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Patterns of School-to-Work-Transition Societies With High Rates of NEETs

Claudia Petrescu¹  | Bogdan Voicu^{1,2,3}  | Adriano Mauro Ellena⁴  | Leonor Bettencourt⁵  | Vladislava Lendzhova⁶ 

¹Romanian Academy/Research Institute for Quality of Life, Bucharest, Romania | ²Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu/Sociology, Sibiu, Romania | ³National University of Science and Technology "Politehnica", Bucharest, Romania | ⁴Department of Psychology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano, Italy | ⁵CIS-ISCTE, University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE-IUL), Lisbon, Portugal | ⁶Sociology Department, South-West University, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

Correspondence: Bogdan Voicu (bogdan@iccv.ro)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In the context of increasing interest across Europe with youth not in employment education or training (NEET), the article explores and depicts the policy measures for stimulating school-to-work transition (SWT) and the work integration of youth in four EU countries.

Methods: We use a database of NEET-related policies adopted between 1990 and 2022 in seven EU countries. We assess existing regulations in Bulgaria, Italy, Portugal, and Romania, evaluate them with respect to types of policy, and compare the likelihood that 11 types of policy are adopted as contrasted to a group of other three EU countries.

Results: The fragmented Romanian system is consistent with the post-socialist residual regime. Bulgaria's EU-driven model is also interpreted through the lenses of the post-socialist regime. Italian attempts to bring training closer to individual needs, and to instil transversal skills, faces a road defined by the bumpers of the sub-protective and familyist SWT culture, manifest both through the stress on financial transfers (also common to the other countries, but more to Italy and Portugal) and to the lack of reaction from employers. Portugal's example reveals lack of preoccupation with tailored measures and with specially targeting narrower defined vulnerable groups.

Conclusions: All four countries implemented policy regulations as part of their commitment to the common European framework, but also consistent to the country specificities. Convergence is limited and filtered through the specificities of the School-to-Work-Transition regimes, keeping the countries in their corresponding type of regime.

1 | Introduction

This paper examines whether and how countries with high rates of NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) differ in their responses to this issue through School-to-Work Transition (SWT) measures. In this context, we propose a threefold conceptual approach, drawing on adolescence literature, SWT literature, and specific policy-related developments—particularly SWT regimes—to address, from a comparative and longitudinal

perspective, the evolving legislative frameworks for SWT across EU countries with high NEET rates. The three streams of literature are complementary: adolescence literature explains NEET emergence, SWT literature connects early NEETs to later status, and policy literature addresses societal reactions. Our argument follows this chronological order, reflecting the human life course.

While developmental theories adopt an integrative approach to individual dynamics (Newman and Newman 2023), their

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application to adolescence highlights the importance of developmental systems models. These models situate individuals within their personal and societal contexts, emphasizing the need to consider contextual factors to fully understand adolescence and its manifestations (Lerner and Castellino 2002). Adolescence is often conceptualized as a transitional phase (Dornbusch 2000; Hopkins 2014; Kapur 2015), during which the successful SWT becomes critical for individual development (Lenz 2001; Piquart et al. 2003). In recent decades, the postponement of stable couple formation and entry into the labor market has extended this transition period, increasingly reframing it as one of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2000; Mehta and Arnett 2023).

The SWT assumes heightened significance in this context of fluid transitions to adulthood, which are further shaped by significant cultural variations (Arnett 2000). To situate SWT within its societal context, this paper examines the relationship between policy measures aimed at stimulating SWT and the labor market integration of youth across several EU countries. The SWT is not merely a phase during which a young individual exits education and enters the labor market (Ng and Feldman 2007), with success or failure determined solely by individual effort (Blokker et al. 2023). Rather, a successful SWT is shaped by a combination of individual factors, such as self-control (Li et al. 2021) or educational attainment (Noelke et al. 2012), and broader socio-political structures, including labor market regulations and social protection systems that shape the environments in which young people are embedded (Masdonati et al. 2022). Ultimately, it is the dynamic interaction between these factors over time that determines outcomes (Blokker et al. 2023).

Effective SWT requires coordinated responses at both societal and political levels to mitigate the uncertainties and risks faced by young people during this critical period. The national institutional configurations of education systems, labor markets, and welfare states play a crucial role in enabling young people to navigate the inherent uncertainties of the transition from education to work (Cefalo et al. 2020; Jung and Go 2021). These institutional arrangements contribute to a wide regional and national diversity in SWT experiences across Europe (Raffe 2008; Pastore et al. 2021). Although youth unemployment, SWT, and youth labor market integration have increasingly become central concerns and high priorities on European political agendas (Scandurra et al. 2020), inspired by the European Pillar of Social Rights, territorial and spatial diversity within Europe has resulted in the development of distinct SWT regimes across European Union (EU) member states (Chevalier 2016; Walther 2017; Vogel 2002). These regimes can be categorized into five distinct clusters, based on national institutional differences—such as educational and training systems and welfare structures—as well as regional characteristics, socioeconomic disparities, geographic isolation, and regional labor market dynamics. This article presents each of these regimes in a brief overview (Pastore and Zimmermann 2019; Rambla and Scandurra 2021; Walther 2006).

1.1 | SWT Regimes Across European Union

Universalistic regimes, typical of Scandinavian countries, emphasize personal development, viewing SWT as a period of

growth and learning, supported by extensive resources aimed at facilitating a successful transition. The policy mix includes comprehensive education systems that provide flexibility in educational pathways and promote equal opportunities. Strong social protection systems are in place, with the welfare state offering extensive social security and ensuring support during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Employment policies are designed to minimize risks and promote personal development, incorporating robust state-funded programs, apprenticeships, and employment services, all aimed at ensuring a smooth transition to the labor market.

The Employment-Centered regime, characteristic of central European countries such as Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands, is defined by highly selective education systems in which students are tracked into academic or vocational pathways during early adolescence. Apprenticeships and skill-specific training are closely integrated with the labor market, providing targeted support to help young people secure employment. Social protection is a shared responsibility between families and the state, complemented by targeted employment policies. The labor market is regulated and offers segmented access to skilled occupations, with a strong emphasis on vocational education and job-specific training.

The Anglo-Saxon tradition, exemplified by countries such as Ireland and the United Kingdom, is characterized by more flexible and less regulated labor markets. The education system is less selective, and training programs are often adaptable. However, there is a strong emphasis on individual responsibility for securing employment and navigating the labor market, which young people are encouraged to enter at an earlier stage. This approach entails higher risks, including unemployment, low wages, and precarious contracts. Specific to Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), the Sub-Protective and Familistic regime is characterized by limited Active Labor Market Policies (ALMPs). Programs designed to assist youth in the transition to work are either underdeveloped or ineffective. While education is universally accessible, reflecting non-selective education systems, vocational training is neither comprehensive nor well-integrated with the labor market. In Post-Socialist regimes, vocational education and training is universally available but is less developed compared to that in Central Europe. The links between vocational education and labor market demands are weak, making it more difficult for young people to secure employment that aligns with their skills. Employment protection is inconsistent, with some countries characterized by high levels of informality and precarious work.

Across all these regimes, a clear regional divide can be observed when considering the structural basis of SWT (Caroleo et al. 2022; Pastore et al. 2021; Simões 2022). On the one hand, sub-protective and post-socialist regimes experience prolonged SWT periods, driven by weaker economies, higher youth unemployment, and underdeveloped labor market support structures (Pastore et al. 2021). These factors are also associated with higher rates of NEET youth and adolescents (Ellena et al. 2021; Rambla and Scandurra 2021; Simões 2022; Ellena et al. 2023). In contrast, the other three regime types—characterized by stronger economies, comprehensive welfare systems, and better integration of education and employment

policies—tend to exhibit shorter and more successful transitions (Pastore et al. 2021).

1.2 | NEET and Active Labor Market Policies

The share of NEET individuals has become a crucial indicator of SWT processes (Simões 2022). The term NEET was first introduced in the early 1990s in the UK to better capture young people's labor market precariousness and vulnerability (Caroleo et al. 2022). It encompasses a heterogeneous group of individuals aged 15–29, including both short-term and long-term unemployed, as well as those economically inactive due to health issues, caregiving responsibilities, or discouragement about finding work (Mascherini 2019). The concept's heterogeneity (Petrescu et al. 2024) has contributed to understanding the social and economic losses associated with NEET status, as well as the overwhelming social and economic burden it imposes on states, communities, families, and most directly, young people themselves (Eurofound 2012). NEET has become one of the central target groups of policy-making at the EU level, prompting EU countries to promote the coordination of networks involving authorities, employers, and civil society organizations. These efforts aim to establish institutional arrangements similar to the universalistic and employment-centered models (Rambla and Scandurra 2021). This approach entails a multi-stakeholder and multi-layered governance framework (Jenson and Mérand 2010; Bettencourt et al. 2023) and mixed coordination of school-to-work active labor market policies (ALMPs). These policies are structured around two central dimensions—one anchored in market logic and the other focused on investing in human capital—and are differentiated into four types of youth-focused initiatives: (i) incentive reinforcement, (ii) employment assistance, (iii) occupation, and (iv) human capital investment (Bonoli 2010). These categories include various specific measures and programs, such as (i) labor market training, (ii) job search assistance and monitoring, (iii) wage subsidies, (iv) public sector work programs, and (v) self-employment support (Caliendo and Schmidl 2016; Speckesser et al. 2019; Simões 2022).

The main research question of this paper is as follows: How have EU countries with high NEET rates developed their school-to-work transition (SWT) approaches within the context of broader NEET policies, and is there variation in these policy approaches across countries and over time, particularly in terms of the types of actions these countries prioritize? Our focus is therefore on the types of policies rather than on their efficiency for individuals or societies. This analysis is conducted at the country level, considering the types of actors involved in program delivery, with a distinction made between state agencies and the NGO sector.

Existing literature highlights how EU countries have implemented youth-oriented ALMPs to address youth labor market integration and the high prevalence of NEET (Cefalo et al. 2020), particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. Among these initiatives, the Youth Guarantee (YG) stands out as the most prominent policy instrument (Tosun et al. 2019; Cefalo et al. 2020). The YG was one of the first EU policy tools to address regional disparities (Rocca et al. 2024),

targeting regions in EU countries where NEET rates exceeded 25%. Its impact proved crucial in reducing NEET shares, particularly in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key measures under the YG, such as reimbursing firms for payroll costs to preserve employment, reinforcing unemployment insurance systems, and providing income relief to vulnerable families, along with on-the-ground programs supporting young people, helped mitigate the long-term negative effects on school-to-work transitions (ILO 2018b). However, in Southern and Eastern EU countries, NEET rates took longer to decline and, in many cases, remain above the EU average (Rambla and Scandurra 2021; Simões 2022). These countries appear less proactive in adopting new and innovative youth-oriented ALMP instruments in established sectors such as education, economy, employment, and family and social affairs, where relevant policy tools already exist. Instead, they often focus on ensuring comprehensive coverage across all sectors and creating new tools in emerging areas (Tosun et al. 2019). By contrast, Northern countries have continued to innovate and produce new policy instruments. As the YG emphasizes, member states must tailor policy measures to align with their specific national, regional, and local contexts (Chabanet 2014; Tosun et al. 2017).

In summary, STW across Europe are shaped by the interplay of individual factors, labor market dynamics, and the broader socio-political framework. Policies aimed at supporting NEETs play a critical role in mitigating the challenges faced by young people during this pivotal stage. Numerous initiatives have been implemented at both the European and national levels to address youth unemployment and support NEETs. These efforts are often categorized under the umbrella of ALMPs, which aim to provide training, job search assistance, and financial incentives to help young people enter or re-enter the labor market. In this paper, we examine the youth-oriented policies adopted by different EU countries with the goal of enhancing young people's skills and improving labor market measures. Specifically, we analyze the patterns of SWT through the lens of NEET policies in four EU member states—Romania, Bulgaria, Italy, and Portugal—seeking to understand how their policy frameworks have evolved over time. Furthermore, we explore whether these frameworks differ fundamentally from those in three other countries—Spain, Lithuania, and Estonia—which serve as the comparison group for this study.

2 | Materials and Methods

We used the Tr@ck-IN database of policy measures targeting youth (Petrescu and Voicu 2023). While the project primarily focused on policy actions for rural NEETs, it generated a unique and extensive data set of policies addressing NEETs more broadly. The database covers the period from 1991 to 2022 across the seven European countries under study. In this timeframe, 229 documents (laws and regulations) were identified for the selected countries, and 22 types of labor market policies were coded.

For the four countries at the core of our analysis, we explore the evolution of their policies and how they have conceptualized support for SWT over the past 30 years. We then examine the adoption of various types of policy measures across all seven

countries, using cross-classified models to predict policy adoption. The regulations are nested within their year of adoption and their respective countries. We predict adoption (as dummy variables) by differentiating between Romania and Bulgaria (our two Southeast case studies) and Portugal and Italy (the two Southwest case studies), while using Spain, Lithuania, and Estonia as comparison groups.

The 11 types of policies analyzed are derived from the existing classifications mentioned in the introduction (Bonoli 2010; Caliendo and Schmidl 2016; Tosun et al. 2017; Speckesser et al. 2019; Simões 2022) and consider both the type of program and the agent responsible for delivering it. These include: (1) providing information; providing three types of financial support: (2a) unemployment insurance, (2b) social assistance through monetary transfers, (2c) subsidies for employers; including Direct Provision by the state: (3a) Social services, (3b) Active measures, (3c) Financial transfers; respectively financing services provided by NGOs: (4a) Social services, (4b) Active measures, (4c) Financial transfers.

This approach enables us to determine whether the four case study countries exhibit significant differences from the three comparison group countries. Two of the comparison group countries (Lithuania and Estonia) belong to the Post-Socialist regime type, while Spain represents the Sub-Protective and Familistic regime. Thus, while these countries share some similarities with the four primary case studies, they also exhibit slightly lower NEET rates.

To enhance clarity, we conducted a secondary analysis excluding Estonia and Lithuania from the comparison group and grouping the Southern countries (Italy, Spain, and Portugal) together. By contrasting the coefficients between the two sets of models (Tables 1 and 2), we assess their stability. In the next section, we discuss the results derived from both sets of models.

3 | Results

3.1 | In Depth Analysis of the Four Selected Case Studies

Between 1991 and 2022, Italy issued 66 regulations, Portugal 49, Bulgaria 31, and Romania 23. This reflects a dynamic aimed at shifting the sub-protective and post-socialist regimes toward greater emphasis on ALMPs and a more integrated approach to adolescent development. In the following sections, we analyze this evolution by focusing on one country at a time.

3.1.1 | Italy

The evolution of School-to-Work Transition (SWT) policies in Italy over the past years has been marked by efforts to address persistently high youth unemployment rates and to streamline pathways to stable employment. A central component in this policy framework is the *Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e l'Orientamento* (PCTO), introduced through the 2019 Budget Law to replace the *Alternanza scuola-lavoro* program that had

been mandated by the 2015 Buona Scuola (Good School) reform. The previous program had required a compulsory number of workplace training hours for high school students. By contrast, PCTO restructured these requirements, reducing the mandatory hours and shifting the focus towards developing “transversal skills” such as teamwork, problem-solving, and professional orientation. This shift aimed to provide students with the competencies required to navigate the labor market and to align their academic skills with market demands (Ellena and Triani 2023). However, PCTO has encountered implementation challenges, notably a low level of engagement from employers and inconsistent quality in workplace placements, which underscores the need for stronger synergies between educational institutions and the labor market. This lack of coherence between labor market expectations and type of training stands in line with the typical traits of the sub-protective SWT regimes, confirming Italian belonging to the stream. However, the search for alternative policy also indicates an effort to change the SWT regime, which is also manifest in other initiatives that we note in the following. One of them is *Garanzia Giovani* (Youth Guarantee), launched in 2014 as part of the European Union’s Youth Guarantee initiative and implemented until 2021. *Garanzia Giovani* aims to reduce the number of NEETs by providing a mix of services, including career guidance, internships, and financial incentives for employers. While the program has facilitated some SWT pathways through meaningful internships and apprenticeships, its long-term impact on stable employment creation remains limited (European Commission 2020; Petrescu et al. 2022). This initiative was introduced alongside the 2014 *Jobs Act* (Governato Italiano 2014), which reformed labor laws to increase flexibility and supported ALMPs with the goal of reducing youth unemployment. The *Jobs Act* specifically promoted more flexible work arrangements, helping reduce hiring barriers, although critics argue that this flexibility may contribute to precarious employment for young workers in the absence of long-term job security. In 2021, the Italian government introduced *Garanzia di Occupabilità dei Lavoratori* (GOL) as part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) to enhance employability among vulnerable groups, including young and long-term unemployed individuals. GOL offers personalized employment support, such as targeted retraining and upskilling opportunities, to improve young workers’ adaptability to an evolving labor market and to meet shifting employer demands (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali and Ministero dell’Economia e delle Finanze 2021; Ellena et al. 2024). Another supporting policy is the *Servizio Civile Universale* (Universal Civil Service), which allows young people to gain professional experience through a specific type of work (receiving a monthly stipend) across various sectors, including social services and environmental protection. By providing hands-on experience and facilitating networking, this program helps participants develop practical skills that can ease their transition into the workforce (Marta et al. 2016).

3.1.2 | Portugal

The legislative framework for ALMPs in Portugal reflects a structured yet limited approach toward integrating youth, especially NEETs, into the labor market. With 49 documented

TABLE 1 | Cross-classified models for the usage of different policy instruments.

Dependent	Financial Support				Direct Provision by the state				Financing services by NGOs					
	Information	Unemployment insurance	Social assistance: Monetary transfers	Subsidies for employers	Regulation	Social services	Active measures	Financial transfers	Social services	Active measures	Financial transfers	Social services	Active measures	Financial transfers
(Intercept)	0.09***	0.20*	0.13*	0.07	0.65	0.19**	0.16	0.03***	0.12	0.07	0.03**	0.12	0.07	0.03**
Italy/Portugal	1.21	0.00	0.23	0.90	3.78	0.51	3.92	8.51**	0.10	1.86	4.96	0.10	1.86	4.96
Bulgaria/Romania	0.97	0.92	0.44	1.71	0.50	0.62	0.52	3.46	0.17	0.19	2.35	0.17	0.19	2.35
2010–2013	2.72	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.12	1.14	1.74	1.43	0.00	1.20	0.99	0.00	1.20	0.99
2014–2017	1.18	0.49	0.48	0.25	0.66	0.74	0.51	1.21	0.35	0.57	0.00	0.35	0.57	0.00
2018–2022	2.90	0.00	0.00	0.12	0.27*	1.90	0.59	1.19	0.33	0.42	0.42	0.33	0.42	0.42
Random Effects														
σ^2	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29
τ_{00}	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.48	0.00	0.27	0.38	0.00	0.27	0.38
N	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries
Observations	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229
Marginal/Conditional R^2	0.063/0.109	1.000/NA	0.991/NA	0.907/0.940	0.220/0.394	0.072/NA	0.160/0.479	0.179/0.283	0.925/NA	0.146/0.543	0.982/NA	0.925/NA	0.146/0.543	0.982/NA

Note: Reference categories: before 2010, ES-EE-LT. The effects are displayed as odd-ratios. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 2 | Cross-classified models for the usage of different policy instruments: Spain is added to the Southern cluster.

Dependent	Financial Support				Direct Provision by the state				Financing services by NGOs					
	Information	Unemployment insurance	Social assistance: Monetary transfers	Subsidies for employers	Regulation services	Social services	Active measures	Financial transfers	Social services	Active measures	Financial transfers	Social services	Active measures	Financial transfers
(Intercept)	0.08**	0.24	0.16*	0.10	0.49	0.26*	0.40	0.04**	0.24	0.19	0.04**	0.24	0.19	0.04**
Italy/Portugal/ Spain	1.33	0.00	0.14	0.48	4.10	0.29**	0.61	4.75	0.04	0.37	3.46	0.04	0.37	3.46
Bulgaria/ Romania	1.07	0.63	0.31	1.18	0.68	0.42	0.21	2.82	0.09	0.08	1.89	0.09	0.08	1.89
2010–2013	2.64	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.04	1.49	1.79	1.19	0.00	1.25	0.94	0.00	1.25	0.94
2014–2017	1.16	0.71	0.63	0.27	0.62	0.87	0.51	0.89	0.47	0.57	0.00	0.47	0.57	0.00
2018–2022	2.91	0.00	0.00	0.13	0.26*	1.92	0.58	0.93	0.40	0.40	0.43	0.40	0.40	0.43
Random Effects														
σ^2	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29
τ_{00}	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.48	0.00	0.27	0.38	0.00	0.27	0.38
country	0.17	0.00	0.00	1.81	0.79	0.00	2.01	0.20	1.49	1.98	0.00	1.49	1.98	0.00
N	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries	25 years 7 countries
Observations	0.067/NA	0.995/NA	0.996/NA	0.910/0.940	0.204/0.402	0.103/NA	0.129/NA	0.086/0.250	0.904/0.934	0.137/0.491	0.953/0.959	0.904/0.934	0.137/0.491	0.953/0.959
Conditional R ²														

Note: Reference categories: before 2010, EE-LT. The effects are displayed as odd-ratios.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

legislative efforts (22 laws, 25 programs, and two broader plans or strategies), the policies primarily target youth, focusing on professional traineeships, employment qualification initiatives, cooperative entrepreneurship programs, and establishing professional integration offices. Starting 2002, the legislation prioritized the increasing of qualifications through provisions in the employment contracts, and mandating training for younger employees. The highly segmented Portuguese labor market (Kougias 2019) was tackled through the first Labor Code in 2003 by weakening legal employment protection, and the individualization of work relations in the second Labor Code in 2009 (Venn 2009; Ramalho 2013). Moreover, in 2008, in the midst of the financial crisis, Portugal presented an increased unemployment rate, a predominantly low-skilled labor force (Kougias 2019), and employment rates decreased among people under 30, between 2008 and 2010 (European Commission 2011). By 2009, the efforts to address these challenges broadened to include national and international internships and first-job initiatives, predominantly for highly educated. Although the overall goals remained consistent—reducing youth unemployment through employment and training programs—the ALMPs evolved to cover a wider range of NEETs, regardless of educational attainment, but continued with a regulatory approach. The state directly supported these programs through active measures such as internships and start-up incentives, and peak years 2009–2010 saw the launch of salient initiatives, including the Qualification-Employment Program, Qualification-Employment Internships Programs, Employment Initiative Program 2010, or the annual program of professional internships in Public Administration. In 2011, the tripartite Employment Agreement was signed between the social partners and government (Távora and González 2014; OECD 2017). The implementation of ALMPs focused on specific groups such as youth, mostly the 15–24 age group, and the long-term unemployed (European Commission 2014; Martins 2014; Ramalho 2013). Also in 2011, the subsidized internship program (*Estágios Profissionais*) was implemented (OECD 2017). Also relevant within the government initiatives is the “Program COOPJOVEM” for cooperative entrepreneurship created in 2012 and renewed in 2015. This program illustrates a set of measures targeting NEETs from rural areas. Another initiative targeting young people was the strategic plan Youth Impulse (*Impulso Jovem*) anchored in four pillars - internships; hiring incentives; vocational training; and entrepreneurship support (OECD 2017). The Youth Impulse was later integrated in the YG, in 2013, together with Youth Invest for the creation of start-ups by young unemployed, and the Active Youth Employment (*Emprego Jovem Ativo*), a 6-months-long work experience apprenticeship program, in 2014. The efforts of the YG were mainly centered on supporting non-registered NEETs and those students at risk of becoming NEETs, for the first 3 years. By 2015, there was a growing concern in promoting young people’s enrollment rates in the Vocational Education Training system (European Commission 2016).

3.1.3 | Bulgaria

Bulgaria has implemented various policies to address the challenges faced by NEETs within the broader context of youth employment. Having as primary goal the most vulnerable groups (Bertolini et al. 2019), the country’s policies focus on

three primary areas: vocational education and training (VET), youth employment programs, and social inclusion initiatives. VET programs, such as the National Program for Education and Training for Adults, aim to equip young people with practical skills that align with labor market demands. This aligns with the need for education systems to facilitate more effective SWT by fostering skill development closely tied to labor market requirements (Pastore and Zimmermann 2019). ALMPs also support youth employment through subsidized employment schemes, apprenticeships, and internships, funded by both national budgets and EU programs like the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) (European Commission 2018). Social inclusion policies, such as counseling and career guidance, provide to marginalized groups, including Roma and young people with disabilities, better access to the labor market (ILO 2018a; Stoilova et al. 2019).

Bulgaria’s NEET-related policies have evolved significantly, particularly since its EU accession in 2007. In the pre-2007 period, efforts were limited and largely reactive, focusing on short-term solutions such as public works programs. However, with EU membership came access to additional funding and a shift towards a more structured approach to youth employment. The 2007–2013 period marked the introduction of systematic efforts aimed at reducing youth unemployment and enhancing employability through VET and skills development. The introduction of the Youth Guarantee (2014) brought further progress, with the 2014–2020 period emphasizing early interventions, education-to-employment pathways, and internship opportunities. This phase witnessed significant engagement in policies targeting NEETs, especially through EU support mechanisms such as the YEI, said to have provided critical resources for VET and work experience initiatives across Bulgaria (Ministry of Labor and Social Policy Bulgaria 2020).

The current period (2021–2027) continues to build on these foundations, with a heightened focus on aligning education with labor market demands, digital skills development, and targeted support for disadvantaged youth. These contemporary priorities reflect an understanding of structural labor market challenges, including skill mismatches and the need for comprehensive training in digital competencies. Social inclusion initiatives, linked with improved coordination between education providers and employers, specifically targeted vulnerable groups in Bulgaria’s youth population, especially in rural and minority communities.

3.1.4 | Romania

Romania exhibits a fragmented and inconsistent policy framework for SWT and NEET inclusion. The transition from a communist to a market economy, characterized by the collapse of industry, triggered a series of regulatory changes aimed at redefining the relationship between education and the labor market. Education reforms have notably resulted in a decline in VET in the country. Initial VET, in particular, has undergone multiple legislative changes, including its abolition in 2003, followed by the introduction of a dual system in 2014 that involved greater participation from the business sector.

Additionally, efforts have been made to make educational pathways more flexible, with a focus on encouraging young people to complete high school rather than pursuing vocational schooling. However, weak coordination between education and employment policy measures remains a significant challenge.

In 2014, Romania drafted the YG Plan, which included a collection of measures already implemented, albeit with questionable results, in three main areas - employment, education and entrepreneurship, that should facilitate NEETs employment. The employment measures included apprenticeships, youth mobility, training and career guidance. The education ones were three national programs: Second Chance, Professional Scholarship, and Money for High School. The implementation of these measures has been coordinated by different ministries and there has been a lack of integration and linkage between them (Petrescu et al. 2021). The Reinforced Youth Guarantee (RYG) measures were included in the National Strategy for Employment 2021–2027. The measures dedicated to SWT propose the improvement of the NEETs tracking system after integration into the labor market or into the education or training system, the development of volunteering among young people, including NEETs, and their skilling and upskilling, with a focus on basic digital skills, career management, communication, and teamwork skills, as well as social and green entrepreneurship skills. Both YG and RYG do not have specific measures dedicated to various specificities of NEETs' types (e.g., young people with disabilities, short-term and long-term unemployed, caregiving responsibilities, or discouragement about finding work, rural ones), all NEETs being considered as a homogeneous group.

From 2017, a series of ALMPs for youth were improved and developed to become more attractive both for young NEETs and for employers. Policy measures like mobility packages, employer subsidies, incentives for insertion for young people who are employed, apprenticeship, internship were improved.

3.2 | Quantitative Analysis

Beyond the country pathways outlined above, Tables 1 and 2 examine differences in policy types across groups of countries and periods in recent history. The distinction between the two tables lies in how the countries are grouped. In Table 1, we compare our four case study countries to a heterogeneous cluster consisting of Spain, Lithuania, and Estonia—three countries that share similarities with the regions and societal types represented by the case studies. In Table 2, Spain is included in the Southern cluster to explore whether differences exist within this regime. While most of the coefficients remain unchanged across the two models, we conclude that Italy and Portugal perform notably well within the Southern cluster (with differences from Spain explained where applicable), whereas Romania and Bulgaria follow a distinct trajectory compared to the Baltic states. Additionally, we find evidence of an influence exerted by higher NEET rates, which prompts the adoption of distinct policy measures.

These measures also exhibit regional variations, as discussed in the following sections. Before delving into the interpretation of the details, it is important to note that the significance levels in

the tables play only a limited role. This is because the analysis encompasses the entire population of regulations enacted during the period under review across the seven EU countries. Compared to both Romania and Bulgaria and the three comparison countries, the Italy-Portugal cluster experienced greater emphasis on financial transfers directly from state agencies. Additionally, these countries adopted more measures to enhance financial transfers through NGOs. Romania and Bulgaria also implemented a higher number of such regulations.

Beyond the notable emphasis on promoting financial transfers, we also observe a higher propensity in Romania and Bulgaria to implement subsidies for employers, as well as a stronger tendency in Italy and Portugal to introduce additional regulations. Conversely, there is a lower interest in social services, whether provided by state agencies or NGOs, across all four countries under study compared to the others. We reserved for the end the second notable difference between Italy and Portugal, on the one hand, and Romania and Bulgaria, on the other. The two Southern countries placed significantly greater emphasis on proposing active measures, both through state agencies and NGOs, not only in comparison to the two Southeast EU members but also relative to the comparison group. However, when Spain is included in the Southern grouping, the situation changes. In fact, it is Spain that lowers the average level of active measures within the comparison group, particularly those directly provided by the state and those delivered through NGOs, thereby diverging in this respect from Portugal and Italy. Even with the inclusion of Spain, the comparison group remains more inclined to propose active measures compared to Romania and Bulgaria, where the emphasis on financial transfers becomes particularly evident.

When comparing the two tables, it emerges that Italy and Portugal (as well as Spain) place slightly more emphasis on disseminating information, followed by Romania and Bulgaria, and then the Baltic grouping. However, the differences between these groups are not substantial.

4 | Discussion

We conducted an in-depth analysis of four high-NEET-rate countries and compared them with three other EU countries from the same Southern and Eastern regions. Our primary focus was on institutional responses. The findings revealed that school-to-work transition regimes play a significant role in shaping policy responses toward NEETs, but they also allow for country-level variations to emerge both within and across the regimes.

Italy's sub-protective regime, rooted in its familistic welfare arrangements, relies heavily on family support to address gaps in public assistance. Young Italians often depend on their families for financial aid and job connections due to limited state support for labor market entrants (Marzana et al. 2024). Consequently, while policies such as PCTO, Garanzia Giovani, and GOL were designed to support youth employment, their effectiveness has been constrained by structural reliance on family networks and a welfare model that inherently prioritizes incumbent workers, thereby limiting the direct impact of these SWT initiatives.

Despite efforts to enhance ALMPs, Portugal remains tied to the sub-protective welfare model and struggles to adequately address the developmental needs of adolescents and young adults. While training and employment support measures have been expanded to include NEETs, the specificity and targeting of these programs remain unclear. Most legislative measures fail to differentiate between various NEET subtypes, limiting the provision of tailored support. Only a small proportion of policies address the needs of short-term and long-term unemployed NEETs or vulnerable groups, such as individuals with illnesses or disabilities. Moreover, limited attention is given to NEETs in rural areas, where national ALMPs demonstrate minimal engagement. In these regions, EU-funded Rural Development Programs (European Commission 2014) play a more prominent role, addressing rural socioeconomic needs through initiatives that often operate independently of the primary ALMP framework.

In Bulgaria, there is a noticeable tendency to address the needs of the most vulnerable groups. Additionally, a pattern similar to that observed in Italy and Portugal can be noted: the development of ALMPs remains limited, not necessarily in terms of initial intentions but rather in the level of specificity and implementation.

Romania follows a similar pattern of reforming its SWT regime, driven more by the impact of EU-level regulations than by proactive measures or need-based assessments. A similar lack of interest in tailored policy is evident, consistent with other analyses that highlight a pervasive tendency to treat all needs as homogeneous and all school-to-work transitions as identical, thereby neglecting specific developmental requirements (Petrescu et al. 2022).

The quantitative analysis highlights potential reasons for which the measures implemented by the four countries have not been sufficient to transform their SWT regimes. Compared to both the comparison group and Romania and Bulgaria, Italy and Portugal place greater emphasis on financial transfers—shifting the focus to financial aspects and setting standards—while the promotion of social services is less common. This reinforces the characteristics of sub-protective SWT arrangements, even within an apparently convergent trend toward NEET-focused policies driven by the common EU framework. Similarly, the two Southeastern countries show limited emphasis on service provision, instead prioritizing subsidies for employers. As previously noted, tailored policies are notably absent. Overall, the findings confirm Romania's and Bulgaria's alignment with the post-socialist SWT regime.

To sum up, despite years of efforts to improve the situation of NEETs through building a common policy framework, countries still rely on their original SWT regimes, which significantly influence individual life courses. To enhance the effectiveness of school-to-work policies, a more tailored approach is needed, involving multi-stakeholder collaboration and adopting strategies from different SWT regimes. Although this paper examines countries as separate entities, the intra-European mobility cannot be ignored. This necessitates providing potentially vulnerable individuals with similar societal arrangements to reduce their risk of becoming NEETs.

From an academic perspective, which also has immediate applicative consequences, the current variation in emphasis on different types of policies and programs offers a valuable natural experiment. This allows societies to refine their initiatives based on successes observed in other countries. Consequently, research is required to isolate the impact of each policy type, while accounting for the presence of all others. To our knowledge, although impact assessments exist for certain policy measures (as referenced in this paper), a comprehensive evaluation of their collective effect has yet to be undertaken. Future research should explore this direction, and need to extend the conceptualization of impact, by understanding it not only as integrating on the labor market or fitting into formation programs, but also on developing as an adult, with emotions, connections to other people, personal needs, etc.

While advocating for common rules, we acknowledge that there is no necessity for identical policy responses across different societies. The need for customized policies is inherent in the nature of each specific SWT regime and serves as a useful basis for comparison, as emphasized earlier. It also reflects local requirements. Therefore, we advocate for considering a variety of policy reactions as part of a comprehensive toolkit that should be universally accessible. Each type of program or policy should be clearly communicated and understood by various stakeholders, including potential individual beneficiaries. From this toolkit, each society can select the most appropriate options based on their unique historical context and societal conditions, backed by empirical evidence from impact assessments ideally conducted at a comparative level.

SWT policy should adhere to these principles and consider its impact on the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This encompasses the shift from educational institutions to work-related environments and takes into account occupations in a broader sense, not limited to work or education/training, but encompassing life as a whole.

Beyond the general implications mentioned above, lessons can be learned for each individual country. In Italy, financial transfers are relied upon more than comprehensive support services, leaving many young people, especially those from rural or vulnerable backgrounds, without clear pathways to employment. Similarly, in Romania and Bulgaria, the generic nature of active labor market policies, limited coordination between public actors, and underdeveloped public-private cooperation contribute to delays in integration into education or the labor market, perpetuating exclusion cycles. The characteristics of SWT regimes influence the effectiveness of policy interventions, with the analysis indicating no consistent pattern over the past decade and no agreement on “best practice.” As already argued, these policies should be adapted not only to the characteristics and needs of NEETs but also to local or national contexts and the features of SWT regimes.

As we have pointed out earlier, policies targeting NEETs may have limited specificity and reach, which can impact key developmental tasks of emerging adulthood, such as achieving independence and building professional and social identities. The reliance on family support in certain regimes can delay NEETs' financial and residential autonomy, while the lack of tailored support services can hinder opportunities for labor market

integration. Furthermore, reliance on family support may restrict young people's chances of broadening their social networks beyond family ties, thereby limiting their capacity for intimacy and wider social participation. ALMPs generally include measures for skills development, both for specific labor market skills and transversal skills (e.g., ICT skills, communication, green skills). Internships, traineeships, and apprenticeships are active measures that have been part of ALMPs over the last decade and contribute positively to skills development, independence, and the enhancement of social networks. This last valence needs to be stressed out within policy implementation, since there is no specific policy to actually refer transition into adulthood otherwise than formally tiding it up to formation or work.

5 | Conclusion

We observed a clear evolution of specific interpretations of EU-level policies through the lens of pre-existing SWT regimes. This indicates that while the European framework aims to promote individual development, its implementation varies significantly among member states, starting from the design phase. The SWT regimes act as “producers” that rephrase and adapt the policy framework based on their own interpretations. Consequently, the impact on adolescents differs and is closely tied to cultural traits, with immediate implications for adapting counseling practices, parenting approaches, and school interventions depending on the EU country in question. Regional variations further underscore the specificity of the selected countries, highlighting differences across European regions. The existing set of policy measures can be considered as a general toolkit that should exist everywhere, but should be doubled by more comprehensive impact assessment exercises, and should be used as a set of tools, out of each one should build context-specific interventions.

The primary limitation of our study lies in its focus on the seven EU member states included in the Tr@ck-In database of NEET policies. Future research could expand the data set to include more countries, potentially incorporating a comparison group from other SWT regimes to enhance comparative analysis. Additionally, our analysis concentrated on the institutional construction of policies through associated regulations, whereas the ultimate focus should be on their impact at the individual level. Exploring the consequences of the analyzed regulations should therefore be the subject of future research. This paper, constrained by its scope and space, has emphasized the macro-level framing of policy interventions. Further investigation is required to assess their outcomes at the micro-level.

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Ethics Statement

This paper uses no data collected in any way from human subjects since it collects its empirical evidence through document analysis.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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