

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public Employment Services and Rural NEETs Aged 25-29: A Case Study from the South-West Region in Bulgaria

Vladislava Lendzhova^{1,*}, Valentina Milenkova², Albena Nakova³, Emilia Chengelova⁴

¹ Department of Sociology SWU "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

² Department of Sociology SWU "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria and Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Science, Sofia, Bulgaria

³ Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Science, Sofia, Bulgaria

⁴ Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Science, Sofia, Bulgaria

* Corresponding author: Vladislava Lendzhova, vlendzhova@swu.bg

ABSTRACT

Background: The concept of youth not in education, training, and employment (NEET) is a relatively new popular concept. Its popularity is largely due to the fact that it takes into consideration different vulnerabilities such as unemployment and early school leaving, which are common among young people. The complexity of labour markets due to digitalization and globalisation has led to increased vulnerability for young people, particularly those aged 25-29. Bulgarian social policy often overlooks this group, who entered the labour market after the 2008 financial crisis, leading to unemployment or unstable employment. Our study aims to contribute to the successful integration of NEETs aged 25-29 into the labour market through increasing knowledge of relevant employment initiatives that have been implemented in Bulgaria. Specifically, it focuses on how these services are provided to young people living in rural areas. The main research question guiding this study is: "How can Public Employment Services (PES) effectively address youth unemployment and support vulnerable youths and rural NEETs in Bulgaria?"

Research methodology: The methodology is based on qualitative information gathered from public employment offices in rural areas and a survey of national PES offices in the country. We combined qualitative data thematic analysis with its quantitative examination (e.g. descriptive and reliability statistics; correspondence analysis) to identify similarity/difference patterns among studied cases.

Conclusions: A key conclusion from our study concerning NEETs (especially those with vulnerable backgrounds) is that many young people in the country might not have trust in public institutions such as the PES. They often need face-to-face personal contact with a person who can speak in a more informal manner. This is why cooperation with other service providers is fundamental.

Keywords: Bulgaria; labour market; vulnerable youths; NEET; PES

1. Introduction

The global crisis in the early 21st century caused disruptions in all sectors and had an impact on the destiny and life chances of many people. The effects of the crisis painfully affected also young people,

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making them face new challenges, including greater risk for early school leaving, long-term unemployment, marginalisation and social exclusion. A growing number of young people that are not involved in education, employment or training and fall into the category of NEET. The acronym NEET stands for young people who are not in employment, education or training, who regardless of their level of schooling and are disengaged from both work and education.

Recent years have seen an increase in the complexity of labour markets, mostly due to increasing digitalization and globalisation. Despite having higher levels of knowledge, young people in Bulgaria are among the population segments that are more affected in this dynamic that is growing. Compared to their adult peers, their relative disadvantage has increased in light of the recent global economic crisis. Bulgarian social policy frequently ignores the youth group of 25–29-years-old who are neither employed, nor in education or training (NEET). This generation entered the labour market soon after the 2008 financial crisis. These youths are more likely to be unemployed or work in unstable positions since they are faced with uncertainty and a lack of security for their well-being and employment. In addition, there is no national policy or law in Bulgaria that addresses the difficulty of NEETs in general or NEETs in particular.^[1] Furthermore, Bulgaria lacks both a young employment plan and a plan for employing NEETs aged 25 and over. The National Youth Strategy (2021–2030) and the National Employment Strategy (2021–2030) both make significant references to issues concerning NEET youth and their employment circumstances. These two documents address NEETs, although the policy's primary focus remains outside of these target groups. Both of the documents take into consideration the entire NEET group rather than specifically mentioning NEETs between 25-29 or more. Though, as previously said, these regional-level approaches may not particularly address the issues faced by NEETs aged 25-29, they do meet the requirements of youth. Supporting young people who are leaving school and entering the workforce is one of the goals of the Republic of Bulgaria's Employment Strategy 2021–2030 ^[1].

To enter the labour market in Bulgaria is a long and uncertain process. Labor market participation is often defined by indicators such as employment rates and unemployment rates, which provide information about those who already have a job or are actively looking for a job. These indicators are often criticized as they contain limited information about the young population. These difficulties experienced by young people in the country provide an insight into why labour market interventions by employment services providers require more refined and adapted instruments for their diverse needs. Young people in Bulgaria are among the latest to enter the labour market compared with people of their age in other EU countries^[2]. In Bulgaria, the common minimum age to enter into an employment agreement is 16 years (Article 301 (3) of the Labour Code). This requirement for the minimum age is obligatory, and a violation of this requirement leads to the contract's nullification. Exceptions are provided by the law and there are numerous clauses dealing with this. The study of the employment of young Bulgarians, especially from vulnerable groups in the labour market, in the last few years raises some questions, most often interrelated, for example: What is the environment in which young people build their working and life path? What opportunities to develop their abilities and to be active have vulnerable young people in Bulgaria? The main interest of this study is how can Public Employment Services (PES) effectively address youth unemployment and support vulnerable youths and rural NEETs in Bulgaria. Specifically, the study focuses on how these services are provided to young people living in rural areas of the country.

2. Materials and methods

The data analysed in this article was collected in the scope of the research project Track - In: Public Employment Services Tracking Effectiveness to Support Rural NEETs (ID No. 2020–1–0011) funded by

EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment, the aim of which is to deliver an evaluation model of the effectiveness of PES. The case studies comprised mixed data collection methods, namely a national survey directed to public employment offices, documental analysis, ethnographic observation on site, and in-depth interviews with case managers and young people. We have interviewed the 3 directors of PES offices, 3 case managers of the programs, 1 manager of the office, and 3 psychologists, as well as 19 young NEETs that participated in the interventions. In total, 29 in-depth interviews were conducted using online and face-to-face approaches. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify key themes and insights. The data for the three case studies was collected between January 2023 and July 2023 and was subject to qualitative analysis. The obtained results were subjected to a secondary analysis under the project "Quality of life and well-being in the context of professional communities and their activity" KP-06-PN80/2, financed by the National Science Fund. We combined qualitative data thematic analysis with its quantitative examination (e.g. descriptive and reliability statistics; correspondence analysis) to identify similarity/difference patterns among studied cases. Three case studies were selected considering the unique programs or services offered by PES. To guarantee diversity the case studies have been selected according to a set of criteria, however the key criteria was territorial diversity, in a cross with other transversal criteria such as mountain areas or economically disadvantage areas. **Table 1** provides a detailed description of the sample of the three case studies.

Table 1. Socio-demographic graphic characteristics of the sample of three case studies.

Case study/name of intervention	Region	Total number of NEETS	Total number of PES	Total number of interviews
JSA (Job Search Atelier)	Kyustendil (South-West Region)	F,24,Secondary Education	Director Case manager Psychologist	8
		F,24,Secondary Education		
		M,25,Secondary Education		
		M,27,Tertiary Education		
Mobile offices	Blagoevgrad (South-West Region)	M,23,Secondary Education	Director Manager Psychologist	11
		M,27,Secondary Education		
		M,26,Secondary Education		
		F,27,Secondary Education		
		F,26,Secondary Education		
		M,28,Secondary Education		
F,24,Secondary Education				
The New Employment Opportunity Program	Razlog (Belitsa) (South-West Region)	M,26,Secondary Education	Director 2Case managers Psychologist	10
		F,27,Secondary Education		
		F,26,Secondary Education		
		M,28,Secondary Education		
		F,24,Secondary Education		
		M,26,Secondary Education		
F,29,Secondary Education				

Source: Authors' elaboration on their own data.

To collect information on how PES are organised, their target groups, the available measures and programs addressed to NEETs, and how the performance of these programs is measured an online quantitative survey was conducted. The survey was unrepresentative and included questions about PES

institutional structure and services addressed to NEETs, encompassing the following dimensions: (a) PES services' institutional structure, (b) portfolio of activities and services, (c) PES services and measures in the context of the Youth Guarantee implementation, (d) reaching out to NEETs, (e) assessing the needs of NEET young people, (f) post - placement support provided to young people, (g) PES response to the COVID-19 crisis, (h) assessment and monitoring, and (i) strategic flexibility. The online version of the survey was added to the Qualtrics platform and disseminated through the national PES offices in Bulgaria. Data was collected between December 2022 and February 2023. In total, 71 valid responses were collected ($n = 71$). The data has been analysed with SPSS.

Although the methodology was very well selected and developed the study has several limitations. The qualitative interviews conducted for this study may be subject to sampling bias, as the selection of participants was based on availability and willingness to participate. This may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of stakeholders like policy makers and youth workers. Limited availability of data, particularly at the local level and for specific demographic groups, may have constrained the depth of analysis in certain areas of the study. The findings of this case study may be specific to the South-West Region of Bulgaria and may not be fully generalizable to other regions of the country. Care should be taken when extrapolating the findings to different contexts.

Despite these limitations, the methodology used in this case study aimed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the issues surrounding youth unemployment in the South-West Region of Bulgaria, laying the groundwork for informed policy recommendations and interventions.

3. Results

3.1. Youth population and youth employment in Bulgaria

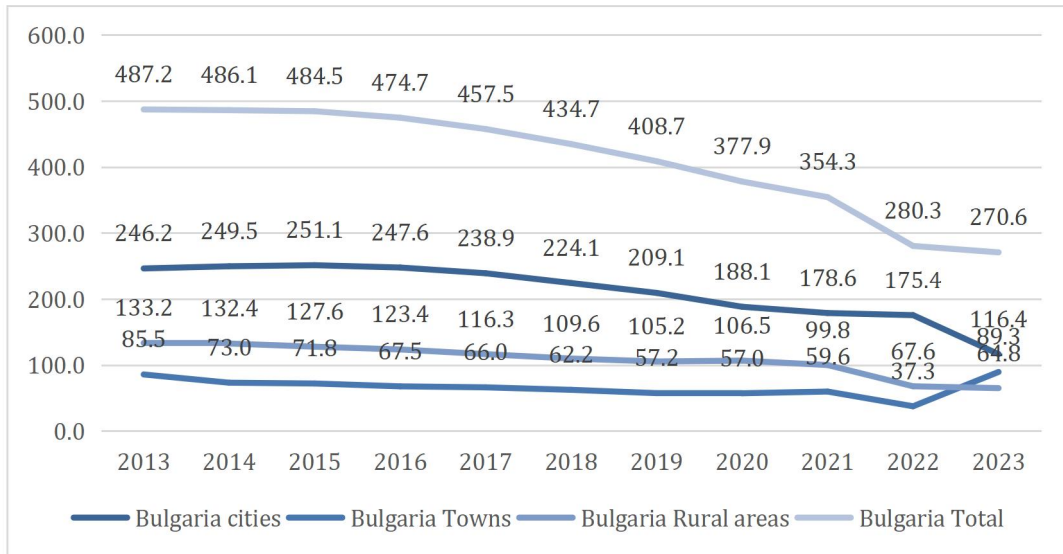
NEETs rate in Bulgaria by degree of urbanization has decreased between 2013 and 2023. It is higher in rural areas in comparison with Bulgarian cities and towns. Some of the biggest challenges facing Bulgaria in this period are related to demographic trends and the development of processes associated with these. The deepening demographic crisis and its associated unfavourable quantitative changes in demographic parameters have been characterized by a very high intensity over the past three decades. They are presently reaching the point of thresholds where permanent destabilization can be observed in the area of natural reproduction. The youth population in Bulgaria has decreased throughout the period in consideration. Data shows that young people are a category at risk in the Bulgarian labour market, with a high unemployment rates. Youth unemployment in Bulgaria is a low-skill and regional problem. The unemployment rate in the age group up to 25-29 years old retains high for the 10-year period.

Chart 1 presents the tendencies of the Bulgarian youth population aged between 25-29 years old by degree of urbanization for a period of 10 years (2013-2023). As reported by the chart, the total youth population is variable during the researched years. In 2013 the total of population aged between 25-29 was 487.2 people. In 2017 the number decreased to 457.5 and continued declining in 2023 to 270.6.

In Bulgarian cities, the number of youths between 25-29 yearsold in 2013 was 246.2, in 2015 this number increased a little to 251.1, while in 2023 the population from this subgroup decreased again to 116.4 people.

This trend remains in Bulgarian towns and suburbs, where in 2013 the population between 25-29 years old was 85.5, by 2015 it had decreased to 71.8. In 2023 the population from this age group decreased to 37.3 people. In Bulgarian rural areas, the youth population from the researched subgroup was 133.2 people in

2013. Youths living in rural areas decreased to 127.6 in 2015 and continued decreasing in 2023 to 67.6. It can be concluded that the youth population aged 25-29 is decreasing in Bulgaria.

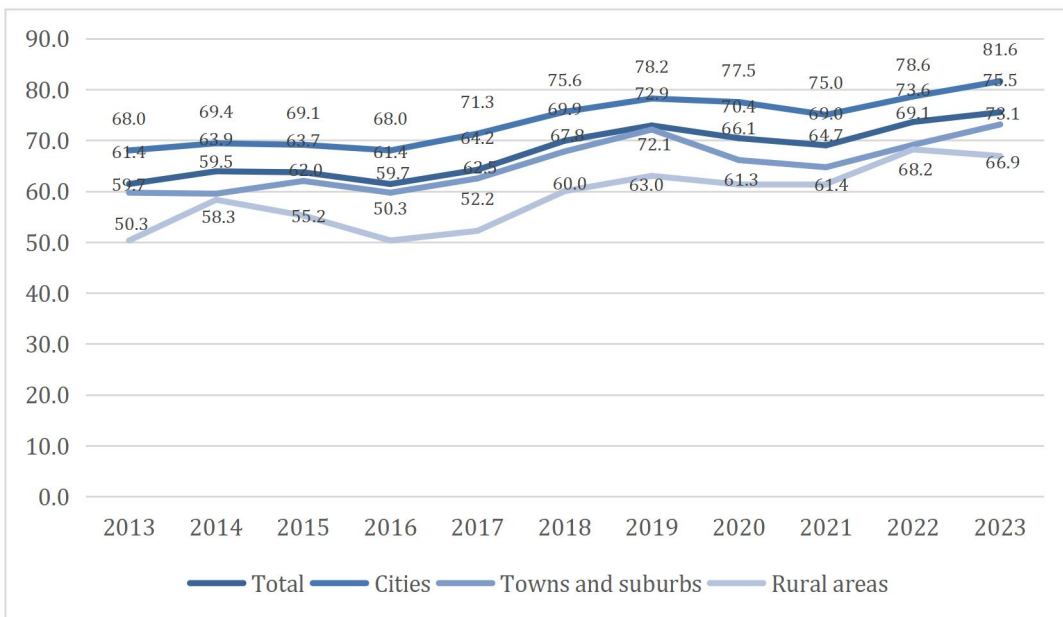


Source: Eurostat [lfsa_pgauws]1- data extracted on 9 May 2024.

Chart 1. Youth population in Bulgarian aged between 25-29 years old by degree of urbanization for a period of 10 years (2013-2023).

Chart 2 indicates employment across the country among youths by the degree of urbanization. The employment increased from 61,4% in 2013 to 69.9% in 2018, and continued increasing in 2023 to 5.5%.

The same tendency is observed in the Bulgarian cities for that period. Employment increased from 68.0% in 2013 to 78.2% in 2019 and continued increasing to 81.6% in 2023. In towns suburbs and rural areas, the trend is the same.



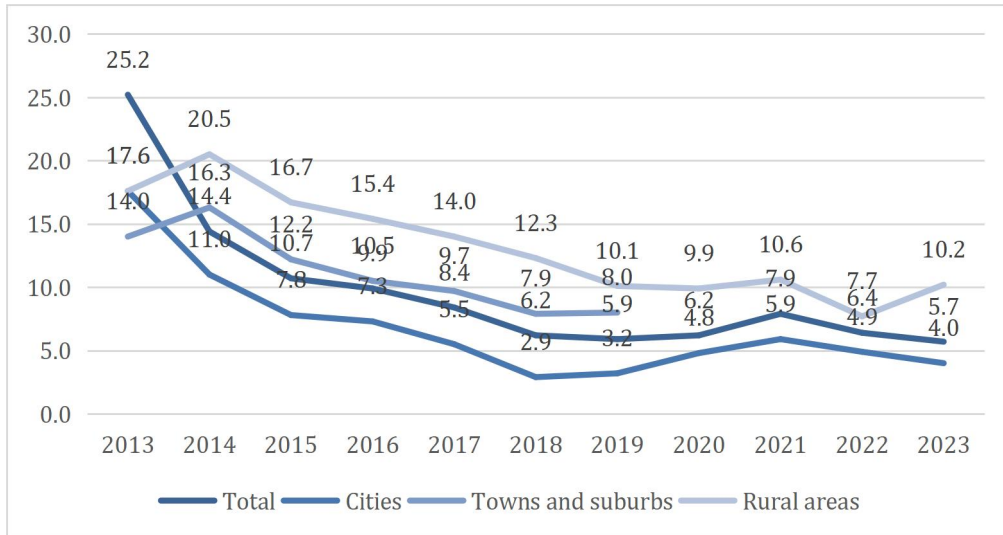
Source: Eurostat [lfst_r_ergau] – data extracted on 9 May 2024.

¹ This is the online data code from the Eurostat data, that has been used in the article.

Chart 2. Youth employment total (%) in Bulgaria (2013-2023) by degree of urbanization.

3.2. Youth unemployment and NEET rates

Chart 3 indicates unemployment rates across the country among youths aged 25 - 29 years old. The unemployment declined from 14% in 2013 to 5.9% in 2021, and decreased again in 2023 to 4.0%. The same tendency is observed in the Bulgarian cities and rural areas for that period. In towns suburbs and rural areas, the trend is the same, where in 2020 the unemployment rate is 0.

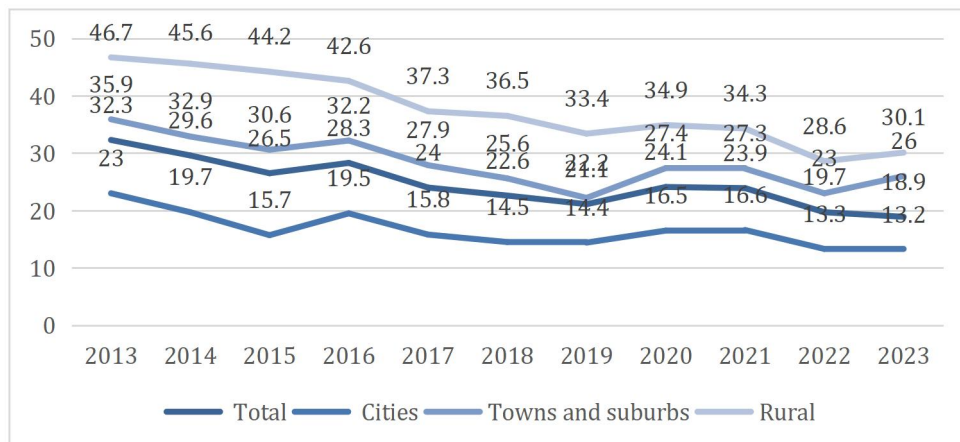


Source: Eurostat [lfst_r_urgau] - data extracted on 9 May 2024.

NEET rate (25-29 Years), by degree of urbanisation

Chart 3. Youth unemployment rate (%) 2013-2023 in Bulgaria by degree of urbanisation (25-29 Years).

Chart 4 indicates the growth of NEETs proportion in Bulgaria and all degree of urbanisation levels and by sex, between 2013 and 2023. According to the chart, the NEETs rate in Bulgaria for those aged 25-29 decreased from 32.3%, in 2013, to 26.5% in 2015 and 18.9% in 2023. In Bulgarian cities, the rates are similar to those of the Bulgarian towns and suburbs. They decreased in cities from 23.0% (2013) to 13.2% (2023), and in towns and suburbs from 35.9% (2013) to 26.0% (2023). The same is the rate of Bulgarian rural areas where the NEET rate decreased from 46.7% to 30.1% between 2013 and 2023.



Source: Eurostat [edat_lfs_29]2 – data extracted on 9.05.2024.

² (online data code in Eurostat edat_lfse_29)

Chart 4. Young people (25-29 Years), neither in employment nor in education and training by degree of urbanisation (NEET rates), 2013-2023(%).

NEETs rate in Bulgaria for those aged 25-29 continuously decrease between 2013 and 2023 in all cities, towns and rural areas.

3.3. Public Employment Services in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, public employment services play an important role in enabling employment, encouraging skill development, giving career counselling, and bridging the gap between job seekers and employers. Their diverse roles and responsibilities help to make the country's labor market more efficient and inclusive. However, the high number of young NEETs in the country continues to be a challenge and actions to identify and reach these young people will intensify and expand. According to the National Strategy for employment 2030, reaching every single rural NEETs in Bulgaria “will be a priority, for which digital tools, social and electronic media, as well as the development of register of these young people in order to determine their profile and undertake adequate measures to reach the place of residence and activation” [3]. In their work, youth and Roma mediators and all specialists involved in activities for identifying, reaching and activating inactive young people will be able to use the practical Handbook for reaching and activating young people from the group of non-employment, education or training (NEETs). Encouragement will continue to make use of available e-services, as well as the creation of new ones.

PES are the branch of the public administration dedicated to support citizens looking to (re)enter the job market. To put it briefly, these services are in charge of providing Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP), which are frequently referred to as help with job searching. This level of ALMP are the activities conducted by caseworkers of public employment services or private providers to facilitate labour market (re)integration. The activities can include the provision of vacancy information, short-term training, or coaching programs assisting youth in their job application process [4;5]. **Table 2** shows what types of ALMPs services are provided by PES for the YG.

Table 2. ALMP services provided by PES for the youth guarantee.

Service	Responses N	Precent	Percent of Caces
Registration of young people in the YG scheme/with PES	64	13,8%	94,1%
Career guidance	50	10,8%	73,5%
Career guidance for young people who are still at school	32	6,9%	47,1%
Specialised career guidance for young people with disabilities	19	4,1%	27,9%
Skills assessment or validation of prior learning	10	2,2%	14,7%
Face-to-face employment counselling	51	11,0%	75,0%
Start-up incentives (the promotion of entrepreneurship through business advice/training, cash benefits/loans, the provision of facilities etc.)	31	6,7%	45,6%
Direct job creation (measures that create additional jobs, usually of community benefit or socially useful, in order to find employment for the long-term unemployed or persons otherwise difficult to place)	26	5,6%	38,2%
Sheltered and supported employment and rehabilitation (measures that aim to promote the labour market integration of persons with	26	5,6%	38,2%

reduced working capacity through sheltered or supported employment or through rehabilitation)			
Employment incentives (recruitment, employment maintenance incentives, mobility/relocation allowance, job rotation, job sharing)	52	11,2%	76,5%
Training (work experience, work trials, institutional training, workplace training, alternate training and special support for apprenticeships)	51	11,0%	75,0%
Working with schools to re-integrate young people in education	12	2,6%	17,6%
Provision of automated matching tools	1	,2%	1,5%
Individual action planning	25	5,4%	36,8%
Pre-selection of young candidates for employers	7	1,5%	10,3%
Presence on social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.)	8	1,7%	11,8%
Total	465	100,0%	683,8%

Source: Authors' elaboration on their own data.

3.3.1 Effectiveness of PES

The factors that influence PES effectiveness with Rural NEETs are spread across multiple layers of reality. These factors range from individual, subjective level factors ^[6] to policy issues ^[7]. This makes it possible to determine how and to what extent PES influences the outcomes of Rural NEETs.

Improving PES effectiveness is not a straightforward process, it entails parallel and simultaneous balancing efforts at both policy-making and operational levels. Effectiveness can be measured in a variety of ways, like: 1) the total number of applications; 2) the total number of individuals hired by the institution on a long-term basis following the program's conclusion; and 3) the decrease in the percentage of youth unemployment. 4) how the Program impacts employer institutions (renewal); 5) how much the institutions are willing to pay for young recruits; 6) how much the youth are willing to pay for positions in the local and state governments; the respondents typically regarded as good the degree of cooperation and partnership between the employing and implementing institutions; 7) the degree of coordination among the institutions carrying out the Program; 8) the effects on the beneficiaries. The survey characterises effectiveness as “the extent to which successful results are achieved from the implementation of the Program regardless of the cost/efforts put into the implementation” in order to provide a more tangible picture of the outcomes. The factors affecting PES effectiveness with Rural NEETs are located at multiple layers of reality. These factors span from policy issues^[7] to individual, subjective level factors ^[6]. The quality of PES must consider the interactive nature as an important layer of PES impact. PES as other public administration services promote what is usually called public encounters, meaning the purposive interaction between citizens and public officials as they communicate to transact matters of some mutual interest^[8]. In the STWT process, these interactions comprise information exchange, counselling, or issues of control or constraint (e.g., unemployment benefits monitoring) tailored by organizational channels, artefacts, and processes^[9]. Thus, PES promote interactions that encompass the engagement and collaboration between jobseekers, or employers, and the services provided by the public employment offices which are very relevant for vulnerable groups such as Rural NEETs, as the quality of human-mediated support is core for delivering effective PES, even in the context of growing digitalization of public services^[6; 10;11]. Measuring PES impact must, address the perceptions of vulnerable citizens such as Rural NEETs about the services provides and how they are provided.

In this regard, the national survey shows that the overwhelming majority of the employees of the PES believe that the Programs reached its aims and objectives.

“One of the programs targeted disadvantage and vulnerable unemployed people is called “National program for activating inactive persons”, “National program for employment and training for disadvantage persons”. In this program PES focused on providing targeted support for vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities, youth, and long-term unemployed individuals. Special programs and initiatives were designed to address the specific needs of these groups during the pandemic.” (Case manager, Labour office Belitsa)

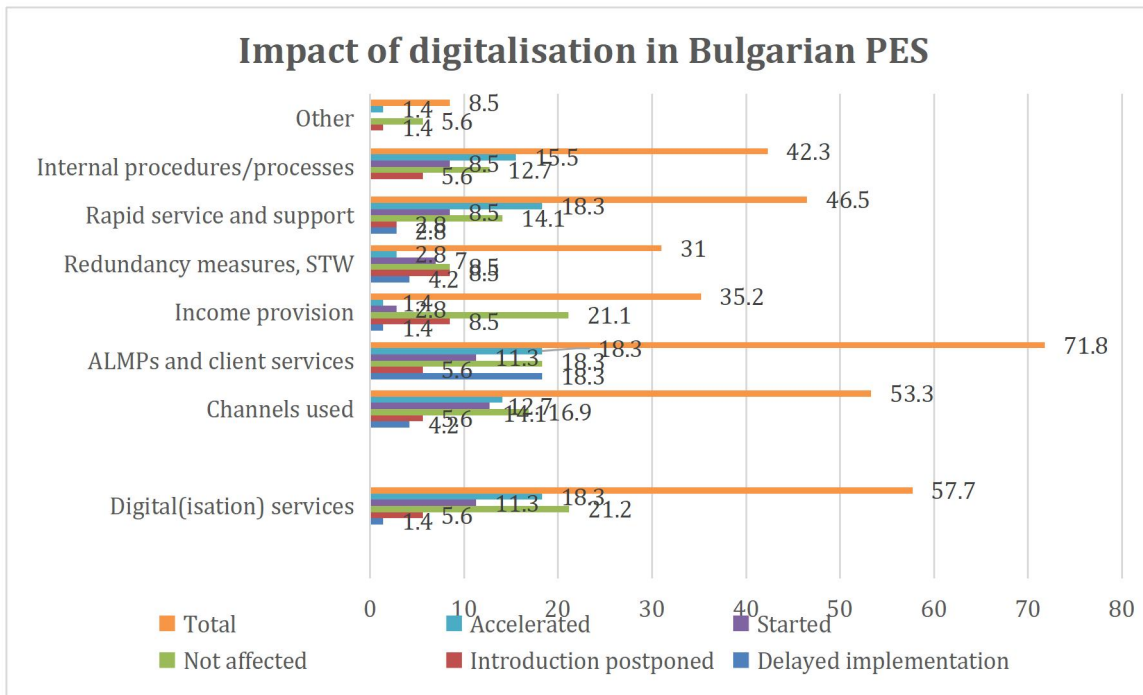
Job-related regulations contain most of the significant measures pertaining to NEETs in Bulgaria. The connection between employers and employees is the main emphasis of both the Employment Act and the Bulgarian Labour Code. The majority of NEETs' protections come from age-specific regulations (the Labour Code). However, in terms of problematic employment of young people, Bulgarian legislation is consistent with the European legal framework. Individuals between the ages of 16 and 18 aren't allowed to be engaged in performing any job that is heavy, hazardous, or harmful to their health and appropriate physical, mental, and moral development, according to the Labour Code. The unemployment legislation proposes a framework that incorporates job subsidies, unemployment insurance, incentives for companies to generate jobs and incentives for jobless persons to establish enterprises, direct transfers, training, and other measures. Except for work subsidies, none of these projects or programs are aimed specifically towards NEETs.

The digital and green transition and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to significant structural changes in the labour market and services provided by the National Employment Agency in Bulgaria. Among the main priorities of the national employment policy in the country are increasing the scope, efficiency and quality of employment services, implementation of new services, including digital services. The study reveals that digital services at Bulgarian Employment Offices were not affected by COVID-19, with the majority of respondents (21.2%) still using these services. PES employees in Bulgaria believe digital services have not been delayed during COVID-19, with 16.7% noting no direct impact on various channels in Bulgarian labor offices. In Bulgaria, 18.3% of respondents believe services are delayed, with income provision being the most affected.

During the pandemic we did not stop working, work was outsourced to other offices, some teams served people at the entrance of the labour office. Some of the services were also done digitally. Applications from employers could be submitted through the Agency's website. Most of the contact was made over the phone. During this period, the electronic registration service also arose. In my opinion, we coped well with the situation and the innovations in the work process. Particular digital services' innovations, such as electronic registration, have remained so far. A change in the legal framework was made and an unemployed person can visit any labour office in the country. For example, if he is in Burgas, no matter that his registration was made in Blagoevgrad, he can also be served in Burgas. Labour offices work to help and facilitate people. (Director of the National Employment Agency, Blagoevgrad and Kyustendil region)

In terms of income provision, the highest percentage of individuals shared that this service was not affected - 21.1%. In Redundancy measures, STW, the same share of those responders according to which it is Not affected and Introduction postponed- 8.5%. The two services Rapid service and support and Internal procedures/processes were defined as Accelerated with the highest growth of respondents - 18.3% and 15.5% respectively. The data gathered by the survey directed at the Public Employment services shows that NEETs in Bulgaria were not significantly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The accusation is supported by the fact that only 2 indicators out of a total of seven have averaged under 3, indicating delays in

the implementation of the measures. With the lowest rates of the services in the country during that period are services such as Income provision (2.84%) and Redundancy measures, STW (2.86%). On the other hand, in the context of the pandemic in Bulgaria Internal procedures/processes (3.80%), and Rapid service and support (3.79%) are the measures that are most stimulated. Although digitalization services were not available in the country before the pandemic and remain low due to relatively poor infrastructures, according to survey data, Digitalisation services (3.68%) and Channels used (3.50%) are also among the measures with the highest implementation and which are stimulated in the context of the pandemic.



Source: Authors' elaboration on their own data.

Chart 5. Presents the impact of digitalization in Bulgarian PES.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Pandemic had little impact on the services provided by PES in Bulgaria to the young job seekers. Offices providing these services around the country immediately ceased operations and switched to digital mode. Throughout the epidemic, labor agencies assist the unemployed and do not take a break. Some of the digital services provided are still in use today. Unemployed persons, for example, can be registered online using the following the online form.

3.3.2. Efficiency of PES

When it comes to efficiency, we sought to find out if the interventions' aims and the available resources (e.g., budget, time, expertise/staff) complemented each other. According to the interviewees, objectives and resources are generally consistent. In terms of personnel skills and cooperation amongst the institutions, things seem to run reasonably smoothly. Mobile Office service works with mobile experts' teams providing full range of services to employment offices, with the aim of reducing the proportion of discouraged and inactive people, as well as helping job seekers. The emphasis is on informing, consulting, and motivating for registration and use of the intermediary and specialized services of the Employment Agency to provide employment or inclusion in training. As it is an itinerant and mobile practice, the Mobile Employment Office service makes it possible to deconstruct one of the main problems for the rural population, intermobility. The Mobile Office expands on the existing outsourced jobs aimed at unemployed people from vulnerable groups and economically inactive people from rural regions and communities. It enables the formation of external

meeting spaces by mobile teams of labor offices and social assistance directorates for the provision of complete services within operational employment and social support centers.

Almost all of the respondents of PES think that this intervention was rather or very efficient during all 2-year periods ('efficient' was explained in the survey questionnaire as 'achieving successful results with the least possible resources and effort'). It is important to note that such positive survey results regarding the efficiency of the Mobile Office service could be explained by the very fact that the institutional survey was completed by institutional stakeholders who have worked with the intervention for a long time. Even if by certain objective criteria the program may not be considered efficient (e.g., due to the insufficient financial resources allocated for the beneficiaries or the long application period), from certain perspectives, the program could be deemed efficient. For instance, it is efficient for the employer institutions as the salaries for the program beneficiaries (and all accompanying expenses), however small, are paid from the state budget, and not from the employers' own budgets.

“At the very beginning of the pandemic, we had a few problems with customer service, perhaps related to people's fear of not going to the right desk. But the problem was solved by enabling people to register using an identification code and submit documents through the electronic service system. At that time, we had many individuals who took advantage of this service. The service to the unemployed was carried out for the most part by phone, but we also kept the service on site, which was taken to the ground floor of the building. But most importantly, during the whole period we did not stop serving our customers. At that time, we did not set up “Ateliers”, because it was not allowed for people to gather in groups. With the young people, however, we responded and had zoom meetings. The activity and the connection between us, young people and employers never stopped.” (Case manager, NEA, Blagoevgrad and Kyustendil district)

The area of the Mobile offices is the employment in the rural areas, helping migrants with their registration at the Employment Agencies. The type of support this office provide to young people can be how to prepare their CVs, how to register online on the website of National Employment Agency. This intervention is very “mobile”, this means that any unemployed person has the possibility for registration and easy searching for job. The main goal of this services is to “bring” employment services directly to communities, offering on-site assistance with job seekers, career counselling, and other employment-related activities. The purpose of the job fairs, career expos, and community events is to connect job seekers with employers and provide information about available services. this intervention is innovative because it is adapted for rural areas and small villages. With this intervention young people from rural areas can be informed for all the current opportunities in the labour market. In the period from 12th to the 16th of June 2023 eight interviews with NEETs have been conducted. These young people are with low skills or qualifications or even without qualifications and education. Very often they work in the informal sector of the economy, without employment contract and respectively deprived of protection of any labor rights. The main criteria for these interviews of young people (25-29 years) are: to be neither in the labour market, nor in education and/or to be part of an ethnic minority group; participation (current or previous) in youth employment programs and measures offered by the State as part of policies to reduce youth unemployment. Educational and labour trajectories: Lack of education is a common characteristic of all interviewees. Lack of education is a major negative factor of transformation associated with the social exclusion of young people. This deprives them not only of skills and knowledge, which makes them unable to realize themselves on the labor market, but also limits their freedom and opportunities for a dignified life in general. Tracking also the labour path of young people, defined with a very high degree of social exclusion, we see that all of them are long-term unemployed or have no work experience at all. The lack of work, the severe deprivation in which many of the young people in this group live is also the reason for stress, depression and lower self-

esteem. Discrimination is another factor that increases the degree of social exclusion for young people in this group. Some of the Roma young people interviewed said that when they were looking for a job, they experienced discriminatory treatment by employers.

“there is still discrimination in the town, they cannot understand if I am ...but when they see my address they understand. And just say: “ we will call you” ...and then noting.” (BG_BLG_F_26)

All young people participated in the interviews did not receive unemployment benefits because they did not meet the criteria for doing so (mostly because of the small length of service they have). The option they have is to register as unemployed with the local “Employment Office”, where they could receive information about vacant jobs or various programs for unemployed people. Nevertheless, many of the interviewees revealed their disappointment with such an experience, as they had not received a job offer or training offer. The reason for not participating in such programs for reducing the youth unemployment is that many young people do not know about them. This shows that the young people who are most in need of such programs, the most vulnerable to exclusion from the labour market – people without education, from minority groups, living in families with long-term unemployment and poverty in ghettoized neighborhoods, in the rural areas – are the least informed about the state support they could get.

3.3.3. Public employment services impact assessment

Evaluating the impact of the New Employment Opportunity program requires tracking the short-term and long-term effects of the program, its unintended on sequences, as well as the difference it makes to the target group, the broader community and society. As a whole, the survey data reveal a general perception that the program has had a positive impact on the beneficiaries (both short- and long-term). The New employment opportunity is considered successful by both institutional stakeholders and beneficiaries (young NEETs aged 25-29 in this case). The positive responses by the institutional stakeholders - 95% for National Employment Agency respondents. As a whole, based on the survey data analysis, the program can be deemed successful – a finding that corresponds to the evaluations in the institutional documents and the opinions expressed in the in-depth interviews. When it comes to the impacts and effects of the program, most respondents from both – the national survey and the case studies interviews agree or rather agree that the New employment opportunity program has short-term and long-term positive impacts and effects, which further supports the evidence for its success. When it comes to the efficiency of the program it is measured by:

“They have the opportunity how to do a lot of things that are going to happen in the future, things that should be useful for them and things they may missed before” Director at the Labour Office Directorate – Razlog.

When it comes to negative unintended impacts of the program, it is notable that a good number of respondents consider that there have been some unintended negative consequences of the program. In regard to this, one interviewee who used to be a program beneficiary, but now is hired by the institution where he worked under the program, mentioned that:

“There are unintended effects in terms of the work hired beneficiaries are given to do. Because there is a job description and it describes what employees have to do. And if they are asked to do something else, purely non-expert tasks, people get demotivated. You say to yourself, 'I didn't come here for this’”. (Case manager at the Labour Office Directorate – Blagoevgrad).

Importantly, such observations did not appear in all interviews. The interview data from the three case studies suggested, though, that instances as the one described above are not ubiquitous. Interview data shows that such instances depend on the specific supervisors and beneficiaries involved in the various institutions

which serve as employers under the program. Taken as a whole, the interview data, suggest that there are mostly positive impacts of the New employment opportunity program. Interviewees commented that through the program many young people had managed to find work by continuing to work for the institutions that had initially hired them under the program (if there had been open positions in the institutions for them to continue as full-time employees). Even if they did not remain at their workplace after the expiration of the 12 months under the New employment opportunity program, interviewees argued that, at the very least, beneficiaries had gained valuable work experience and had enriched their CVs by participating in the program. Interviewees also argued that in these ways, the program had contributed to the lowering of youth unemployment in Bulgaria. The New employment opportunity program has also had a positive long-term impact for state and municipal institutions which have managed to receive new and younger recruits without any expense on their end and, in its turn, this has contributed to the rejuvenation of the civil service sector in Bulgaria.

There are many possible dimensions that PES processes assessment can address to measure these services impact on Rural NEETs and these are: PES availability, PES support and PES staff capacity

The availability of Public Employment Services (PES) is crucial for Rural NEETs, as it enhances their perceptions of services' effectiveness and accessibility. PES availability is essential for providing necessary resources like counselling and job opportunities. Positive perceptions of PES availability are associated with higher quality of life perceptions, resulting in higher satisfaction levels among Rural NEETs [6].

Assessing PES availability for Rural NEETs involves evaluating its systematized outreach strategy, digital services provision, and mobility. Outreach should be based on a system and resources, while digital platforms should be adequate and effective. Mobility can enhance outreach by delivering non-permanent services across different territories, as public services are increasingly dismantled in non-urban areas. Collaboration with community stakeholders and NGOs is crucial for effective outreach [6;11].

PES broader and higher-quality support is an essential feature to ensure the development of these services for vulnerable young people in the upcoming decades. Indeed, PES support is becoming increasingly irrelevant for vulnerable young people as they rely, more and more, on other sources for job search and assistance, such as family and friends, particularly in countries with weaker on-the-ground institutional support [11]. Moreover, considering the emotional and social support aspects of PES deployment for vulnerable young people is key to making sure these services reinforce contemporary provider-centered perspectives, meaning those departing primarily from each individual's needs and resources, instead of perpetuating top-down/bureaucratic approaches designed by decision-makers [11;12].

"We do regular follow-ups to monitor progress in training, employability, and other aspects."
(Director at the Labour Office Directorate – Razlog.)

"We had daily contact with the monitors of the course about the absences and how it had gone" (Case manager, NEA, Blagoevgrad and Kyustendil district)

The importance of understanding the role and impact of all support dimensions is vital at a time in which PES are being pressured to digitalise their operation. In this context, there is some evidence that digital tools may contribute to reaching out to young people [13], but will be particularly inefficient with vulnerable groups such as rural NEETs if they are not combined with face-to-face support in all its dimensions (instrumental, social and emotional) [11]. In addition, the reliance on digital tools such as artificial intelligence and profiling in PES carries many risks, biases and exclusions, especially for groups in a situation of greater vulnerability which are far from being prevented [14;15]. Finally, PES support must account for the increasing complexity of vulnerable young people's needs, particularly in rural contexts. This

requires multi-professional approaches and coordination with other sectors such as health, to address requirements such as those associated with mental health [15]. Below, we describe three dimensions of social support that should be considered when assessing PES impact for rural NEETs and that are also key for the Track-IN understanding of PES impact [14].

Capacity of PES officers to provide support to rural NEETs in tangible or objective elements of school to work transition (e.g. preparing a CV, providing training tips, preparing for an interview). Emotional support: PES officers show the capacity to care for rural NEETs as persons, involving features such as being empathetic, available or trustworthy. Social support: PES officers are able to acknowledge and value rural NEETs skills and personal attributes, while being attentive and capable of understanding these young people’s problems and providing the necessary support to overcome any personal barriers [15]. **Table 3** presents what are the other support services PES officers use when addressing the needs of NEETs, where the Counselling (including one-to-one sessions) has 26,7%, while the Bridging programs to prepare young people in vulnerable situations to (re)enter mainstream education or VET system has only 2.2%. Career guidance/advice is also one of the most preferred support service provided by PES- 22,8%.

Table 3. The other support services PES officers use when addressing the needs of NEETs.

Other support services provided by PES	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Career guidance/advice	41	22,8%	71,9%
Entrepreneurial guidance	9	5,0%	15,8%
Counselling (including one-to-one sessions)	48	26,7%	84,2%
Choice Mentoring	27	15,0%	47,4%
Motivational sessions (including individual coaching to build up motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem with view to work-readiness)	21	11,7%	36,8%
Peer support	1	,6%	1,8%
Referrals to social services	29	16,1%	50,9%
Bridging programs to prepare young people in vulnerable situations to (re)enter mainstream education or VET system	4	2,2%	7,0%
Total	180	100,0%	315,8%

Source: Authors’ elaboration on their own data.

Supporting rural NEETs is a complex task and requires PES staff a high level of preparation and skills. Therefore, PES officers’ technical readiness to assist this group is a key element of PES impact assessment. The officers working with young people form vulnerable groups need a unique skill set to effectively address the specific challenges and needs of this population. PES can connect NEETs with training and skills development programs, which are presented in the following **Table 4**.

11,8% of all respondents needs training on counselling, 11,5% do not feel confident and don’t know how to successfully activate youth. The heterogeneity of the targets group requires individual approach for that reason 10.9% of the representatives of PES offices need a training on how to drafting individual action plans. 7,3% of the officers experienced difficulties to outreach to NEETs.

Table 4. PES can link NEET with training and skill development programs.

Training and skill development of PES officers	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
counselling	39	11,8%	95,1%
career guidance	33	10,0%	80,5%
using profiling and screening tools	15	4,5%	36,6%
how to work with youth	35	10,6%	85,4%
activation of youth	38	11,5%	92,7%
case management	9	2,7%	22,0%
outreach to NEETs	24	7,3%	58,5%
specific services and ALMPs for youth	21	6,3%	51,2%
diversity and inclusion	9	2,7%	22,0%
working with marginalised youth	16	4,8%	39,0%
working with young migrant population	8	2,4%	19,5%
networking	7	2,1%	17,1%
drafting individual action plans	36	10,9%	87,8%
interviewing techniques	13	3,9%	31,7%
communication	28	8,5%	68,3%
Total	331	100,0%	807,3%

Source: Authors' elaboration on their own data.

4. Discussion

Information from the interviews with the PES directors and case workers who mentioned that the digitalisation approach is yet not suitable for all NEET profiles and some of them prefer to meet face to face. Some of the directors mentioned that what they do is not always translatable on a remote form, especially this individual follow-up regarding the most complex NEET cases. It should be noted that young NEET from the South-West region of Bulgaria revealed a lack of adequate skills, associated with a lack of entrepreneurial spirit. This places them in a situation of social exclusion, of social marginality, often seen by society as belonging to a generation that does not have a culture ^[20] and work habits and who live dependent on friends and family ^[16;17;20]. The South-West region of Bulgaria is still characterized by one of the most difficult social problems to solve in Bulgaria: interior depopulation and the consequent difficulty for local employers to recruit human resources with the appropriate qualifications for their needs. All the partners involved in the project, especially the Municipality of Blagoevgrad considered that the programs and interventions fully complied with the proposed objectives, being surpassed with exceptional results. There is a conviction that the young NEETs who went through the new employment opportunity program training processes were completely integrated and motivated to enter the labour market ^[3, 19].

Through our analysis, and regarding the impact of the different programs and strategies on perspectives on employability, the interviewees reports demonstrated a positive relationship, through aspects such as "PES environment", "skills of PES staff" and "flexibility".

It is significant that, despite being mostly higher education graduates, many NEETs revealed a lack of adequate communication skills, related with lack of entrepreneurial spirit^[6;21]. This associated with the challenges of living in a rural area, placed them in a situation of social exclusion and dependency that further

delayed their development as full citizens. Hence, meaningful and quality education that responds to such gaps and provides a bridge between academy and labor market can bring very positive results. In this regard PES officers working with them need specific skills such as: cultural sensitivity, empathy, effective communication, active listening, problem –solving, collaboration and flexibility. These skills combined with a genuine commitment to helping young people can make PES officers highly effective in their roles [18,19]. Equipment, training and professional development are also crucial to ensure that officers can support youth entering the labour market effectively.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a few key points that stand out as being particularly relevant in terms of the labour market and youth unemployment. Bulgaria is a typical example of Eastern European countries. The insights into which elements have the biggest influence on the youth labour market would be fairly similar for several of its bordering countries. Furthermore, there are a few major trends that are common across Europe, such as decreased youth and labour migration as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the expectation that most states will experience an economic crisis, which will inevitably have an impact on the most vulnerable unemployment group - youths.

To effectively address the many needs and barriers of vulnerable young people, PES must demonstrate flexibility in the techniques, measures, and services it provides. Furthermore, PES's previous experiences in attempting to reach numerous NEETs demonstrate the importance of obtaining the trust of vulnerable young people. To reach out to vulnerable NEETs, PES should collaborate with local players, including associations, educational institutions, and mental health specialists. This requires effective and appropriate information and data-sharing, and means that PES counsellors will need to spend more time managing these partnerships [5,6,7]. This more inclusive approach (with a strong emphasis on NEETs) cannot succeed without effective collaboration among PES, educational institutions, social service providers, businesses, and suppliers of other supportive services (including psychological and health care). This more inclusive strategy must establish partnerships that include data exchange in order to identify vulnerable NEETs, as well as signposting young people so that they obtain enough supports and do not 'get lost' among care providers. One of the key conclusions concerning NEETs (especially those from vulnerable backgrounds) from our study is the role of PES in contacting and convincing them to participate in the labour market^[11]. In particular, many young people might not have trust in public institutions such as the PES. They often need face-to-face personal contact with a person who can speak in a more informal manner. This is why cooperation with other service providers is fundamental.

Addressing youth unemployment requires a multifaceted approach that includes targeted interventions, partnerships, and collaboration between PES and other stakeholders. By implementing the recommendations outlined above, policymakers and practitioners can enhance the effectiveness of PES in addressing youth unemployment and supporting the economic empowerment of young people.

Author contributions

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Institutional review board statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad (protocol code №: 2302-1/28 February 2023, **Разрешение №: 2302-1/28 февруари 2023**). Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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