



# COUNTRY STUDY

## BULGARIA

# Country monitoring report 2016

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Bulgaria is facing a rate of young people who are neither in employment, education or training (NEETs) that is well above the EU average: 25.2 %, compared to an EU average of 18.9 % in 2015. This puts Bulgaria in the top three of EU countries with the highest rates of NEETs, most of their young people are also long-term unemployed (22.5%) and inactive discouraged workers (21.1%). Moreover, the proportion of NEETs among the Roma community is extremely high, namely 61 %, calling for targeted efforts under the Youth Guarantee scheme. Furthermore, Bulgaria has the highest proportion of young NEETs (one out of five) who are not in touch with the employment services and thus fall completely outside the scope of standard labour market activation measures. One of the causes are the strict eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits and social assistance for people without any employment experience. As a result, in Bulgaria the share of people at risk of social exclusion among NEETs is four times higher than among non-NEETs.





## BULGARIA

### Promoting access and participation in Lifelong Learning

Bulgaria continues to occupy the second to last place in the EU regarding participation in Lifelong Learning (LLL). The adult participation rate in Lifelong Learning is 2% compared to an EU average of 10.5 % in 2015. Yet since 2011, the rate has increased by 0.4% partially due to the European Social Fund project-based education and training offers that are provided in cooperation with business partners.

Since 2014 Bulgaria has a Lifelong Learning Strategy implemented for the period 2014-2020. One of the most significant ambitions of this strategy is to achieve 5% adult participation in Lifelong Learning, as well to widen the education and training offer to address needs of disadvantaged groups by 2020. Yet the implementation is still in its initial phase, especially with regards to the introduction of Lifelong Learning concepts at all administrative levels, and making the recently formulated strategies operational. This is backed up by initiatives such as pilot projects in selected regions, organisation of Lifelong Learning Days, implementation of EPAL and national action plans.<sup>1</sup> Success of this approach depends on concrete follow-up and implementation as well as engagement in the process of the governance at all level and the involvement and engagement of partners such as education and training actors, social partners, civil society and business. The action plan includes activities and objectives directed towards learning in all its forms (formal, non-formal and informal) and degrees, supporting the acquisition and constant development of key competencies for Lifelong Learning in one common process. It has been acknowledged that over the past years Bulgaria

1 [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/nrp2016\\_bulgaria\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/nrp2016_bulgaria_en.pdf)

has made big efforts in terms of the promotion and information on Lifelong Learning.

### Vocational Education and Training

The Austrian Vocational Education and Training (VET) In Bulgaria participation of upper secondary students in Vocational Education and Training (VET) is above the EU average (52.4% compared to 48.9% in 2013). The employability of VET graduates is higher in comparison to the general upper secondary education, however it is below the EU average – with 61.5% compared to 73%.<sup>2</sup> The Bulgarian VET system faces several challenges such as poor relevance its education curricula with regards to the current needs of the labour market, and further training. This is one of the reasons of insufficient attractiveness of VET and its decreasing quality that goes hand in hand with increasing rates of students dropping out. Therefore Bulgaria intends to work on establishing a better cooperation between the business sector and the VET system with regards to current standards and needs for emerging professions. This is facilitated by a change of law on vocational education and related legislations to develop dual vocational education system in Bulgaria. The action plan 2015-2017 contains measures to boost the quality of VET, introduce work-based learning (WBL), adapt VET curricula to the labour market's needs and develop a system for validating non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes. Moreover as part of the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2014-2020, one of the key aspects for Bulgaria is to introduce a coherent and unified national approach to quality assurance in both initial and continuous VET (for students and adults who follow education or training in this system).

2 [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2016-bg\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2016-bg_en.pdf)



## Validation of NFIL

Bulgaria still has no uniform legal framework or national system, policy or strategy on validation in place which covers all educational sectors. The country also does not have a national institutional framework with clear allocation of responsibilities and coordination between stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> However, it has made some efforts during the last years, as a project from the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training may prove. This project called 'New opportunity for my future' is linked to the process of validation of the results of non-formal education in the field of VET. The main result of the project is a system of validation of competences gained in non-formal and informal learning. Moreover, there has also been a gradual increase in the engagement of social partners.

The process has so far also reached a change in the attitude of employers, who now have a more positive attitude and acceptance towards validation which is expressed in growing support for validation arrangements. Last but not least, Bulgaria additionally has launched a new initiative for the development of a system for validation in the shape of a project called the 'System for validation of non-formal acquired knowledge, skills and competences' which is supposed to develop, amongst others, a systematic approach to validation.

Only since 2015 there is a set of regulations on conditions and procedures for validation of professional knowledge, skills, and competences in Bulgaria. The validation procedure leads to provision of one of two types of certifications:

- Certificate for validating levels of vocational qualifications: Following an exam, that certifies that all learning outcome units defined in the State's educational requirements have been

achieved;

- Certificate for acquiring a vocational qualification for part of a profession: Following an exam, that certifies that one or several learning outcome units included in the State educational requirement have been achieved.

The second point covers to a certain extent the validation of learning outcomes of non-formal learning as learning on job, hence is subjected to recognition of professional qualifications and linked to a list of standards.

## Early-school Leaving

Rate of early school leavers from education and training in Bulgaria is 13.4% compared to 11% in the EU in 2015. Compared to 2012, the Bulgarian rate has increased with 0.9%. The national statistics show that there are large divergences between urban and rural areas, regions, and minorities. National authorities are planning to reverse this trend, and to steer policies towards achieving the national target of 11% by 2020 as part of the Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013-2020).

This is to be achieved through the establishment and approbation of an early warning system, as well as through the necessary policies for prevention, intervention and compensation of early school leaving. Both need to be tailored to the specificities of the demographic, economic and social development of the respective municipalities, districts and regions, and the activities planned, in order to facilitate the transition from pre-school to school education, as well as the transition between the various stages of training. It is recommended to put in place conditions to support those children and students that have either never attended school or are at the risk of dropping out.<sup>4</sup> The implementation of the strategy is still at an early stage. The overarching approach

<sup>4</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/nrp2016\\_bulgaria\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/nrp2016_bulgaria_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014



focuses on integrating all members of the school community to tackle dropping out and early leaving of the system, and to stimulate cross sectorial partnerships in implementing integrated policies to ensure access to education for everyone.

Another element of the strategy is to address needs of disadvantaged groups, who are significantly below national average with regards to enrolment, completion rates and educational outcomes. Socio-economic status has a major impact on educational opportunities, and there are important regional differences in terms of participation and performance, as well as between urban and rural areas. Language is often a barrier for Roma children. This results in lower educational performance and lower access to quality education. Data from the 2011 national census show that 93 % of Roma did not complete upper secondary education, compared to 30 % among the Bulgarians. The data also show that almost a quarter of Roma children aged between seven and 15 were outside the education system.<sup>5</sup>

## NEETs

Bulgaria is facing a rate of young people who are neither in employment, education or training (NEETs) that is well above the EU average: 25.2 %, compared to an EU average of 18.9 % in 2015. This puts Bulgaria in the top three of EU countries with the highest rates of NEETs, most of their young people are also long-term unemployed (22.5%) and inactive discouraged workers (21.1%). Moreover, the proportion of NEETs among the Roma community is extremely high, namely 61 %, calling for targeted efforts under the Youth Guarantee scheme. Furthermore, Bulgaria has the highest proportion of young NEETs (one out of five) who are not in touch with the employment services and thus fall completely outside the scope of standard labour market activation measures. One of the causes are the strict eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits and social assistance for people without any employment

<sup>5</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2016-bg\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2016-bg_en.pdf)

experience. As a result, in Bulgaria the share of people at risk of social exclusion among NEETs is four times higher than among non-NEETs.<sup>6</sup>

To tackle the youth unemployment and NEETs challenge the Youth Guarantee implementation program was launched in Bulgaria. A program for youth activation has been created, funded by the national budget. 35 youth mediators have been appointed to reach out and search for non-registered inactive young people aged up to 29. The program will last until 2017 and the funds for this year amount to 1.3 million BGN, and only then there will be the possibility to assess the outcomes of the program. Nevertheless, reaching out to low-skilled and most excluded youth remains a challenge, and so far hasn't been addressed by governmental programs. Currently designed measures concentrate on activities for acquisition of professional qualifications and key competencies for those undergoing training, or are at the beginning of their professional career. Additionally, Bulgarian authorities reform and promote VET systems (i.e. introduction of dual training) and work on measures to reach out to young people especially those who are not accounted for in the system.

## Citizenship education

Citizenship education is a separate subject taught at secondary level, in both general and vocational upper secondary education. The state has defined the standards and objectives for citizenship education, including the most important social objects (relevant for family, school, work environment, small community etc.), development of citizen attitudes and skills; general human values and the laws of the democratic state; the structure and function of the national and the European institutions as well as the citizen society and the orientation in the global and regional processes and responsible participation in public life.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef1602en2.pdf>



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## Council recommendations

*“The education system has limited capacity to include vulnerable groups and equip learners with relevant skills. Vulnerable groups such as Roma and pupils from poor families continue to face significant obstacles in accessing and completing education. The level of enrolment among Roma at all levels of education is significantly lower than for non-Roma. The early school leaving rate continues to increase and is particularly high in rural areas and less developed regions. Removing barriers to the participation in early childhood education of disadvantaged children is essential to increase educational outcomes and prevent dropouts. A new Pre-school and School Act adopted by the parliament in September 2015 is an important step towards a comprehensive reform of the school system. The implementation of this legislation, together with targeted measures to overcome non-legislative barriers to the full participation of disadvantaged groups in education, should contribute to improving the Bulgarian economy’s growth potential and social cohesiveness in the long term. Enrolment and graduation rates in tertiary education are on the rise and the employment rate of recent graduates is recovering slowly, although it remains significantly below the EU average.*

*Therefore Council Recommendation for Bulgaria focuses to reinforce and integrate social services and active labour market policies, in particular for the long-term unemployed and young people not in employment, education or training. Increase the provision of quality education for disadvantaged groups, including Roma (EUR-Lex, July 2016)<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.LC\\_2016.299.01.0032.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2016:299:TOC](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.LC_2016.299.01.0032.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2016:299:TOC)



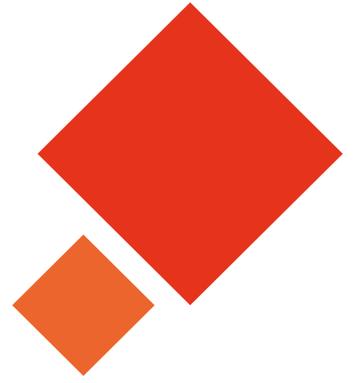


# **solidar**

## **FOUNDATION**

Rue de Pascale 4 -6  
1040 Brussels  
Belgium  
T +32 2 500 10 20  
F +32 2 500 10 30

Twitter: @SOLIDAR\_EU  
Facebook: SOLIDAR  
[www.solidar.org](http://www.solidar.org)  
[solidar@solidar.org](mailto:solidar@solidar.org)



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As part of the Lifelong Learning Watch SOLIDAR Foundation has developed 12 country studies in 2016 covering the status in different Member States when it comes to; Promoting access and participation in Lifelong Learning, Vocational Education and Training, Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (NFIL), Early-school Leaving, NEETs and Citizenship education in reference to 2016 Council's country-specific recommendations.

The SOLIDAR Foundation is the cooperation platform of SOLIDAR; a European network of NGOs working to advance social justice in Europe and worldwide. SOLIDAR brings together 60 member organisations based in 25 EU member states and in 6 candidate countries. We work together in Social Affairs, International Cooperation and Lifelong Learning. The Building Learning Societies pillar includes 23 members, covering 18 EU member states.

SOLIDAR Foundation engages through member and partner organisations citizens in EU decision making processes, empowers people through lifelong learning and VET, and voices their concerns to the EU institutions by carrying out active lobbying, project management and coordination, policy monitoring, research and awareness-raising.



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