

A theory based evaluation on possible measures which increase young NEETs employability

Vasile Alecsandru STRAT

*The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Department of Statistics and Econometrics,
Bucharest, Romania
vasile.strat@csie.ase.ro*

Laura TROFIN

*Bucharest, Romania
laura.trofin@qures.ro*

Irina LONEAN

*Bucharest, Romania
irina.lonean@gmail.com*

Abstract. *Using Prospective Evaluation Synthesis (PES) – a theory based evaluation method – and spatial distribution analysis of the young NEETs population in correlation with demographic and economic indicators at European, national, regional and county level, the research is looking for evidence on the factors influencing both the labour market (request and demand) and the success of active labour market policies (ALMPs) in increasing young NEETs employability and decreasing their number. Taking into account that Romania has the lower rate of registration of young NEETs to the Public Employment Services and that most of the active labour market measures are targeting only registered NEETs, the article reviews all Romanian policies designed to target young NEETs and finds they have limited impact. It also analyses the number of young NEETs, the regional disparities and county level disparities and it finds no correlation between the economic strength of the county and the presence of the NEETs. Considering the characteristics of young NEETs in Romania: their education level, their previous work experience (in average), their family responsibilities, the percentage of registered young NEETs and comparing Romanian policies with successful policies in other countries with similar profile of young NEETs the article concludes that in order to be effective, the tools planned and applied need to be highly customised and their success is still dependent on natural economic dynamics. However, further research is needed to determine the economic indicators with a positive effect over the young NEETs employability.*

Keywords: NEETs, regional disparities, theory based evaluation, employment, county level disparities.

Introduction

The term NEET - ‘not in employment, education or training’, first appeared in the 1990s, in policy discussions in the UK about the need to reintegrate young people aged 16–18 who had dropped out of education but had not moved into the labour market (Eurofound, 2016). At EU level NEETs were specifically referred to for the first time in the Europe 2020 flagship initiative ‘Youth on the move’, developed as a response to the youth unemployment crisis in Europe, i.e., in 2011 only 34% of Europeans aged between 15 and 29 were employed, which became one of the more salient symptoms of the global economic recession.

In response to this problem, the European Commission developed an EU Youth Strategy for the 2010 – 2018 period, and concrete instruments such as the 2012–2013 Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative, the latter focused on regions where youth unemployment situated above 25%. The aim of these initiatives has been to ensure young people's successful transition into work through different active labour market policies (ALMPs) such as counselling and job-search assistance, apprenticeships, traineeships or continued education (Council of the EU, 2013) which would at least increase their employability and, to the extent possible, employment.

In 2013 in Romania 15.6% of young people were unemployed a rate favourably comparing to the EU average of 17.5%; however, at that moment Romania recorded a higher NEET rate¹ than the EU average (19.9% versus 15.3%)². In 2015, NEETs rate was even higher, with 6,1 p.p above European average (18,1%, versus 12,0%) (Government of Romania, 2017). Despite measures directed at unemployed youth implemented under the Human Resources Development Sectoral Programme (HRDSOP 2007-2013), in 2013 only 8.1% of NEETs were registered with public employment services, the lowest percentage across the EU; less than 5% of NEETs received financial assistance at that stage (Eurofound, 2016). Since 2013 further measures targeting NEETs have been implemented in the framework of the Romanian Youth Guarantee 2014-2015, financed partially under the same operational programme, and other interventions have been planned in the framework of the Human Capital Operational Programme (HCOP 2014-2010), through which the Youth Employment Initiative is implemented. In July 2017 the Government of Romania adopted the Action Plan for the Youth Guarantee 2017-2020.

In order to provide evidences of factors which, together, influence labour demand and thus the employment opportunities for young NEETs and, consequently, their number, we compared data on average salary, number of companies and value of Foreign Direct Investment with data related to number of NEETs and unemployed in this age category. We visually present the distribution of these indicators at European, national, regional and country level, using maps and histograms. Based on the difficulties in fighting regional gaps (Miron et al, 2009), we assume that in counties where more job opportunities exist the number of NEETs is lower, and thus active labour market policies (ALMPs) should concentrate in counties with higher NEETs level to compensate, if possible, the lack/limited labour demand.

The paper includes a section where the general framework and a brief review of the literature is presented, a short section where the methodological approach is described and a section where the main findings are presented. These sections are accompanied by some introductory and conclusive remarks.

General framework and literature review

In Romania, there is still a three-pillared structure providing the services that youths need: the family, the governmental bodies and the civil society (Mitulescu, 2007). In the transition from Communism to democracy, young people went off the radar of political decision-makers and stopped being a societal priority, although at the level of the political discourse youths have always been important. While the “youth time” changed from ages 14-29 to

¹ NEET rate is calculated as the percentage of the population aged 15–29 (or 15–24) who are not employed and not involved in further education or training.

² Figures based on the 2013 Labour Force Survey

ages 14-35, more policies to encourage youth employment, entrepreneurship and housing have been developed. In this context the change of the “youth time” made these policies more inclusive (Călăfăteanu, 2012). However, due to budget shortage these initiatives have never had a general impact. The second challenge is that of “youth space” that came once the educational system started to change based on internationalization and convergence trends in higher education (Dima&Vasilache, 2016). Young people had the opportunity to follow different courses and not to go directly from the educational system to the labour market (Kovaceva, 2001) and due to the extinction of the Union of the Communist Youth they had more free time. But youth specific, directly targeted services have not been developed. During this transition the poverty, social exclusion and marginalization among young people increased and this determined the incapacity to cover the young people’s needs (Petrescu and Ilie, 2002).

Young NEETs integration and employability is highly dependent on labour market policies, as differences among countries are more related to public policies variables than to economic indicators. However, in Europe overall, economic growth or recession is correlated to youth unemployment more than the unemployment of older adults, research showing that “youth unemployment is three times more sensitive to economic growth” (Banerji et al. 2014).

On the other hand, assessments on the effectiveness, efficacy and effects of youth policies and investments in youth policies prove a positive long-term macroeconomic impact: first in savings from other social and security policies³ (Aked et al., 2011) and in additional revenue in economy generated by higher employment and increase in the wages⁴ (Youth Work Ireland, 2011).

Methodology and data issues

This evaluation is mainly based on the Prospective Evaluation Synthesis (PES) as type of TBE. The findings of the PES are triangulated with the review and light assessment of the measures targeting NEETs available in our country (based on secondary data) and quantitative analysis.

Theory based evaluation (TBE) is an approach to evaluation (i.e., a conceptual analytical model), a way of structuring and undertaking analysis in an evaluation (Government of Canada, 2012). Central to TBE approaches is the “theory” of the evaluated interventions, developed usually in partnership between policy makers, programme managers or other stakeholders, consisting of a collection of assumptions, and hypotheses - empirically testable - that are logically linked together (Evans, 2013).

When applying a theory based approach different methods or techniques for data collection and analysis are used, in line with the evaluation design (i.e. focus groups, workshops, case studies, expert judgements etc.) with a view to test the assumptions and hypotheses of the intervention theory. Different types of TBE approaches have been developed and used in the last two decades, the most known being the realist evaluation, contributions analysis, and the Prospective Evaluation Synthesis.

³ Aked et al. calculated that the investment in youth policies save 2.2 million more currency units over 10 years from expenses in the social, medical, law enforcement and support systems (police, justice, etc.) because the personal and social development that youth activities provide to young people, generating more independent adults, decrease the pressure over social and security policies.

⁴ Youth work Ireland estimates the return of investment in youth policies is from 700% to 900% over 10 years.

In order to identify the possible successful measures to increase young NEETs employability we use the Prospective Evaluation Synthesis (PES). It is a theory based evaluation method designed to provide information on the likely outcome of proposed policies, programmes, measures or other organised intervention, based on the experience of similar interventions in their context and, most often, on the comparison of policy or programme alternatives. The method combines (1) the construction of the program or action model (as is done for the evaluation of the evaluability) with (2) the systematic use of available data as a synthesis of methodologies and results of other evaluations (Wholey, 1977). According to Evalsed (the evaluation guide developed for the evaluation of Socio-Economic Development by DG REGIO under the European Commission), a prospective evaluation synthesis is, essentially, a combination of: (1) a textual analysis of the assessed intervention (policy, programme, project or measure), aiming to define explicit or implicit goals and outcomes of the intervention, (2) a review of existent assessments, especially impact evaluations, for similar interventions, and (3) a judgment of the "likely success, given a future context that is not too different from the past" (Evalsed, 2013). After the first two steps, the Prospective Evaluation Synthesis answers three questions on the intervention under assessment, compared with other similar ones: (a) at a conceptual level: 'Logically, should it work?'; (b) at an operational level: 'Practically, could it work?' and (c) at an empirical level: 'Historically, have it worked in the past in other similar places?' (Evalsed, 2013).

For providing a spatial dimension to the analysis, the 2015 NEETs population across Europe was briefly analysed comparatively, so that countries with the severest problems and also the member countries with the lowest NEETs rates are clearly highlighted. In a second step, the analysis was taken to the national level and the evolution of the NEETs population was presented at regional and county level.

In order to identify both the areas where the economy has the potential to absorb new employees, and therefore, to provide them with better opportunities, several spatial distributions were mapped. Also, in order to acquire further insights, the density of the phenomenon (NEETs/population) was correlated with these macro-indicators. The general hypothesis supporting the inclusion of the selected variables, presented in table 1 is that strong economic areas might provide opportunities for unemployed and discouraged/less employable young population. The data for analysing the correlations was obtained from the Tempo database of the National Institute of Statistics; data presented in the 2016 evaluation report "HCOP contribution to employment among young NEETs" was also used for a thorough analysis.

Table 1. Indicators

Indicator	Source	Time period	Aggregation level
Population aged between 15 and 24	NIS	2007 - 2015	National/regional/county
Average salary	NIS	2007 - 2015	National/regional/county
Number of companies	NIS	2007 - 2015	National/regional/county
Value of Foreign Direct Investment	NIS	2007 - 2015	National/regional/county
Unemployment rate	NIS	2007 - 2015	National/regional/county
Urbanization rate	NIS	2007 - 2015	National/regional/county
NEETs rate	Eurostat	2014	European
Number of NEETs	NIS	2007 - 2015 (III)	National/regional
Number of NEETs	Report	2007-2015	County

Source: Authors' work

Empirical results

The context of labour market and the profile of young NEETs profile vary considerable from country to country, their most important characteristics being: the education level, the previous work experience and the attitude towards the labour market, as well as their employability chances. Carcillo shows that in Western and Northern Europe about two third of the young NEETs don't have secondary education, while in the Southern countries like Greece, Italy, Portugal or Spain the number of young NEETs with and without secondary education is almost equal (there are only 10% more young NEETs without secondary education compared to the ones who attended high or professional school) (Carcillo et al, 2015). These differences are striking taking into account that in both regions of the continent young NEETs have generally some previous work experience (Mascherini, M. et. al, 2012). According to the same research, more young NEETs in Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, are qualified or have secondary education, but they don't have previous work experience and they are discouraged, having a negative attitude towards the employment measures proposed by the public or private specialized services.

The comparative analysis of the measures targeting unemployment among young people (Mascherini et al., 2012) allows for a codification of these measures: (a) preventing early school-leaving; (b) reintegrating early school-leavers; (c) supporting school-to-work transitions (providing information, guidance and counselling, providing exercise mock experience and skills development, entrepreneurship programmes); (d) fostering employability of young people (training, apprenticeships, internships, guidance and counselling); (e) removing barriers and offering employer incentives (measures addressing special needs and for accessible work places, facilitating mobility and financial support for the young employee, employer incentives and subsidies). There are strengths and weakness to each of these measures and their likely outcome and impact depends on the context and target group.

In 2011 a comparative study on preventive measures (Britton, J. et. al., 2011) and a 2016 comparative study on active labour market policies (Caliendo, M., and R. Schmidl, 2016), including Central and Eastern European countries in a comparison with Western European states, show the general success in achieving their goal of vocation training and community programs to prevent early school-leaving and prepare young people for a smooth transition to labour market.

Regarding active labour market policies, the most effective in boosting employment are the ones including activities to provide information, guidance and counselling to the young people on already existing, concrete opportunities (jobs demand) and facilitating their relationship with employers. These activities are effective because they are adaptable to the needs of targeted groups but also to specific needs of targeted individuals. They are also the most efficient measures in terms of cost for the result obtained. The same research (Caliendo, M., and R. Schmidl, 2016) shows that employer incentives and subsidies are often unsustainable measures, although they provide some work experience for the young people and better employability chances for the future. Moreover, they are highly inefficient. Professional training, one of the most popular measures to boost employment, has various success rates depending on how suited it is to labour market along with the use of internship programmes and cooperative education schemes (Goia (Agoston) et al., 2017).

Previous research shows as well that most of the strategies to ensure young NEETs employability are effective for the short-term unemployed young NEETs and less for the

long-term unemployed and for the young NEETs due to family responsibilities, mainly young women, present in a higher proportion in Romania than in other EU member states (Eurofund, 2016). Measures providing public childcare and child-raising allowances to boost young women employability and legal reforms giving parents the right to flexible working hours are gender-sensitive measures working in Sweden and UK for target groups with similar profile as some of the Romanian young NEETs: educated, qualified, short-term unemployed, but unavailable to work due to family responsibilities. On the other hand, successful strategies for the long-term unemployed among the target group of policies design for the young NEETs, include civil engagement and the development of social competencies, including those required in the labour market and the recognition of informally acquired skills as implemented in Italy, Poland and Ireland (Eurofund, 2016). However, these strategies could only have long-term results and evidence needs to be collected on their effective success.

In 2017, the conclusions of the European Court of Auditors (ECA, 2017) on the implementation of the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative in Europe underlined: (a) the importance of proactive outreaching strategies to support those young people who are most detached from the labour market, in order to raise the number of young people asking for education, training or employment offers and (b) the importance of a 'quality' offer, adapted to the profile, needs and interests of the young people. Failures in meeting these conditions, together with insufficient financial and sustainability planning, generated a limited effect of the instruments planned at EU level (the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative), according to the European Court of Auditors.

In Romania, as mentioned above, only 5% of young NEETs were receiving financial support in 2013, out of 8,1 registered. Financial support made available through policies and programmes put in place by the Romanian government is directly dependable to registration with the Public Employment Service. In 2016, 67.702 young NEETs were registered with PES and the target was 200.000 (Government of Romania, 2017). Assuming that around 400.000 NEETs exist in Romania at this point⁵, their registration rate (16%) doubled compared to 2013 but it is still very low. This also implies that little intervention is applied to this target group, thus limited results can be expected in terms of higher employment rate or "activation" in the sense of reinsertion in the education system (in any form, i.e. vocational training, second-chance system etc.). Available interventions are limited to instruments provided by the national legislation and covered from the national budget (as presented under), as to this date limited (to no) progress is registered in the deployment of the priority axes 1 and 2 of the Human Capital Operational Programme through which the bulk of the Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment Initiatives are implemented in Romania.

Young NEETs benefit of the overall provisions of the Law no. 76/2002 regarding the unemployment insurance system and employment stimulation, which provides for unemployment benefits paid for 6 months and bonuses if the young NEETs enter employment in this timeframe. This measure is accompanied by subsidies and tax deductions to employees hiring fresh graduates, which are higher for "insertion" employers, who engage with vulnerable categories of young NEETs. Through law PES is responsible to

⁵ INS and Eurostat estimated in 2015 that there are between 396.000 and 441.000 young NEETs in Romania. At this point clear data on the number of NEETs is still not available.

deliver a series of AMLPs to young NEETs (and all registered unemployed) including information, counselling and guidance, assessment and recognition of competences obtained in non-formal training and informal system, vocational training, mobility and relocation bonuses, job search, matching and placing. Other interventions refer to the use of a professional card⁶, apprenticeships⁷, internships⁸, second Chance programs for primary and secondary education, developing entrepreneurial skills among young people, professional scholarships and “high-school money” for youngsters engaged in education/vocational training programmes to prevent drop-out and a roll-in the NEETs category (Government of Romania 2013 and 2017).

However, to complement and strengthen the previous findings as regards the reduced intervention volume, it needs to be underlined that the number of young NEETs benefiting of support financed under the national budget and/or HRDSOP is low, e.g. under the 2014-2015 Plan for implementation the Youth Guarantee 36.813 young NEETs were engaged in second chance programmes, 139.200 pupils benefited of professional scholarships and 239.122 of “high-school money”, employment subsidies were paid to employers of only 9.906 young employees, only 172 apprenticeship contracts were signed but 278.067 youngsters were counselled and 26.076 benefited of professional training (with an employment rate of less than 10%) (Government of Romania, 2017). In this context lack of progress in activating and employing young NEETs should not come as a surprise.

Limited information is available on the effectiveness of the measures applied to young NEETs and which of them have better results in terms of employability and employment. Based on the 2015 evaluation on HRDSOP and HCOP contribution to employment among young NEETs (MEF, 2016) the most effective measures in terms of job creation are employers’ subventions as these lead to a direct increase of labour demand, essential precondition for sustainable employment. Similarly, vocational training (if effective), highly customised job-search and labour mediation services and information, counselling and vocational guidance do contribute to young NEETs activation, increase employability, and to some extent, employment. The evaluation argue that the less effective measures are training and support measures in the field of entrepreneurship, apprenticeship and initial training courses (MFE, 2017). Although the Plan for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee 2017-2020 identify a high number of youngsters involved in entrepreneurship interventions (15.253 micro-enterprises set up under SRL-D and 326 start-ups established under START), further than the limited number of treated youngsters, there are no evidences that these are former NEETs. As also the number of apprenticeship is very low, it can be safely concluded that, at least this stage, the findings of the 2015 MEF evaluation still stand.

At the level of the European Union, Romania was ranked 25th, in 2015, with a NEETs rate of 21.1%, compared with the EU average of 16.1% (a worst situation is encountered only in Bulgaria, Italy and Greece). Noteworthy is the fact that the NEETs rate peaked in 2015, in Romania, and it started from around 15.6% in 2007.

⁶ As recommended by the European Commission, https://europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/work/professional-qualifications/european-professional-card/index_en.htm

⁷ As per Law no. 279/2005, republished on apprenticeship at workplace

⁸ As per Law 335/2013 on internship for higher education graduates

At national level, there are important disparities among regions regarding the number of NEETs. For 2014 and 2015, the development regions South Muntenia and Centre have the largest cohorts of NEETs, grouping almost 40% of the entire national population.

Table 2. The percentage distribution of NEETs population across regions

Development Region	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
North-East	16.10%	15.07%	14.15%	14.41%	13.36%	13.64%	12.44%	11.91%	10.86%
South-East	18.15%	17.05%	13.96%	13.36%	14.98%	14.72%	15.37%	15.70%	16.47%
South Muntenia	18.30%	18.00%	18.54%	19.23%	19.50%	19.93%	20.36%	19.67%	20.07%
South-West Oltenia	10.72%	10.70%	10.07%	9.52%	8.09%	7.98%	9.01%	8.55%	10.35%
West	7.03%	6.94%	6.86%	6.31%	6.78%	7.96%	7.82%	8.17%	6.70%
North-West	9.72%	10.84%	12.07%	10.86%	11.34%	10.45%	10.81%	10.07%	11.14%
Centre	12.92%	13.30%	16.56%	18.28%	19.00%	17.09%	15.46%	17.31%	18.31%
Bucharest - Ilfov	7.06%	8.10%	7.79%	8.03%	6.95%	8.23%	8.73%	8.61%	6.09%

Source: Authors' work based on NIS Data

As far as the county level distribution for the year 2015 is regarded, the largest NEETs percentage in the total population is recorded for the central area and for the south-eastern area of the country. Noteworthy is the fact that the western and north eastern parts of the country are mainly characterized by lower NEETs ratios (table 2).

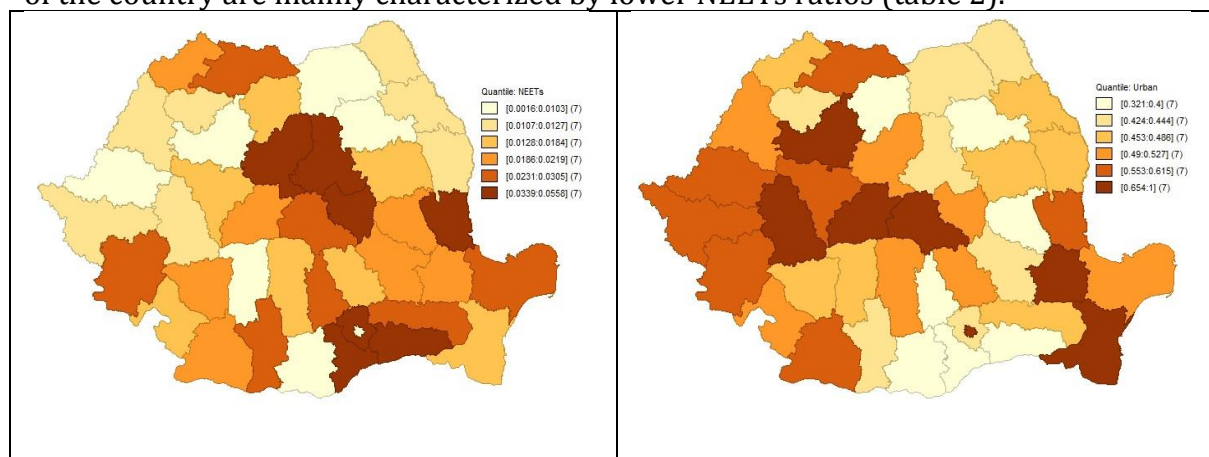


Figure 1. a) % NEETs in total population 2015, b) % of urban population

Source: Authors' work

Among the studied variables none is highly correlated with the percentage of NEETs population in total population, showing therefore that there is no significant correlation between the economic strength of the county and the presence of the NEETs (see table 3). However, the strongest, negative correlation for almost the entire period is mainly the one with the percentage of urban population. Therefore, there is higher propensity to find large percentages of NEETs in counties where larger percentages of population is located in the rural area.

Table 3. Correlations across counties among the ration of NEETs/inhabitant and the five macro level variables

Correlation (x,y)		2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
% NEETs in total POP	Monthly net salary	-0.12648	-0.01904	-0.04132	-0.02362	-0.07729
% NEETs in total POP	Firms/100 inhabit	-0.35628	-0.18355	-0.13896	-0.07206	-0.05283

% NEETs in total POP	FDI/inhabit (EUR)	-0.06494	0.242622	0.22128	0.105158	0.047312
% NEETs in total POP	Unemployment rate	0.222853	0.001728	0.06156	0.169304	0.108535
% NEETs in total POP	% Urban Population	-0.32222	-0.33684	-0.28529	-0.25586	-0.22336
Correlation (x,y)		2012	2013	2014	2015	
% NEETs in total POP	Monthly net salary	0.041274	0.052795	0.093533	-0.06435	
% NEETs in total POP	Firms/100 inhabit	0.01886	0.093161	0.170205	0.040699	
% NEETs in total POP	FDI/inhabit (EUR)	0.165736	0.252853	0.259862	0.093315	
% NEETs in total POP	Unemployment rate	0.016434	-0.04765	-0.06811	0.030443	
% NEETs in total POP	% Urban Population	-0.23078	-0.2833	-0.25096	-0.28982	

Source: Authors' work

By not finding any relevant correlations there is not possible to generally connect the existence of the NEET population with the economic characteristics of the Romanian counties and it is more advisable to try to identify good practices and efficient measures by analysing individually the performing counties (counties with lower percentages of NEETs in total population). Moreover, the result might reveal the fact that in order to deal with this challenge, individually tailored policies, starting from relevant success cases, might be the most suitable policy option for local authorities.

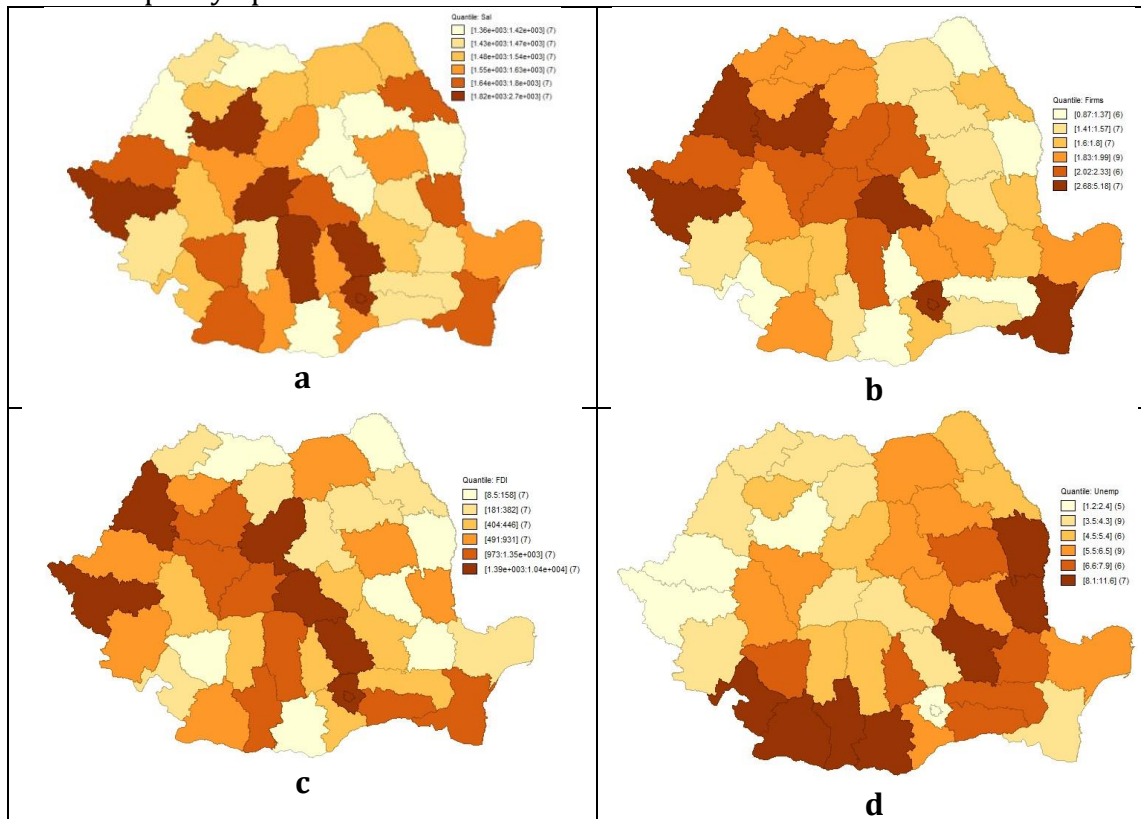


Figure 2. 2015 county level distributions a) Average net salary, b) number of firms/1000 inhabitants, c) stock of FDI/inhabitant, d) unemployment rate

Source: Authors' work

Conclusion

The analysis points at a number of key factors which need to be taken into account by interventions, of any type, designed to target the problem of young NEETs. Firstly, the young NEETs, in Romania as elsewhere, have diverse profiles, distilled from different characteristics related to social, educational, economic, geographical, gender and even physiological (i.e. discouraged and demotivated young NEETs) dimensions. Consequently, in order to be effective, the tools planned and applied need to be highly customised, which indicate that the costs of activating and/or employing a young NEET, particularly a long-term young NEET, are also high. Secondly, this is valid for ALMPs such as information, counselling, guidance, vocational training and job search, matching and placing, which seem effective both in Romania and elsewhere only if designed closely in line with the young NEET profile and needs.

Significant attention should be paid to young NEETs in the rural area, as their number is high and opportunities for education and employment are very limited at this level. For this specific group mobility and relocation incentives might be the answer.

Other types of ALMPs such as apprenticeship, internships, entrepreneurship seem to have a very limited success in Romania, compared to other countries.

The opposite conclusion can be drawn as regards employers incentives. While these seem effective in Romania, unlike other EU Member States, it is unclear if jobs created through this instrument are sustainable, thus are preserved also beyond the timeframe for which the incentive is paid, as the law requires.

In any case, the striking conclusion of this assessment is that the decrease in young NEETs might not be attributed in any way to public interventions planned and implemented to this date, as these are limited, but to natural economic dynamics in an improved economic context compared to 2010 (and, possibly, outmigration).

More research should be carried out on effectiveness of employer incentives in terms of sustainable employment, as this seems to be a successful instrument in other countries, but not in Romania. Identifying the factors limiting the effectiveness of this instrument is more important as in Romania no significant correlation seems to exist between economic development of a county (and, thus, in theory, job demand) and the number of NEETs.

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