... I am very pleased, except for the pay; I repeat, it is near to the minimum. But a person with no income, like me, unfortunately is satisfied with the little he gets... I suppose, or at least I hope, after I pass this programme, which I think is six months or thereabout, they will raise my salary.” [BG1_P4 _58].

Possible benefits

The programme is assessed positively by all parties involved in its implementation. For the employers, it provides a possibility to expand their business: “*The positive thing, from my viewpoint, is that it helps us to grow and open new job vacancies. Because we would certainly open fewer workplaces if we lacked this opportunity.*” [BG1_RLS _355].

During the programmes, the participants developed new skills: “*If you have worked as a chambermaid, you are now established and you work in a bigger hotel. If you have worked in a smaller one, now you work in a bigger one. You see how one is supposed to work in a team, for instance, of four chambermaids, so that you are not the only one to go to work, for instance. And it's useful. You learn to work in a team.*” [BG1_P1 _135]. Participation in the programme is a way of maintaining already established work habits: “*I registered at the LO... you get up early in the morning, you somehow continue to work actively in some way [!: You preserve your work habits by getting up, your organizational habits, right?] Yes, getting up early and so on.*” [BG1_P5 _93]. The interviewees shared that, thanks to their participation in the programme, they engaged more actively in social life and had greater self-confidence: “*For instance, I am thinking about getting a card for a fitness salon or something like that, my way of life will definitely be more active.*” [BG1_P4 _201]. And especially, “*...after that, you get a qualification as a chambermaid, and in that way, wherever you go, you can start work at once. Regardless that you have not studied for it, etcetera, you have a document... with which there is no problem to start work.*” [BG1_P1 _54]. The latter statement was shared by a representative of the LO as well: “*For instance, he has a secondary education, I direct him to the position of a junior accountant. In other words, we give them the opportunity to build upon their knowledge and skills. There the duration is six months under this programme. After these six months, in which they have a mentor who teaches them all the time, it is assumed that... a contract is signed...*” [BG1_SM2 _146].

Characteristics of the specific programme

The basic expectation people have regarding the programme is that they will succeed in finding a job. With the exception of the above-mentioned cases of disabled persons and pregnant women, participants indicated that the programme met their needs. Participants' expectations from the programme have not changed since they started taking part. The content of the programme is assessed as quite important: “*In terms of a tendency, I can tell you that generally, the employers are looking for people, prefer people, with experience, who are inclined to start work the very next day. So, as a whole, the problem here is precisely that these young people must pass through some kind of training, for the job itself, for the profession, because they don't have established work habits, as the expression goes. To work fixed working hours, from-to, to be concentrated during the working hours, those 8 hours, which is at first a bit hard for young people. This is a good opportunity.*” [BG1_SM1 _89].

The participants gave a highly positive assessment of the quality of teaching. The length of training and the obtained knowledge and skills were also assessed positively. The

respondents shared that the location where training is conducted was convenient for them. No difficulties related to location were mentioned. By the time the interviews were conducted, none of the participants had been included in any other such programme. All of them declared they were interested in being included in future programmes, should they have the need.

According to the employers, the programmes must take into account the season in which they are conducted. They indicate the spring and the summer as unsuitable periods. The recommendation is that the programmes be conducted during the colder months of the year, because *“at certain times of the year, for instance, it is even harder, because, let's say when spring comes, people start to scatter for various seasonal jobs, specifically, young people. [I: Yes] So the people under the age of 25 start to look for some seasonal job for the summer, because it would bring in serious income. Respectively, in September, October, they start to come back and look for something more permanent, so usually the winter period is when we are able to organize these things more easily.”* [BG1_RLS _242].

Defining and measuring success

The various actors included in the programme have different notions as to the meaning of success.

The participants in the programme see success as holding a job. At the end of the day, the participants fill out a performance control card: *“... the training was during the day and, say, an hour before we left, we would be given a test. Generally, we had a test almost every day, so we could sort of memorize what they had... us”* [BG1_ P5_158]. Controlling the quality of performance (and for presence or absence) is done by the Employment Agency through the LO: *“Under every programme, there is a procedure for control activity, so it is regulated, when, how, who attends...”* [BG1_SM2 _243].

From the LO's point of view, success is measured based on the degree of fulfilment of the vacancies declared by employers: *“Every employer declares a certain number of vacancies for which he wants to find people; he applies, let's say they approve him and he is given the possibility to receive our assistance in finding 7 people who will start working for him. And I would say that we are successful in motivating, in the sense that we succeed in satisfying... the employer in this aspects... we have..., we score success.”* [BG1_SM2 _459].

For the employers, success is measured by finding the right candidates whom they will manage to keep after the end of the programme.

Learning lessons

According to the staff members running the programme, the people considered suitable for participation in the programme should be motivated to enter the programme as soon as possible: *“When there are, for instance, 10 people waiting outside believe me, at some point you become tense. And you say it to them, and they say, 'I can't understand you very well, next time you will explain it to be in greater detail'. Things get postponed, which is not good... And I learned my lesson, that I should be much more energetic and motivate them more quickly and, to direct them to a job vacancy... To inspire courage in them... to motivate them to apply by themselves and be more active on the labour market.”* [BG1_SM2 _570]. This view was confirmed during the conversations with participants in the programme: *“I found the job by myself through jobs.bg... And last week, when I went to the LO on Monday,*

the woman who works there... told me that in fact she had proposed the job to me when I had been there, she had even given me the phone number I should call. But later, I decided I wouldn't start work.” [BG1_P5 _231].

Among the actions undertaken by the LO to implement lessons learned are face-to-face meeting with persons who are suitable for inclusion in a specific programme; the opportunities that the programme offers are explained to them specifically and in detail: “... *this information meeting... which I entitled My Career,... is aimed specifically at youths up to the age of 29, and we prepare the specific orders for them. We invite the persons who are suitable under the requirements of these orders [from employers – I.N.]... So that these persons can, more personally, become familiar with the respective order. And be motivated by the intermediary and directed to this job.” [BG1_SM1 _591].*

Generalisability and suggested implications (in the national/ regional context)

In the recently published Council Recommendation on the 2018 National Reform Programme of Bulgaria, the European Commission acknowledges that, “the labour market has improved... However, the positive labour market developments are not equally benefiting the whole working-age population” and recommends “Increase the employability of disadvantaged groups by upskilling and strengthening activation measures.”¹⁴ On the basis of the policy trail on employment, we can draw several general conclusions that may contribute to increasing the employability of disadvantaged groups through upskilling and strengthening activation measures.

Evaluation and impact analyses of the programmes targeted at young people

Regular evaluation of the programmes is very important. According to the Updated Employment Strategy of R Bulgaria 2013-2020¹⁵, at least once every three years, a gross assessment is made of the effects of implementation of programmes and measures for employment and training funded through the state budget, and a net assessment is made at least once every five years. Experts have noted a positive effect of the YG when policies are applied to ensure the work-first approach (which were assessed as weak in 2013 and medium in 2016), as well as of policies for upskilling/enabling (the evaluation of which rose from medium to strong in the same period), and also as concerns reaching the target group of NEETs¹⁶.

An Assessment of the Effect of Active Labour Market Policy Funded by the State Budget was published recently¹⁷. Although the assessment does not cover the programme

¹⁴ Council Recommendation on the 2018 National Reform Programme of Bulgaria and delivering a Council opinion on the 2018 Convergence Programme of Bulgaria, Brussels, 23.5.2018 COM (2018) 402 final, Brussels – Belgium, 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2018-european-semester-country-specific-recommendation-commission-recommendation-bulgaria-en.pdf

¹⁵ Aktualizirana strategija po zaetostta na Republika Bulgaria 2013 – 2020 godina, Sofia-Bulgaria, 2013. <http://www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=4048>

¹⁶ L. Spasova, R. Stoilova, P. Boyadjieva, V. Krastveva, P. Ilieva-Trichkova and G. Yordanova, Strategies to improve labour market integration of young people: Analysing linkages between horizontal and vertical policy coordination – Country Report Bulgaria (Oslo: Nova, 2016), (20.02.2020).

¹⁷ E-Research Consortium, Izgotvyane na otsenki na efekta ot aktivnata politika na pazara na truda, finansirana sas sredstva ot darzhavnja byudzheta, na individualno nivo (netna otsenka), (Sofia: MLSP, 2017), (20.02.2020).

discussed in this policy trial, we believe it is important to present the evaluation youths made of the programmes and measures for employment and training.

Impact of the programmes and measures upon unemployed persons (aged up to 29) who have taken part in programmes, projects, and measures for employment and training in 2015

The social impact of the programmes and measures were evaluated for several aspects on a scale from 2 - “completely useless” to 6 - “very useful”. An impressive fact is that the assessments of youths who participated in the programmes were higher than those of older participants (Table 1).

Table 1. Average assessments of the usefulness of the programme in which they participated

Aspects	Assessments by persons aged up to 29 years	Assessments by persons aged 30-49 years
Making more social contacts	5.20	5.00
Accumulating work experience/length of service	5.10	4.90
Acquiring or enhancing practical experience	5.10	4.90
Acquiring new skills	5.00	4.90
Acquiring or enhancing work habits	5.00	4.80
Acquiring or enhancing self-confidence	5.00	4.80
Acquiring social and healthcare insurance	5.00	4.80
Improving existing skills	4.90	4.80
Improving one's material situation	4.60	4.50
Finding employment that matches skills/qualification	4.60	4.40

Source: Preparing assessments of the effect of active labour market policy financed through the state budget, at individual level (net assessment), 2017

The persons who participated in programmes and in employment and training measures were asked to assess themselves, on the basis of several criteria, at the start, i.e., before participation in the programme, and again after their participation was completed. The average values on each of the criteria indicate a positive result (Table 2):

Table 2. Participants' average self-assessments based on 6 criteria, before and after participating in the programme

Self-assessment criteria	Before	After
Professional knowledge and skills	4.20	4.90
Self-confidence	4.30	4.80
Skills in looking for a job	4.00	4.60
Chances of finding a job	3.60	4.40
Personal material situation	0.5	4.20
Material situation of the household	3.70	4.20

Source: Preparing assessments of the effect of active labour market policy, financed through the state budget, at individual level (net assessment), 2017

The gross effect of programmes and measures funded through the state budget

The gross effect for persons up to the age of 29 was evaluated at 75.1%, which means that over two thirds of the young participants in programmes have found realization on the labour market. There is a certain preponderance of youths aged up to 24, in which the share of hired and self-employed persons amounts in all to 68.6 %, which is higher than the share of older hired persons, those in the group aged from 25 to 29 years – 64.4 %. Hence, the older the participants are, the more difficult it is for them to achieve realization on the labour market.

Net assessment of programmes financed through the state budget

When making a gross assessment of the active labour market policy, the main question is what would have happened to the persons in question if they had not participated in the programmes that are being assessed. For the purpose, an additional number of people – the so-called control group – were studied. In 2017, the share of unemployed youths aged up to 24 in the control group amounted to 66.7%, while the share in the test group was 24.0%. The difference of 42.7 percentage points indicates that the effect was greatest among youths aged up to 24. With the increase of age, this difference decreases; i.e., the effect of inclusion in active policy is smaller for older participants. For persons aged between 25 and 29, this difference goes down to 23.7 percentage points. Two conclusions should be highlighted, which show the importance of inclusion in connection with the present policy trial of young people with low education and disabilities. The strongest net effect of active labour market policies occurs among persons with initial and lower education, 24.6 percentage points, and among people with basic education, 19.3 percentage points. The analysis of the data also shows that the net effect among persons with reduced work capacity (23.5%) is higher than for persons without reduced work capacity (14%). This means that the programmes targeting persons with reduced work capacity are very effective and, in the future, should be enhanced in variety and scope¹⁸. The study confirmed the need “to go on to a qualitative model of assessment of policies, a model based not only on the number of employed persons under separate programmes but also on long-term analysis of economic activity and employment of included persons.”¹⁹ A significant element of this model should be to take into account the opinions of the programme participants by using qualitative methods, and to trace what happens to participants after a longer period of time.

Access to representatives of disadvantaged groups

A recent country report of the European Commission states that measures within the Youth Guarantee “so far have focused on young people with secondary and tertiary education and had only a limited impact on the low-skilled”.²⁰ This is a very serious problem, as assessments show that the highest net effect of active labour market policies (adult education programmes included) occurs precisely for people with primary and lower education²¹.

¹⁸ E-Research Consortium, *Izgotvyane na otsenki na efekta ot aktivnata politika ...* 80-82.

¹⁹ L. Spasova, R. Stoilova, P. Boyadjieva, V. Krastveva, P. Ilieva-Trichkova and G. Yordanova, *Strategies to improve labour market integration...* 29.

²⁰ European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Country Report Bulgaria 2017 Including an In-Depth Review on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances*, Brussels, 28.2.2017 SWD (2017) 68 final/3, Brussels – Belgium, 2017.

²¹ E-Research Consortium, *Izgotvyane na otsenki na efekta ot aktivnata politika ...* 80.

The study has shown that public employment services do not always have sufficient capacity to reach all sub-groups within the group of jobless youth. The study confirmed the conclusion that “most of the employment measures are towards youth registered with the public labour offices and insufficient attention is paid to economically inactive and long-term unemployed youth who have limited contacts with public institutions.”²² Hence, it is very important to find adequate ways to inform young people from disadvantaged groups about the existing programmes. The organization of programmes should be flexible in order to meet the needs of young vulnerable people.

Personalized approach

Although NIPEYG envisages that an individual action plan will be prepared for every unemployed youth registered with the LO, efforts should continue for fuller application of the personalized approach to each young person. In designing policies and programmes targeted at young vulnerable people, one should take into account the life stage in which a young person is situated, and specifically, that youths are in reproductive age and are making a transition from living with their parents to making a family of their own and having children. Others among them wish to continue their education.

Cumulative disadvantage

Special attention should be given to groups suffering from cumulative disadvantages. Young people who find themselves in a situation of cumulative disadvantage, in which the negative impact of various factors (low education level, low family status, health problems) combine, are in need of greater and more differentiated support.

Active motivation

When taking steps to motivate young people to participate in active labour market policies, it is necessary to take into account the specific needs of that age group and the different aspects of the personalities of young people. Undoubtedly, achieving a decent living standard is very important for young people, and one condition for this is for them to receive more attractive remuneration for labour. It should be remembered, however, that the programmes and activities in which young people are included also have an impact on their self-confidence, on their social contacts, and on their opportunities to exercise other activities.

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the analyse and results from the employment policy trail in Bulgaria, the following implications and recommendations are put forward: Available, affordable and sustainable offers for training and employment; A personalized approach; Active motivation; Cumulative disadvantage; Intersectionality; Organization of employment and training programmes; Coordination between employment and social policies; Benefits of employment programmes and how to measure their (un)success; Complex model of assessment of policies.

²² M. Jeliaskova, D. Minev, Dr. Draganov, V. Krasteva, and A. Stoilov, Youth Employment Policies in Bulgaria, EXCEPT Working Papers, WP No 27 (Tallinn: Tallinn University, 2018), (20.02.2020)

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