



Empowering Youth for Equal Success (EYES)

Comparative Analysis Report on Youth Employment and Equal Opportunities

Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Italy and Serbia

Partner organisations

YES Bulgaria | KOM 018 Serbia | Beyond Borders Italy | COSI Romania | GO Alive Greece

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About the EYES project

Empowering Youth for Equal Success (EYES) addresses youth unemployment and unequal access to employment opportunities in five partner countries: Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Italy and Serbia. The project starts from a practical concern shared by the partner organisations: many young people are formally close to education, training or employment services, but still do not receive the support they need to enter decent, stable and meaningful work.

Youth unemployment is not only an economic indicator. It affects independence, mental wellbeing, confidence, social participation and trust in institutions. Barriers are stronger for young people who face more than one form of disadvantage, including NEET youth, young women and girls, young people from minorities, young people from rural areas, young parents, persons with disabilities and young people with limited access to professional networks.

The EYES partnership brings together YES Bulgaria, Club for Youth Empowerment 018 (KOM 018) from Serbia, Beyond Borders Italy, COSI Romania and GO Alive Greece. The partners combine youth work, research, community outreach, advocacy and local cooperation with schools, public institutions and civil society stakeholders. The project focuses on employability, equal opportunities, youth work capacity building, research-based advocacy and the establishment of local innovation hubs. The hubs are intended to become practical access points where young people can receive information, guidance, mentoring and support to navigate employment and self-employment pathways.

Specific project objectives in practical terms

- Improve young people's employability by strengthening practical skills, labour market knowledge, confidence, adaptability and access to quality learning and work experience opportunities.
- Support youth workers and partner organisations so that they can provide more structured, long-term and locally relevant support to NEET youth and young people from vulnerable groups.
- Use research and evidence-based recommendations to support advocacy for better youth employment policies, more accessible public programmes, quality paid internships and stronger links between education and the labour market.
- Establish local innovation hubs in five partner communities as accessible support points where young people can receive information, mentoring, referral support and practical tools for entering the labour market.

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1. Executive summary

This Comparative Analysis Report has been developed within the Erasmus+ project **Empowering Youth for Equal Success (EYES)**. It brings together national research findings from Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Italy and Serbia, combining desk research with survey data collected from young people in the five partner countries. The report provides a comparative overview of youth employment challenges, equal opportunities, existing support systems and the needs expressed by young people themselves.

The analysis confirms that young people across all five countries continue to face a difficult transition from education to stable and decent work. Although national labour market contexts differ, several common barriers appear throughout the research: lack of work experience, low wages, limited job opportunities, weak career guidance, poor access to information and a gap between education and labour market needs. These challenges are particularly serious for young people in vulnerable situations, including NEET youth, young women, rural youth, young people from minorities, young parents and persons with disabilities.

The desk research shows that all five countries have legal frameworks, public employment institutions and programmes that are relevant to youth employment, self-employment, traineeships, internships and support for vulnerable groups. However, the comparative finding is that existing measures often do not reach young people in a sufficiently visible, practical or accessible way. The issue is therefore not only the existence of policies, but their implementation, communication and connection with the real needs of young people.

The survey analysis is based on **958 valid responses** collected through the EYES partnership: 150 in Bulgaria, 202 in Romania, 181 in Greece, 203 in Italy and 222 in Serbia. The survey findings show that young people need more practical support in entering the labour market, including quality internships, first-job opportunities, stronger career counselling, clearer information about public programmes and better preparation for employment during education. Many respondents also expressed interest in self-employment, but this interest is limited by lack of start-up capital, fear of financial risk, insufficient business knowledge, complex procedures and lack of mentoring.

Mental wellbeing also appears as an important employability factor. Young people recognise that stress management, confidence, motivation and emotional balance influence their ability to find work, stay employed and perform well. This shows that youth employment support should not be limited only to technical job-search skills, but should also include mentoring, encouragement, resilience-building and safe spaces for personal and professional development.

The report concludes that youth employment measures in the EYES countries need to become more practical, local, youth-friendly and inclusive. Stronger cooperation is needed between public institutions, education providers, employers, municipalities and civil society organisations. The future EYES local innovation hubs can play an important role in this process by helping young people understand available opportunities, access guidance and mentoring, develop employability and entrepreneurship skills, and connect with institutions and employers.

Overall, the comparative evidence shows that young people are not asking only for more information, but for support that is concrete, understandable and connected to real opportunities. The EYES project can respond to this need by turning research findings into practical local support mechanisms and advocacy actions for more equal access to employment.

2. Methodological approach

The comparative report is based on the common WP2 research methodology prepared for the national reports. The methodology required each partner to combine two complementary sources: desk research and analysis of the EYES survey results. This design makes it possible to compare national policy and labour market contexts with the direct perspectives of young people reached through the project.

The desk research covered youth unemployment, NEET statistics, self-employment and entrepreneurship, labour market trends, legal frameworks, social rights, public programmes, support measures and gaps between education and the labour market. Partners were instructed to use official and reliable sources, including national statistical offices, ministries, Eurostat, OECD, ILO, EURES, Cedefop, Youth Wiki and relevant national legislation.

The survey analysis was based on a common questionnaire used across the five countries. The questionnaire covered respondent profile, employment situation, contract type, job stability, connection between education and work, job-search barriers, discrimination, self-employment interest, barriers to entrepreneurship, awareness and usefulness of public programmes, access to career guidance, mental wellbeing and stress management, key employability skills, education preparation and youth recommendations.

The combined comparative survey base is 958 valid responses. The samples are project-based evidence collected through partner networks, youth centres, schools, social media, local outreach and targeted work with vulnerable groups. They should not be read as nationally representative population samples. Their value lies in showing how young people reached by the project understand employment barriers, which forms of support they consider useful, and where local innovation hubs can respond in a practical way.

Country	Partner or report source	Survey base
Bulgaria	YES Bulgaria / National Report Bulgaria	150
Romania	COSI Romania / National Report Romania and survey dataset	202
Greece	GO Alive Greece / National Report Greece and survey dataset	181
Italy	Beyond Borders Italy / National Report Italy and survey dataset	203
Serbia	KOM 018 Serbia / National Report Serbia and survey dataset	222

Source: EYES national reports, common questionnaire and WP2 desk research methodology.

For the comparative analysis, data were harmonised into common categories where possible. This was especially necessary for translated survey options and national survey forms. Multiple-choice questions do not add up to 100%, because respondents could select more than one answer. Where official indicators differ by age group, year or definition, the report presents them as source-reported values and explains the limitation. Where numeric comparison is not methodologically sound, findings are analysed in narrative or profile form instead of filling tables with artificial zeros or missing-value labels.

3. Comparative desk research analysis

3.1 Comparative labour market and youth employment context

The desk research across the five national reports shows different labour market contexts, but a shared challenge: the transition from education to stable work remains fragile. In Bulgaria, overall unemployment is low, yet youth employment is comparatively weak and the NEET rate remains above the EU benchmark. Romania presents the sharpest statistical challenge, with very high youth unemployment and the highest NEET rate among the countries covered by the reports. Greece has improved since 2020, but youth unemployment, long-term unemployment, seasonal fluctuations and regional disparities remain central concerns. Italy faces persistent youth unemployment, a high NEET rate and strong regional inequalities, especially between the South and the Centre-North. Serbia has seen improvements in the overall labour market, but young people still face considerably higher unemployment than adults, with an estimated NEET rate above the EU average.

Country	Youth unemployment	NEET indicator	Youth employment / trend	Self-employment context	Interpretive note
Bulgaria	7.7% youth unemployment, 15-29; 13.1% for 15-24	13.8% for 15-29	52.7% employment rate, 20-29; 34.3% employment rate, 15-29	Young people aged 20-29 represent 5.3% of all self-employed aged 20-64	Low overall unemployment coexists with weak youth employment and slow transition into stable work.
Romania	28.2% youth unemployment, February 2026	19.4% for 15-29 in 2024	53.1% employment rate, 20-29, December 2024	Overall self-employment rate 11.7%; youth entrepreneurship constrained by procedures and lack of support	Most acute labour market context in the comparison; many NEETs are economically inactive rather than job-seeking.
Greece	18.9% youth unemployment under 25, average 2025; 13.0% in December 2025	The Greek report identifies high NEET levels and regional estimates around 24%, with some regions above 30%	Improvement since 2020, but seasonal and regional fluctuations remain strong	Youth self-employment around 11% in 2023 and 10-12% in 2024-2025, often necessity-driven	The recovery is visible, but young people still face long-term unemployment, mismatch and regional exclusion.
Italy	18.8% youth unemployment, November 2025; 21.5% in June 2025	15.2% for 15-29 in 2024; 23.3% in Mezzogiorno	49.2% employment rate, 20-29, December 2024	Youth self-employment is described as limited and constrained by financial and regulatory barriers	High youth unemployment and NEET rates are linked to precarious work and strong territorial disparities.
Serbia	Around 20-23% for 15-24; approximately 16-18% for 15-29	Around 14-15% for 15-29	Overall labour market improved, but young people face a longer transition period to first stable employment	Overall self-employment around 27%; youth entrepreneurial activity around 6-8%	Young people face experience requirements, limited entry-level opportunities and uneven local access to jobs.

Source: EYES desk research and national reports. Official indicators are source-reported and not fully comparable by age group and year.

The most important comparative distinction is not simply whether youth unemployment is higher or lower. The national reports point to job quality, entry barriers and unequal access as the deeper issue. Low wages, temporary or informal arrangements, lack of experience and weak school-to-work bridges appear repeatedly. Regional and rural dimensions are also important: in Italy, Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece, smaller communities and economically weaker regions provide fewer opportunities; in Romania, the survey and desk research show that vulnerable groups are concentrated among those experiencing labour market exclusion.

Self-employment appears in all national reports as both an opportunity and a risk. Greece and Serbia have relatively visible self-employment contexts, while Bulgaria reports very low participation of young people among the self-employed. Italy and Romania show interest among youth but also strong barriers. Across the countries, entrepreneurship cannot be treated as a simple alternative to unemployment. It requires capital, business knowledge, legal guidance, mentoring, market access and realistic risk assessment.

Labour market profile by country

Country	Labour market context	Main opportunity areas	Main structural barriers
Bulgaria	Low overall unemployment, but weak youth employment and NEET concerns.	Services, business services, construction, R&D, media, computer programming and IT; medium and high qualifications both important.	Regional inequalities, small-town/rural limitations, low wages and weak practical preparation.

Romania	High youth unemployment and high NEET rate; many young people face multiple vulnerabilities.	Digital economy, automotive/manufacturing, construction, healthcare/social care, hospitality and green transition sectors.	Education-market mismatch, weak counselling, low wages, insufficient information and high discrimination exposure among respondents.
Greece	Improving youth unemployment but persistent seasonal, regional and long-term exclusion.	Tourism, agriculture, construction, IT, renewables and medium-skilled service occupations.	Seasonality, regional disparities, skills mismatch and variable quality of apprenticeships/placements.
Italy	Persistent youth unemployment, high NEET rate and strong North-South divide.	IT/telecommunications, green technologies, healthcare, tourism/hospitality and advanced manufacturing.	Precarious work, low pay, regional disparities, rural isolation and low use of public programmes.
Serbia	Improved general labour market, but young people still face a difficult first-job transition.	ICT, manufacturing, trade, logistics, administration, tourism, hospitality and creative/digital industries.	Lack of experience, low awareness of programmes, uneven local access and practical skills gaps.

Source: EYES national reports.

3.2 Comparative overview of legal frameworks, policies and support programmes

Country	Main legal/institutional framework	Main youth employment and self-employment programmes	Measures for vulnerable youth	Main implementation or accessibility gap
Bulgaria	Constitutional right to work; Labour Code; Employment Promotion Act; Social Security Code; Protection Against Discrimination Act.	Youth Guarantee, Employment Agency services, Human Resources Development Programme 2021-2027, Youth Employment and Training, Ready for Work, Start in Career, apprenticeships, traineeships and ESF+ training.	Youth mediators, activation of inactive youth, measures for NEETs, young Roma, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, early school leavers and low-qualified youth.	Instruments exist, but many young people do not know or use them; local outreach and outcome quality remain uneven.
Romania	Labour Code, internship and apprenticeship legislation, anti-discrimination law, protections for persons with disabilities; ANOFM as key employment institution.	Youth Guarantee, ANOFM youth programmes, NEET job subsidy scheme, youth centres, apprenticeship contracts, dual education, Start-Up Nation and innovation hubs/incubators.	Employment programme for at-risk youth, wage subsidies for NEET hiring, rural/disadvantaged youth priorities in the National Youth Strategy 2024-2027.	Awareness is relatively high, but use and perceived usefulness are weak; complex procedures and limited follow-through reduce impact.
Greece	Law 5239/2025, Presidential Decree 62/2025, youth/minor worker protections, work-life balance and equality measures; DYPA as central employment service.	National Youth Employment Strategy 2021-2027/2030, Enhanced Youth Guarantee, Jobs Again reform, DYPA digital tools, training and wage subsidies, EPAS apprenticeship schools.	NEET/youth integration routes, paid apprenticeships, subsidised jobs for 18-29 without prior experience, measures for women, persons with disabilities and long-term unemployed.	Framework is advanced, but outreach to the most vulnerable, placement quality, funding and transparent performance use remain uneven.
Italy	Budget Bill youth measures, Youth Bonus, NASpI, DIS-COLL, internship and traineeship regulation, protections for minors and vulnerable workers.	PNRR/Italia Domani, GOL programme, Youth Guarantee, National Programme “Giovani, donne e lavoro”, employer incentives, self-employment and regional entrepreneurship measures such as Resto al Sud.	Hiring incentives for NEETs, people with disabilities and beneficiaries of inclusion measures; support for women victims of violence and other vulnerable workers.	Measures are numerous but fragmented; young people report low awareness, poor accessibility and persistent precarious entry routes.
Serbia	Constitutional right to work; Labour Law; Employment and Unemployment Insurance Law; anti-discrimination legislation; laws on business registration and persons with disabilities.	National Employment Service active labour market measures, Youth Guarantee pilots, My First Salary, self-employment subsidies, grants/loans, Innovation Fund, Development Agency, incubators and science/technology parks.	Youth Guarantee pilots, self-employment subsidies after training, measures for persons with disabilities, Roma inclusion strategy and local employment measures.	The strongest gap is visibility: a very large share of surveyed young people are not familiar with public employment/self-employment programmes.

Source: EYES national reports and desk research.

A clear pattern emerges: none of the countries can be described as lacking institutions or programmes altogether. The challenge is the distance between measures on paper and the young people who need them. This distance takes different forms: weak visibility, complicated procedures, uneven local availability, low trust, limited youth-friendly communication, lack of individual guidance, and insufficient connection between training, employers and decent job outcomes.

This finding is central for EYES. The project does not need to replace public institutions. Its added value is to act as a bridge: translating programmes into understandable steps, guiding young people through options, linking them with employers and services, and collecting evidence for advocacy where measures do not reach vulnerable youth effectively.

3.3 Main desk research conclusions

- The transition from education to work remains difficult in all five countries, even where general labour market indicators have improved.
- Low wages, temporary work, informal work and weak contract security reduce the quality of first employment and discourage young people from entering or staying in the labour market.

- Vulnerable youth face compounded barriers: rural location, disability, gender, minority status, family responsibilities and low income can overlap and make standard employment measures insufficient.
- Public measures exist in all countries, but outreach, accessibility, visibility and outcome monitoring are uneven.
- Entrepreneurship support must combine finance with mentoring, administrative/legal help, business training and realistic risk management.
- Local innovation hubs are relevant because many barriers are practical and local: young people need one-to-one information, first-job preparation, employer connections and guidance through existing systems.

4. Comparative survey analysis

4.1 Survey sample and respondent profiles

The comparative survey base consists of 958 valid responses: 150 in Bulgaria, 202 in Romania, 181 in Greece, 203 in Italy and 222 in Serbia. The country samples differ in profile, which is useful for project design but requires careful interpretation. Bulgaria and Serbia include many respondents in education or early transition. Romania reached a high share of vulnerable respondents. Italy has a strong rural dimension. Greece has an urban and student-oriented sample, and its status categories do not separately identify NEET respondents.

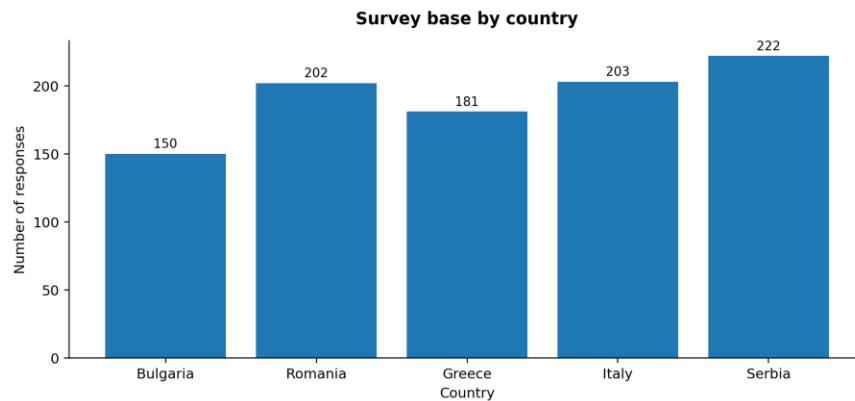


Figure 1. Survey base by country

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets.

The survey base is large enough to identify recurring barriers and support needs across the project countries, but it is not designed for national prevalence estimates. The comparison therefore focuses on patterns that are useful for designing EYES activities: which barriers young people name, which support measures they know or do not know, how they perceive self-employment, and what they recommend to decision makers.

4.2 Employment status, instability and job quality

The current status of respondents confirms that the project is reaching young people in different stages of the school-to-work transition. In Bulgaria and Serbia, around half of the respondents were in education or training. Romania and Italy show a much stronger concentration of respondents outside employment or in NEET/unemployment categories. Greece has a large education/training group and an unemployed group, but no separate NEET category in the survey status question.

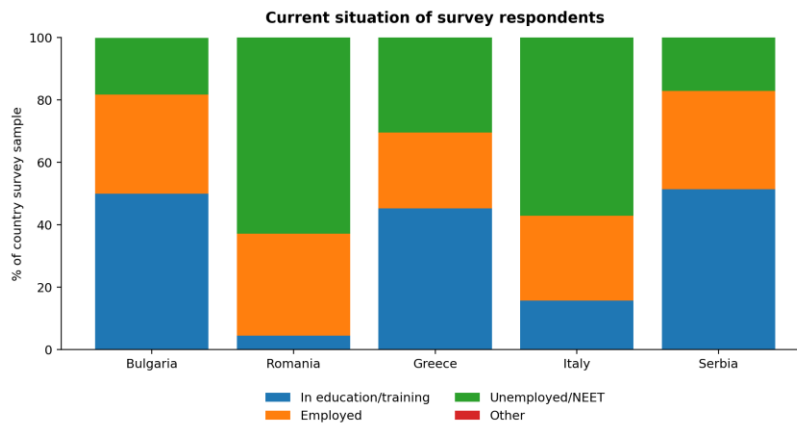


Figure 2. Current situation of survey respondents

Country	In education/training	Employed	Unemployed/NEET	Other
Bulgaria	50.0%	31.8%	18.1%	0.0%
Romania	4.5%	32.7%	62.9%	0.0%
Greece	45.3%	24.3%	30.4%	0.0%
Italy	15.8%	27.1%	57.1%	0.0%
Serbia	51.4%	31.5%	17.1%	0.0%

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets.

Job quality is a recurring concern behind these status figures. The country reports describe temporary contracts, informal or no-contract work, part-time work, occasional employment and weak alignment between education and jobs. For EYES, this means that support should not only help young people find any work. It should help them understand contract types, identify quality placements, prepare for interviews and avoid exploitative entry routes.

4.3 Main job-search barriers

Across the full survey base, low salaries, lack of experience and lack of job offers are the most visible job-search barriers. These three barriers describe a difficult entry loop: young people are expected to have experience before they can access stable jobs, available jobs are often poorly paid or unstable, and local opportunities do not always match their education or skills.

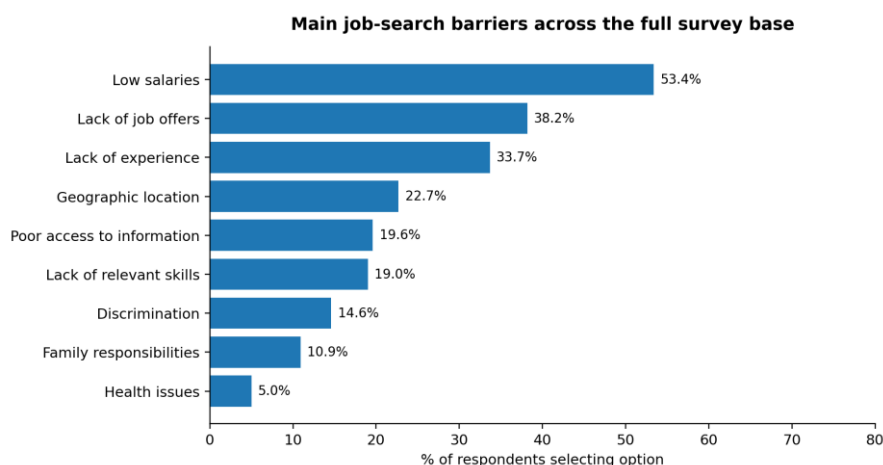


Figure 3. Main job-search barriers across the full survey base

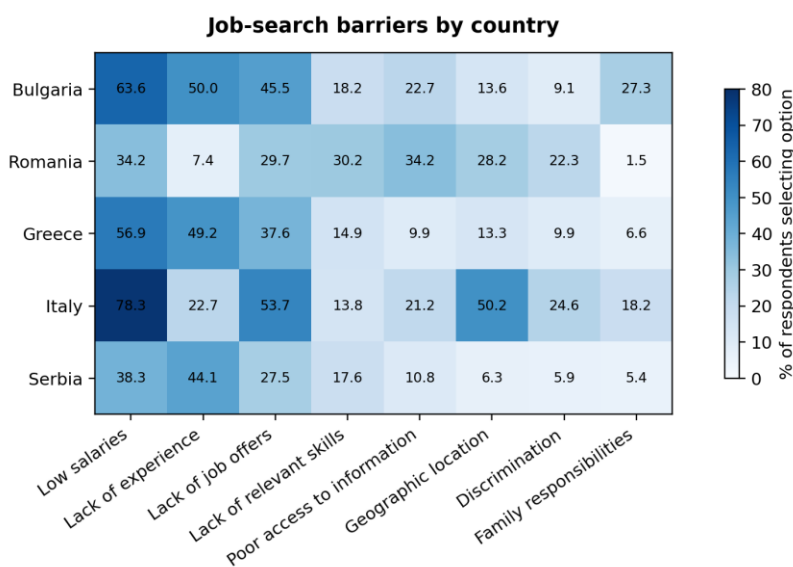


Figure 4. Job-search barriers by country

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets. Multiple-choice question; values show the share of each country sample selecting the option.

Country	Low salaries	Lack of experience	Lack of job offers	Lack of relevant skills	Poor access to information	Geographic location	Discrimination	Family responsibilities
Bulgaria	63.6%	50.0%	45.5%	18.2%	22.7%	13.6%	9.1%	27.3%
Romania	34.2%	7.4%	29.7%	30.2%	34.2%	28.2%	22.3%	1.5%
Greece	56.9%	49.2%	37.6%	14.9%	9.9%	13.3%	9.9%	6.6%
Italy	78.3%	22.7%	53.7%	13.8%	21.2%	50.2%	24.6%	18.2%
Serbia	38.3%	44.1%	27.5%	17.6%	10.8%	6.3%	5.9%	5.4%

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets.

The country patterns differ. Italy and Bulgaria show very high shares selecting low salaries. Greece combines low salaries with lack of experience and lack of job offers. Serbia shows lack of experience as the most frequently selected barrier, while Romania stands out for insufficient information, skills gaps, geographical location and discrimination. These differences matter for local hubs: the same support package cannot be copied mechanically across countries. However, all hubs should include practical job-search preparation, information navigation and employer cooperation.

4.4 Discrimination and vulnerable youth

Equal opportunities are a central concern in the project. The survey question on discrimination during job applications is directly comparable for Romania, Greece, Italy and Serbia. Bulgaria's national report provides discrimination as a job-search difficulty rather than a separate discrimination-experience indicator, so it is discussed narratively and not included in the numeric chart below.

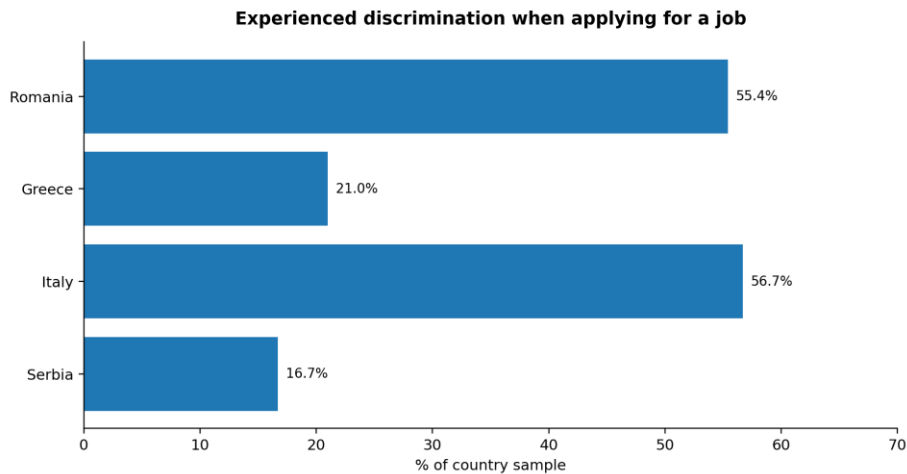


Figure 5. Experienced discrimination when applying for a job

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets. Comparable discrimination-experience question available for Romania, Greece, Italy and Serbia.

The results show that discrimination is not equally visible across country samples. Romania and Italy report particularly high levels of discrimination experience, while Greece and Serbia report lower but still significant shares. The national reports also show that vulnerability is not a single category. It may include gender, age, ethnic or minority background, disability, place of residence, migrant background, family responsibilities and low income. Romania's sample is especially important in this respect, because three quarters of respondents belong to at least one vulnerable group. Italy's rural sample shows how geographic isolation can function as a labour market barrier. Serbia and Bulgaria show that even where discrimination is not the top barrier, young people still need clear information about rights, contracts, unpaid work and complaint channels.

For EYES, the practical implication is that employability support must include an equal-opportunity layer. Young people should learn how to recognise discrimination, how to document unfair treatment, where to seek support and how to protect themselves from informal or exploitative work. This should be integrated into career guidance rather than treated as a separate legal topic.

4.5 Public programs, support measures and awareness gap

The desk research identifies a wide range of public employment and self-employment measures in all countries. The survey results show why these measures are not enough by themselves. Awareness and use vary sharply, and in several countries young people either do not know about programmes, know about them but do not use them, or have doubts about their usefulness and accessibility.

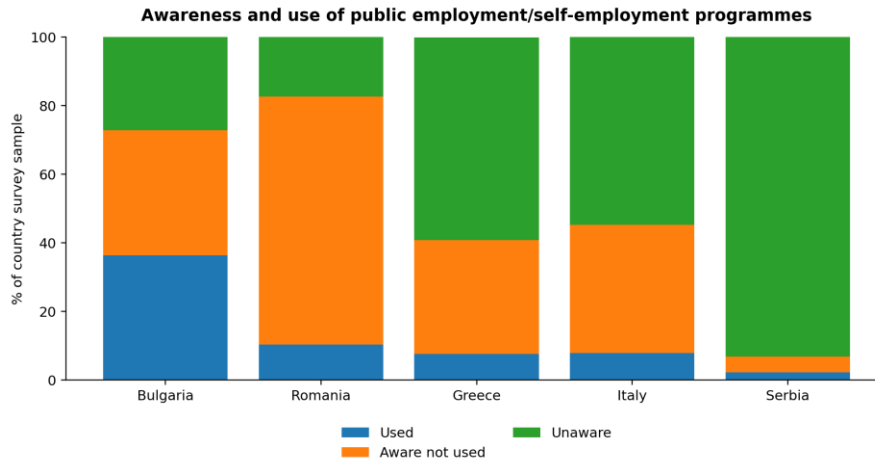


Figure 6. Awareness and use of public youth employment/self-employment programmes

Country	Aware and used	Aware but did not use	Unaware
Bulgaria	36.4%	36.4%	27.3%
Romania	10.4%	72.3%	17.3%
Greece	7.7%	33.1%	59.1%
Italy	7.9%	37.4%	54.7%
Serbia	2.3%	4.5%	93.2%

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets.

The clearest gap is in Serbia, where 93.2% of respondents were not familiar with public programmes supporting employment or self-employment. Italy also shows a major awareness gap, with more than half of respondents unaware of such programmes. Romania presents a different problem: most respondents were aware of programmes, but use and perceived usefulness were low. Bulgaria shows comparatively higher programme use, but almost two thirds of respondents either did not know about programmes or knew about them without using them. Greece falls between these patterns, with many respondents unaware and a smaller group using available programmes.

This is one of the strongest arguments for local innovation hubs. Hubs can provide youth-friendly navigation: what programmes exist, who can apply, what documents are needed, what deadlines apply, what support is realistic, and where young people can receive further help. They can also collect feedback on why programmes are not used and communicate that evidence to public institutions.

4.6 Career guidance and employment support

Career guidance is weak or uneven across the survey samples. The lack of guidance is not only an information problem; it affects confidence, career planning, understanding of labour rights, awareness of programmes and ability to translate education into employability. Young people who lack family or professional networks are particularly dependent on accessible career support.

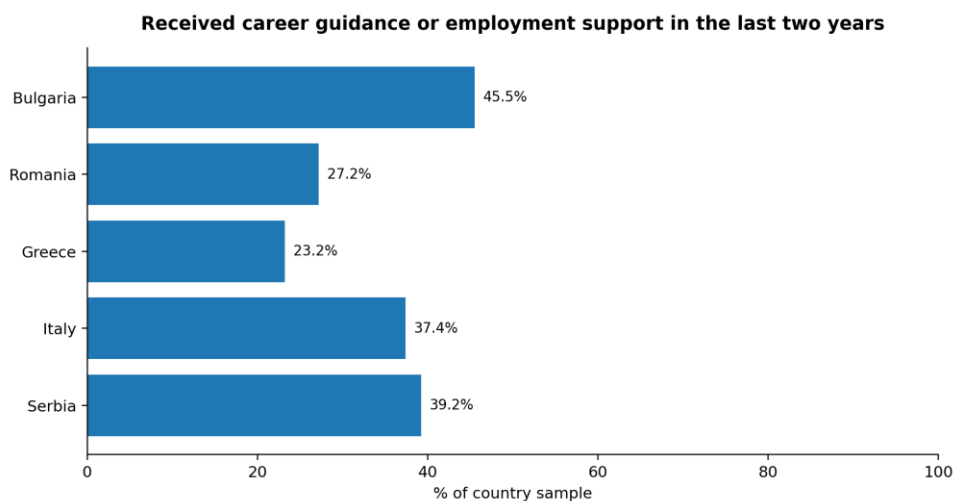


Figure 7. Received career guidance or employment support in the last two years

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets.

Bulgaria reports the highest share of respondents who received career guidance, but even there more than half did not. Greece, Romania and Serbia show large gaps, and Italy also has a majority without guidance. This points to a need for continuous and practical guidance, not one-off information sessions. EYES hubs should combine CV and interview preparation, individual career planning, rights information, employer contacts and referrals to existing public services.

4.7 Self-employment and entrepreneurship

Interest in self-employment is high in most country samples, but the findings also show that interest should not be confused with readiness. Many respondents see self-employment as a possible path to independence, flexibility or better income, but the barriers are substantial: capital, financial risk, business knowledge, mentoring, legal procedures and unstable market conditions.

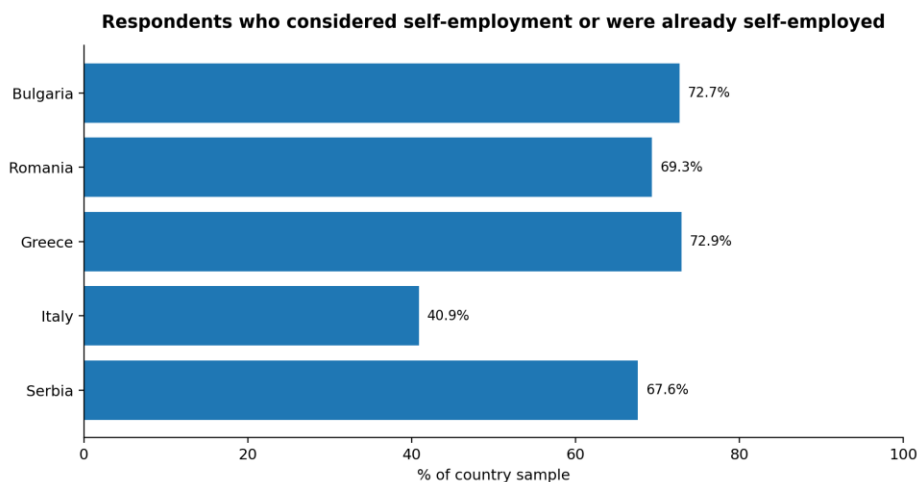


Figure 8. Respondents who considered self-employment or were already self-employed

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets.

Barriers to self-employment by country

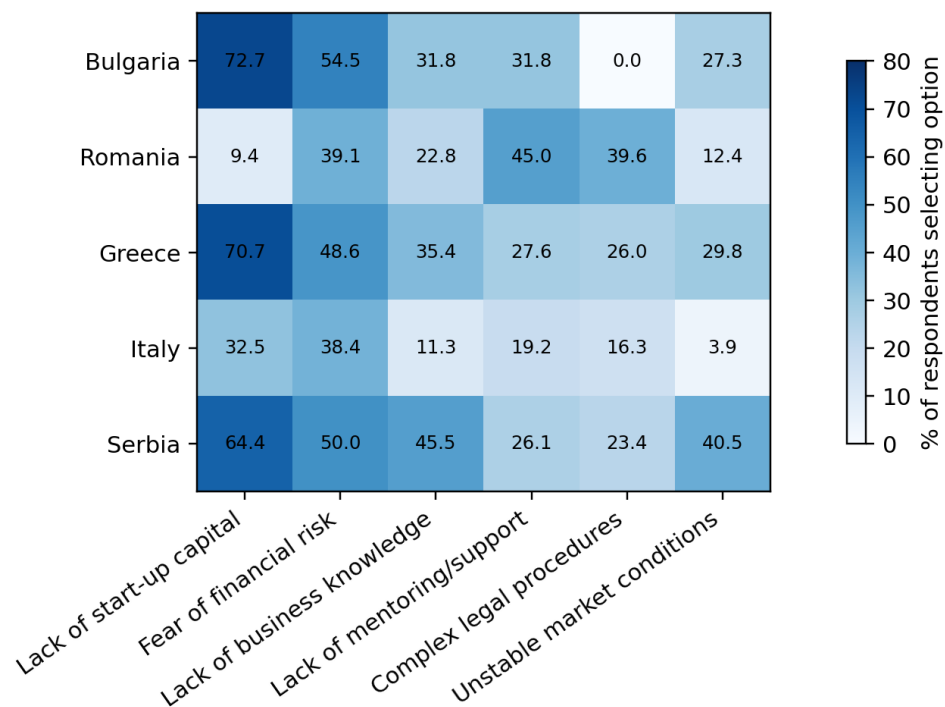


Figure 9. Barriers to self-employment by country

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets. Multiple-choice question; values show the share of each country sample selecting the option.

Country	Lack of start-up capital	Fear of financial risk	Lack of business knowledge	Lack of mentoring/support	Complex legal procedures	Unstable market conditions
Bulgaria	72.7%	54.5%	31.8%	31.8%	0.0%	27.3%
Romania	9.4%	39.1%	22.8%	45.0%	39.6%	12.4%
Greece	70.7%	48.6%	35.4%	27.6%	26.0%	29.8%
Italy	32.5%	38.4%	11.3%	19.2%	16.3%	3.9%
Serbia	64.4%	50.0%	45.5%	26.1%	23.4%	40.5%

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets.

The self-employment barrier profile differs by country. Start-up capital is the dominant barrier in Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia, and a major barrier in Italy. Romania is distinctive because lack of mentoring and complex legal procedures are more visible than lack of capital. Italy and Serbia show high concern about financial risk. Greece and Serbia also show strong concern about lack of business knowledge and unstable market conditions. The correct response is not only more promotion of entrepreneurship. Young people need a staged support model: idea assessment, business planning, small finance options, legal and administrative guidance, mentorship, market testing and risk management.

4.8 Skills, education-to-work preparation and mental wellbeing

The survey results show that employability is understood broadly by young people. They do not identify only technical skills. Communication, digital skills, problem-solving, teamwork, foreign languages, entrepreneurial skills and critical thinking recur across countries. The education-to-work gap is also visible: in several country samples, many respondents feel that their education did not prepare them well for the labour market.

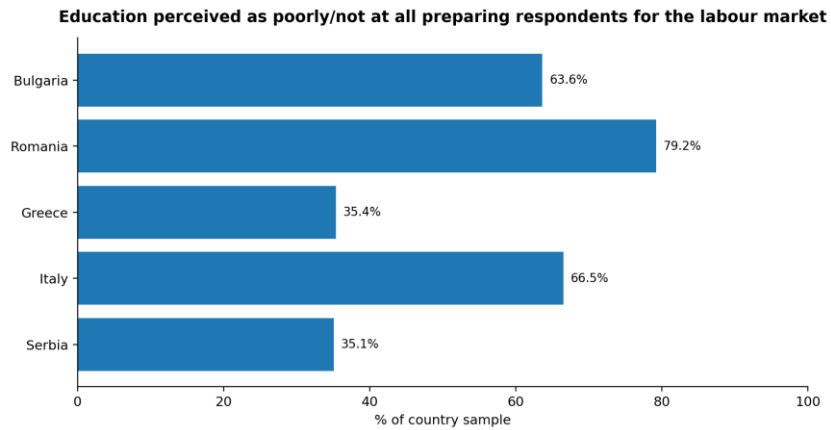


Figure 10. Education perceived as poorly/not at all preparing young people for the labour market

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets.

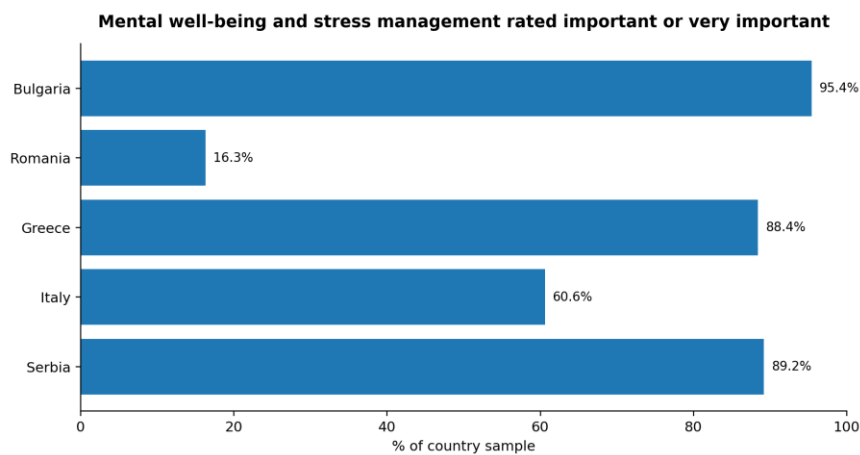


Figure 11. Mental wellbeing and stress management rated important or very important

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets.

Country	Five most frequently selected skills
Bulgaria	Communication (81.8%), Teamwork (59.1%), Foreign languages (59.1%), Digital skills (40.9%), Problem solving (31.8%)
Romania	Communication (55.4%), Foreign languages (33.7%), Problem solving (30.2%), Teamwork (29.7%), Technical skills (26.7%)
Greece	Communication (63.5%), Digital skills (50.8%), Critical thinking (49.2%), Teamwork (42.5%), Foreign languages (39.8%)
Italy	Digital skills (67.5%), Communication (52.2%), Foreign languages (43.3%), Technical skills (41.4%), Problem solving (31.0%)
Serbia	Communication (68.5%), Entrepreneurial skills (43.2%), Problem solving (42.8%), Technical skills (41.0%), Digital skills (37.8%)

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets. Multiple-choice question; percentages do not add up to 100%.

Mental wellbeing is not separate from employability. In Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia, very large shares rated mental wellbeing and stress management as important or very important. Italy also shows a majority, while Romania’s responses are more cautious, with many respondents selecting “somewhat important” and a notable share saying it was not important. For project design, the safest conclusion is balanced: EYES should not medicalise employment support, but youth workers should include confidence building, stress management, communication, coping with rejection and workplace pressure as part of employability preparation.

4.9 Youth readiness to participate and youth recommendations

Young people’s recommendations are consistent with the barriers identified in the survey. Across the full survey base, higher salaries, better education quality, more internships/traineeships, more career guidance and stronger employment protection appear as the leading priorities. The recommendations are practical rather than abstract: young people want more real experience, better pay, clearer information, stronger protection and support that reaches local communities.

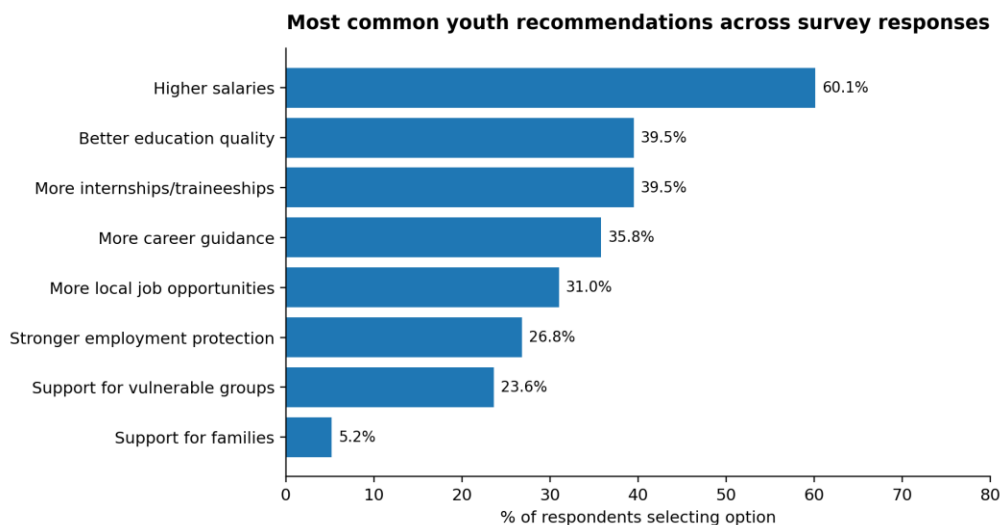


Figure 12. Most common youth recommendations across survey responses

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets. Multiple-choice question.

Country	Top youth recommendations
Bulgaria	More internships/traineeships (63.6%); Higher salaries (59.1%); Better education quality (54.5%); More career guidance (40.9%)
Romania	More career guidance (35.6%); Higher salaries (33.2%); Stronger employment protection (31.7%); Support for vulnerable groups (27.2%)
Greece	Better education quality (64.1%); Higher salaries (60.2%); More internships/traineeships (47.0%); More career guidance (45.3%)
Italy	Higher salaries (88.7%); Support for vulnerable groups (40.9%); More local job opportunities (40.9%); Stronger employment protection (35.0%)
Serbia	Higher salaries (59.0%); More internships/traineeships (54.1%); More career guidance (41.4%); Better education quality (34.2%)

Source: EYES national survey reports and datasets.

Youth willingness to participate also supports the advocacy dimension of EYES. In Bulgaria, Greece and Romania, high shares of respondents answered yes or maybe to participation in youth initiatives. Italy was more hesitant, with many respondents selecting maybe or no, which may reflect lower trust, weaker connection to institutions or rural barriers. Serbia also shows considerable potential for participation. Local hubs should therefore include youth feedback mechanisms, peer consultations and structured opportunities for young people to speak with stakeholders.

5. Country-specific analytical profiles

Bulgaria

Bulgaria combines low general unemployment with weaker youth employment indicators. The national report identifies youth unemployment of 7.7% for ages 15-29, a NEET rate of 13.8% and a comparatively low employment rate among young people aged 20-29. The labour market offers opportunities in services, construction, business services, IT-related fields and medium-skilled occupations, but young people still face low wages, lack of experience and limited local opportunities. The survey profile shows many young respondents in education or early transition. Low wages, lack of experience and lack of job positions are the leading barriers. Interest in self-employment is high, but lack of start-up capital and fear of financial risk are strong obstacles. The policy framework includes Youth Guarantee-related measures, Employment Agency services, HRD Programme measures, traineeships, apprenticeships and youth mediators. The EYES implication is to connect young people earlier and more locally with existing opportunities, while ensuring that internships and first-job pathways are practical and paid.

Romania

Romania presents the most acute official labour market challenge in the comparison, with the national report citing very high youth unemployment and the highest NEET rate in the EU. The survey reached many vulnerable respondents, including rural youth, young parents, minorities/migrants and persons with disabilities. This makes the Romanian evidence particularly important for understanding compounded barriers. The survey shows a high share of respondents in NEET or unstable employment situations. Low wages and insufficient information are the leading job-search barriers, while discrimination is also highly visible. Public programmes are known by many respondents, but use and perceived usefulness are weak. Self-employment interest exists, but mentoring, complex procedures and financial risk are major barriers. The EYES implication is to focus on targeted outreach, counselling quality, practical programme navigation and anti-discrimination support for vulnerable youth.

Greece

Greece has improved considerably since 2020, but youth unemployment, long-term unemployment, seasonal work and regional disparities remain major issues. The national report describes a labour market shaped by tourism, agriculture, construction, IT, renewables and medium-skilled service occupations, with continuing mismatch between education and employer demand. The Greek survey is urban and student-oriented. It shows a large education/training group, a significant unemployed group and high interest in self-employment. Low salaries, lack of experience and lack of job offers are the main barriers. Respondents strongly value mental wellbeing and stress management, and many ask for better education, higher salaries, internships and career guidance. The EYES implication is to use the hub model for career guidance, local networking, entrepreneurship support and stronger connection between education, placements and employers.

Italy

Italy's national report shows persistent youth unemployment, high NEET rates and strong regional disparities, especially in the Mezzogiorno. The survey sample has a strong rural dimension, which is visible in the barriers reported by respondents. Low salaries, lack of job opportunities and geographic location are especially prominent. The Italian survey points to precarious employment, low use of programmes and limited career guidance. More than half of respondents are unaware of public youth employment programmes, while self-employment interest is lower than in the other country samples. Among those interested, fear of financial risk and lack of capital are major obstacles. The EYES implication is to focus on rural outreach, accessible information on programmes such as Garanzia Giovani and Resto al Sud, mentoring, paid placements and employer partnerships that reduce precarious entry routes.

Serbia

Serbia has improved overall labour market indicators, but young people still face a difficult first transition into stable work. The national report estimates youth unemployment at around 20-23% for ages 15-24 and a NEET rate around 14-15% for ages 15-29. The labour market offers opportunities in ICT, manufacturing, logistics, trade, administration, tourism, hospitality and creative/digital industries, but practical skills and experience remain decisive. The Serbian survey is based on 222 valid responses and shows many respondents in education or early transition. Lack of experience is the leading job-search barrier, followed by low wages and lack of job advertisements. The strongest programme-related finding is very low awareness of public employment/self-employment support. Self-employment interest is high, but capital, financial risk, business knowledge and market instability are strong barriers. The EYES implication is to position the local hub as a visible first point for programme navigation, career guidance, entrepreneurship clinics and labour rights information.

6. Recommendations

The recommendations below are based on the combined desk research, survey results and youth recommendations. They are organised by actor group because youth employment barriers cannot be solved by one institution alone. Ministries, public employment services, local authorities, schools, employers and youth organisations each have a distinct role.

6.1 For ministries and national-level policy makers

- Strengthen paid internships, apprenticeships, traineeships and first-job schemes, with quality standards for mentoring, learning outcomes, contract conditions and transition into employment.
- Improve the accessibility of active labour market measures by simplifying procedures, reducing unnecessary documentation and providing clear youth-friendly instructions.
- Ensure targeted measures for NEET and vulnerable youth, including rural youth, young women, minorities, persons with disabilities, young parents and young people with low qualifications.
- Connect entrepreneurship support with mentoring, legal guidance, business training and small-scale finance, rather than offering finance alone.
- Include youth voices in policy design through consultations, local dialogues and feedback collected by youth organisations and local hubs.
- Monitor whether programmes reach vulnerable youth and whether participants move into stable, decent and protected work.

6.2 For public employment services and local authorities

- Improve outreach by using youth centres, schools, social media, local organisations and peer channels, not only official websites or office-based communication.
- Create simple local information packages explaining programmes, eligibility, deadlines, application documents and realistic benefits.
- Cooperate with youth organisations, schools and employers to identify young people who are not registered with employment services.
- Offer one-stop local support points where young people can receive guidance, referrals, CV support, interview preparation and programme navigation.
- Track whether services are used by vulnerable youth and adapt outreach where participation is weak.

6.3 For schools, universities and training providers

- Make career guidance continuous and practical, starting before the final year of education and continuing through transition into work.
- Connect curricula with labour market needs through employer cooperation, work-based learning, guest lectures, site visits and real-life assignments.
- Develop transversal employability skills: communication, teamwork, problem-solving, digital skills, foreign languages, entrepreneurial thinking, critical thinking and work discipline.
- Include labour rights, contract literacy, discrimination awareness and basic entrepreneurship in education and training programmes.
- Monitor whether internships and placements provide real learning rather than unpaid or low-quality work.

6.4 For employers and the business sector

- Provide paid, quality internships and entry-level opportunities with clear tasks, mentoring and feedback.
- Avoid informal, unpaid or no-contract work arrangements, especially for young people entering their first jobs.

- Use transparent recruitment criteria and avoid requiring unrealistic experience for entry-level positions.
- Cooperate with local hubs and youth organisations to reach young people who are outside usual professional networks.
- Support mentoring, job-shadowing and workplace visits that help young people understand sectors before applying.

6.5 For youth organisations and EYES partners

- Operate local innovation hubs as practical access points for guidance, mentoring, skills workshops and programme navigation.
- Help young people prepare CVs, motivation letters, interview responses, job-search plans, programme applications and business ideas.
- Provide entrepreneurship clinics covering idea testing, business planning, legal forms, taxes, budgeting, risk and available grants or loans.
- Include labour rights, discrimination response and contract awareness in employability support.
- Reach vulnerable young people through targeted outreach, peer support and cooperation with schools, social services, local communities and minority organisations.
- Collect youth feedback systematically and use it in advocacy with public institutions and local authorities.

6.6 Country-specific priority recommendations

Country	Priority recommendations
Bulgaria	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Connect Employment Agency and HRD Programme opportunities with schools and youth centres through local information sessions. 2) Expand quality paid internships and first-work-experience pathways. 3) Strengthen mentoring and capital-readiness support for young people interested in self-employment. 4) Improve outreach to small-town and rural youth.
Romania	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Move from programme awareness to programme effectiveness by simplifying access and improving follow-up. 2) Strengthen career counselling for vulnerable youth and NEETs. 3) Improve anti-discrimination support and rights information. 4) Pair entrepreneurship programmes with mentoring, legal help and local incubation.
Greece	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Link DYPA reforms and youth employment strategy measures with local youth outreach. 2) Improve the quality and monitoring of apprenticeships, internships and placements. 3) Provide entrepreneurship support that combines grants/micro-loans with mentoring, networking and legal/admin guidance. 4) Expand local career guidance and employer networking outside major urban centres.
Italy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Improve youth-friendly information on public programmes and regional self-employment measures. 2) Prioritise rural and southern outreach through local hubs, schools and community organisations. 3) Promote paid entry-level opportunities and reduce informal/precarious work pathways. 4) Provide mentoring and risk assessment for self-employment, especially where lack of capital and financial risk are major barriers.
Serbia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Make public employment and self-employment programmes visible through simple local guides and hub-based support. 2) Focus on first-job preparation, paid internships and employer contacts to address lack of experience. 3) Provide entrepreneurship clinics covering grants, loans, business planning, taxes and legal obligations. 4) Integrate labour rights, anti-discrimination and mental wellbeing into career guidance.

7. Conclusions and implications for the next phase of EYES

The comparative analysis confirms that youth employment challenges in the five countries are not limited to the number of available jobs. Young people face a broader transition problem: lack of experience, low wages, unstable contracts, weak career guidance, limited awareness or use of public programmes, mismatch between education and labour market needs, barriers to self-employment and unequal access for vulnerable groups.

The desk research shows that all countries have institutions, policies and programmes relevant to youth employment. The survey shows that these measures do not automatically reach young people in a useful form. The gap is often practical: young people do not know what exists, do not understand how to apply, do not trust the usefulness of programmes, cannot access services locally, or need individual guidance before they can benefit from formal measures.

7.1 Implications for local innovation hubs

The next phase of EYES should focus on bridge-building. Local innovation hubs should not duplicate public employment services. They should translate, connect and support. Their role should be to help young people understand opportunities, prepare for jobs, access career guidance, learn about rights, explore self-employment realistically, receive mentoring and communicate their needs to institutions and employers.

Hub function	Practical content	Evidence base
Programme navigation	Simple explanations of national and local support measures, eligibility, deadlines, required documents and application steps.	Low programme awareness in Serbia and Italy; low use or low perceived usefulness in Romania; partial non-use in Bulgaria and Greece.
Career guidance and first-job support	CV and motivation letter support, interview preparation, job-search planning, sector orientation and referrals to employers or employment services.	Most country samples show limited access to career guidance; lack of experience is a top barrier in Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria.
Quality internship and employer bridge	Cooperation with schools, local authorities and employers to promote paid internships, apprenticeships, job-shadowing and mentoring.	Young people ask for more internships and traineeships; desk research shows education-work mismatch and unstable entry routes.
Entrepreneurship clinic	Idea testing, business plan support, budgeting, legal form selection, tax/admin guidance, mentoring and referral to grants or micro-loans.	Self-employment interest is high in most samples, but readiness is limited by capital, financial risk, business knowledge and mentoring gaps.
Rights and equal opportunity support	Basic labour rights, contract literacy, anti-discrimination information, unpaid work risks and referral pathways for specialised support.	Discrimination is visible in several country samples, while no-contract or informal work appears as a job-quality concern.
Wellbeing and resilience layer	Confidence building, communication, stress management, coping with rejection, workplace pressure and peer support.	Mental wellbeing is rated important by large shares of respondents in most countries and is linked to retention, performance and motivation.
Youth feedback and advocacy channel	Short consultations, youth panels, feedback forms and local dialogues with institutions and employers.	Young people identify concrete improvements and many are willing or potentially willing to participate in initiatives.

Source: Comparative synthesis of EYES desk research and survey findings.

The hubs should be designed as low-threshold spaces. Young people should be able to approach them without already knowing which institution is responsible for their problem. This is especially important for young people who are inactive, discouraged, outside formal youth structures or living in communities with fewer employment services.

7.2 Implications for youth worker training

Youth worker training should be aligned with the practical functions of the hubs. Youth workers do not need to become employment officers, lawyers or business consultants, but they need enough structured knowledge to guide young people safely, recognise when referral is needed, and communicate with institutions and employers. The training should therefore include several practical modules.

Training area	What youth workers should be able to do
Career conversation skills	How to discuss goals, barriers, motivation, skills and realistic next steps with young people who may have little work experience.
CV, motivation letter and interview support	How to help young people present limited experience, education, volunteering, informal skills and project participation in a credible way.
Programme navigation	How to read public calls, eligibility criteria and application instructions, and how to explain them in simple language.
Entrepreneurship basics	How to support early business idea development, identify risks and refer young people to finance, mentoring or legal support.

Labour rights and discrimination	How to explain basic contract types, unpaid work risks, discrimination grounds and complaint/referral options.
Vulnerable youth outreach	How to reach young people outside standard networks and adapt support for rural youth, young women, minorities, young parents and persons with disabilities.
Mental wellbeing in employability work	How to include confidence, stress management and coping with rejection without turning the hub into a clinical service.

Source: Comparative synthesis of EYES survey findings and partner methodology.

7.3 Implications for advocacy and sustainability

The advocacy work of EYES should be grounded in the gap between formal measures and young people’s experience. Instead of advocating only for more programmes, the project should advocate for programmes that are visible, accessible, monitored, locally connected and youth-friendly. The evidence from the survey can be used to start structured conversations with ministries, public employment services, local authorities, education providers and employers.

Sustainability will depend on practical partnerships. Hubs should map local employers, public employment offices, schools, universities, training providers, youth centres, social services, disability organisations, Roma/minority organisations and entrepreneurship support structures. The aim is to build referral pathways that survive beyond the project period.

The strongest comparative message is clear: young people need support that is practical, local, youth-friendly and connected to real opportunities. EYES can provide that link between young people, employment services, education providers, employers and policy makers.