

QUO VADIS  **S**

**CIVIL
SOCIETY**  

IN EUROPE'S

**NEIGHBOUR-
HOODS?** 



INTERNATIONAL
NEIGHBOURHOOD
SYMPOSIUM

Quo Vadis Civil Society in Europe's Neighbourhoods?

Edited by

Nadiia Bureiko and **Dimitrios Triantaphyllou**

Authors:

Nadiia Bureiko, Stefan Cibian, Agapi Kandylaki, Michael G. Kavuklis, Cristina Rigman, Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, Stefanos Vallianatos

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MICHAEL G. KAVUKLIS

Youth Empowerment in Europe's Neighbourhoods* : Challenges and Prospects in a Post-Covid-19 Era

Youth empowerment is recognized internationally by both states and international organisations as a key element in building strong and sustainable democracies. With reference to young people, stakeholders recognize them as the bearers of hope towards more inclusive, more adaptive, more innovative communities. Thus, actual youth participation in decision-making and in active citizenship are crucial to improve our way of living.

Youth empowerment is almost always approached in two ways: 1) to create strong, independent, skilled, willing and participating individuals out of young people; and 2) to consider youth as a vulnerable group among the population in need of protection and specific actions. Both approaches target the countering of certain realities that young people face today. The aim of this paper is to describe the current situation of youth in the region, isolate the challenges faced by young people and propose a series of policy recommendations.

General challenges faced by youth

When studying the young as a vulnerable group inside the general population, there are certain aspects to be taken into consideration:

1. There is a need to enhance the consciousness of the group's members, support their efforts to become strong, independent individuals, to be self-aware of their condition and to be able to pursue the improvement of the quality of their lives.
2. Each community must develop its acceptance of the vulnerable group and allow it to become active, while the group itself has to be open to inclusion and to being a part of something greater, an integral part of their community.
3. The vulnerable group has to be supported, even protected; and solutions to its members' basic needs have to be promoted, while their views and demands have to be allowed for.
4. As with any vulnerable group, its members, apart from the personal skills and capabilities mentioned above, have to be able to attain a level of income security, in order to ensure a certain level of quality of life.

* For the purposes of this report, we define the European Union member states as 'Europe'; and as 'neighbourhoods', we refer to the states included in the European Neighbourhood Policy (both Eastern and Southern), where statistics and data are usually sufficient to support the findings and conclusion of the report.

5. Every vulnerable group is judged against certain general perceptions and, sometimes, is even assigned certain stereotypes. This leads to a set of limitations imposed on its function as a part of the community and some societal rules that are expected to be followed.

To counter these challenges and their consequences, youth empowerment should aim, respectively, to:

1. provide young people with education, support, training and skills to become independent and promote their feelings of self-confidence.
2. inspire and support young leaders to become the voices of youth, to get actively involved and engaged in the inter-communal and inter-generational dialogue and community process. As a result, young people will become an integral part of their community, early on, participating in and owning part of the solutions that affect both the group and the overall community.
3. develop a series of institutional and social tools, including government agencies, public watchdogs, voluntary organisations, unions, etc. that will create and sustain resources required for young people to be firstly provided with the proper protection coverage and, secondly, to be heard and represented in the decision making and social processes.
4. equip the young with the proper set of skills that will make them successful executives and entrepreneurs, achieving the desired income security and ownership of their produced outcomes.
5. combat stereotypes associated with age and reverse norms and social expectations for young people that are irrelevant in terms of their development as individuals.

Challenges specific to the youth of the region

Young people of the region, apart from their generic challenges faced as a vulnerable group, have to deal with a series of actual problems and facts that restrain their development and equal opportunities. Furthermore, in a region like the EU and its Neighbourhoods, which includes more than 50+ countries spread around two seas, where three continents meet, the youth challenges and, thus, the expectations regarding their empowerment vary.

Demographics

It is a known fact that the population in the developed world is constantly ageing. There are many more young people in the ENP-East countries in the EU, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the population. (Eurostat: Statistics Explained)

Furthermore, UN projections exhibit a further pessimistic tendency with the EU's population getting significantly older over the next decades; a trend that will also affect the EU's neighbouring countries. However, the median age of some countries, like Egypt or Jordan, will be almost half the median age of certain EU countries like Germany, Italy, Spain, or Greece (Appendix A).

This results in further challenges, given that countries with a low median age usually have a larger ratio of their youth population depending on the active work force, while the higher median age countries have a larger ratio of the older people depending on the active work force. For example, while in EU and ENP-East countries the young people (under 15) that are dependent corresponds to 20–30 % of the working-age population (15–64 years old), in North African and Middle East neighbouring countries, the ratio is usually 40 % or more. Concurrently, the dependent old population ratio for the same group of countries is close to 30 % for EU and ENP-East countries while for ENP-South it is usually less than 10 % (Ritchie and Roser 2019).

Apart from challenges like employment and financial independence, the demographics of the region imply different social structures and different expectations from youth in its sub-regions, which further expand the vulnerability of the group.

Definition and perceptions of youth

Depending on the scientific approach of the term 'youth', e.g., anthropological, sociological, political, and economic, there are various definitions of youth as an age group. Most of them are inclined to define youth as those including teens and young adults, mainly referring to the ages 15–17 and 18–29 respectively. Some set the latter upper limit at 24 (usually workforce related references, like ILO or labour statistics from Eurostat) or push it up to 35 or even 40

years of age (usually political/partisan definitions). Most international organisations consider the first two groups (15–17, 18–29 years old) as a definition for youth, making them also applicable to their youth programmes. Although this definition will be mostly accurate in a global context, the regional approach might differ. Social, cultural, financial, and legal actors make the definition of youth more flexible when studied at both regional and national level. Europe and its neighbourhoods almost present a uniformity when referring to adulthood being reached at the age of 18; therefore, the division of youth into two groups <18 and 18< is valid, although the upper limit of 29 may not always be applicable in reality.

The first age group, 15–17, or teens, are, or should be, more protected as a group, given the fact that they are considered children, receiving special protection by both international and national laws, and are still considered dependent citizens. However, in small percentages (with the exception of Mauritania, at 17.4 %) there is still child labour present within Europe's neighbourhood.¹ The second age group is in fact the most vulnerable, since its representatives are legally considered adults, with all the rights and obligations this entails, including the lifting of all provisions and protection they received as children.

Young people under 18 remain a vulnerable group on its own, within the framework of youth empowerment, with the main aim being to provide them with education and skills to become active and sensitive adults. However, their livelihood and quality of life is dependent on their parents/families and vastly covered by international law and international organisations that work closely on their support and protection.

For the purposes of this report, the analysis will further be focused on the 'emerging adults'² and their support, development and empowerment. Even though the economic situation of the young will be explored later in this report, the economic realities of each country affect how we perceive youth, who we assign under this group, and how many people we actually work for through empowerment. Especially in the Western World and compared to previous generations, young people study more, enter the labour force later, and create families later still. This implies that they turn from 'emerging' to 'fully-fledged' adults later. The proposed period of 'emerging adulthood' features the concepts of identity, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between one's adolescence and adulthood, and exploring possibilities,³ which reflecting the first section above, almost correspond to the challenges faced by the members of a vulnerable group.

¹ ILO measures child labour in the following countries: Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Jordan, Mauritania, North Macedonia, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Serbia, Tunisia, and Ukraine. Source: SDG indicator 8.7.1. Proportion of children engaged in economic activity and household chores (%), Downloaded from ILOSTAT. https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer57/?lang=en&segment=indicator&id=SDG_B871_SEX_AGE_RT_A. Last update on 28.03.2021.

² The terms 'emerging adults' and 'emerging adulthood' derive from the work of psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, with his research starting in the US in 1995 and published in 2000 onwards in multiple articles and books.

³ A summary of Arnett's findings may be found in the review 'Emerging Adults: the in-between age' by Christopher Munsey, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/jun06/emerging>

Combating these challenges has to do with the quality of life and the financial independence of youth, which as a condition per se, is not achieved, if ever, at the same age all around the region. As shown in the next chapter, for many countries, including the whole European South and East, financial independence is achieved after 25 years of age and, often, closer to 30. If we consider these measurements as averages, there is a large portion of people well above 30 that have yet to complete their transition to ‘fully-fledged’ adults and, as a result, are to be considered members of the vulnerable youth group. Since major social statistics and cultural references usually show us that Europe’s South (EU Mediterranean countries) have similar social characteristics and even values to their southern and eastern neighbours (the third Mediterranean countries), it is safe to assume that similar financial dependence on the parental house exists in the neighbouring countries. Taking this into consideration, we propose that in order to holistically study youth and its problems, we have to include at least people up to 35 years of age in our scope, in order to successfully reflect the actual conditions in many countries of the region. Otherwise, we have to reflect and admit that we have large groups of people between 30 and 40 that have failed to successfully transit from ‘emerging’ to ‘fully-fledged’ adulthood, and there is no actual consideration of them at all.

Unemployment and financial independence

Youth is considered one of the most vulnerable groups of the population with reference to unemployment and the risk of poverty. However, a vast majority of the young unemployed are still studying at school, college or university or are active in a training capacity; although not active members of the working population, they are still active citizens. Thus, measuring or concentrating our analysis simply on the Employment Rate might be misleading as regards the actual employability of youth or its actual contribution to society.

Consequently, the term NEETs has been coined to describe the part of youth that is Not in Employment, Education or Training. Being a NEET person means usually that there is little to no access to actual education and training and the environment does not favour employment. Data suggests that very few young people actually are NEETs by choice, while they most often face financial, social or even racial barriers to finding a job or to enlisting in education or training programmes. According to the latest available data for each country, EU countries have relatively low percentages of NEETs among their young population, ranging from 4 to 15 %, while the neighbouring countries start from 15 % (Israel) to more than 35 % (Jordan). In most of the countries of the South, in the Balkans and in the Caucasus, NEETs are a quarter or even one third of the total young population (Appendix B).

Another important metric to be considered is the partial dependency of youth on the parental household. Especially in Europe, where such metrics exist, we can see three main tendencies, taking into account when young people leave the parental household. Young people in Northern countries tend to leave home closer to the age of 20, while in central Europe it is

around 25, and in South and Eastern Europe, including certain enlargement countries, they leave home closer or even over the age of 30 (Appendix C). The main reasons usually posed for such a delay in leaving home are income insecurity, and financial dependence on the parental household, as well as social and cultural customs.

The historical context

To examine the needs and specificities that youth empowerment has to follow to be successful, one has to be aware of and understand the historical context in which today's youth was born, has grown, and lives. Considering those between 18 to 29 or 35 years of age, we are referring to the majority of the Millennials⁴ and the older part of Generation Z.⁵ Within the last 35 years, at the regional level, we have lived through the following:

1. the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War;
2. the further integration and expansion of the European Union and the adoption of the Euro;
3. the 9/11 terrorist attacks and more than a decade of major terrorist events in the western world;
4. the creation of the World Wide Web and the transformation of means of communication and changes in lifestyle, from technological developments like social media, instant messaging, remote business, etc.;
5. the Arab Spring and the instability in Libya and Syria, resulting in massive refugee waves and the dislocation of millions of people;
6. the Russia-West ongoing *bras de fer*, with the annexation of Crimea, the unrest in the Caucasus, and the gas and pipelines wars;
7. the decade long financial crisis starting in 2007–2008;
8. the COVID-19 pandemic; not to include smaller scale or bilateral crises that occasionally stall the process towards a peaceful, fairer world.

Returning to the stereotypes that are attributed to youth, today's young person has not survived a World War, has not participated in, or lived through the great social struggles and revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, as it is usually accused of by older generations. All these major events have affected how the international system functions over the past 80 years

⁴ The term Millennials refers to those people born between the 1980s and the mid-1990s.

⁵ The term Generation Z refers to those people born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s.

and resulted in the main international human rights movements and awareness that are still points of reference today. However, today's youth, especially throughout its adulthood, has never experienced a stable reality, a certain and prosperous future. Moreover, its very identity was challenged, with stereotypes becoming more hostile, and social structures and financial earnings established in the previous decades were reversed.

Cultural perceptions and gap in communication

When referring to the cultural perceptions of the youth in the region, we are referring to perceptions based solely on age as a factor. Young adults face different expectations and social obligations throughout the region, even those within the same country. Those norms may also vary based on gender; e.g. in certain communities, younger women are expected to start a family as early as possible, or immediately after finishing school or college, or they are expected to abandon their careers in order to start a family.

As described above, the European north expect their young people to become financially independent early in their adulthood, while in the south, they are accommodated in the parental household even after the age of 30. Furthermore, the technological advancements with which the Millennials and Generation Z have grown up, along with the new ways of communicating they brought, make them socially distant in the eyes of previous generations that refuse or are unable to keep up. Despite the multiple crises faced during their lifetime, today's youth is still measured against stereotypes that are decades old.

The intergenerational gap in communication and perception alienates youth from the rest of society. Conventional methods of political dialogue and process popular among the older age groups are of no use or even totally irrelevant to today's youth across the region. The young discuss, debate, talk, communicate through new technologies, new emerging platforms, that older groups do not use or are not even aware of. Although the pandemic put teleconference tools like Skype, Zoom, Teams and Meet in the lives of all, young people prefer TikTok, Discord and other instant messaging or exchange platforms to communicate.

Access to resources / Ease of mobility

The European Union is considered the largest economy in the world and includes some of the most advanced, developed, and progressive democracies around the globe. Most of the member states have national youth strategies, while the EU has its own programme (under the Erasmus+) providing funding for youth projects. We should mention the relevance of the EEA and Norway Grants, a strong financial tool for European countries. Additionally, through organisations like the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the OECD, ENP — East partners have access to a whole other array of resources and projects, including expertise and funding.

On the other hand, the majority of ENP – South countries lack direct or effective national strategies for youth, or specific regional-oriented projects,⁶ with the exception of the Anna Lindh Foundation and the Union for the Mediterranean, which, however, both rely heavily on the European Union’s funding as well, or the various other EU and EU/CoE led/funded youth programmes. There are various foundations from more developed countries (public or private sector) that act in the ENP – South countries, but not in an organised and coordinated way, and not always with the same agenda and projected outcomes. There are also regional plans, like the African Union’s African Youth Charter, Youth Decade Plan of Action, and the Malabo Decision on Youth Empowerment, that however target the whole African continent and do not include the Levant countries.

Much as in the case of funding, the European Neighbourhood region presents the same duality concerning mobility. In general, and irrespectively of financial means, citizens from the European countries (Enlargement and ENP-East), and therefore youth and youth facilitators, require no visa or obtain visas much easier for travel within the Schengen area than their ENP-South counterparts.⁷ These three levels of access to resources and easy mobility, work as a serious obstacle to substantial relations and the integration of youth work at the regional level.

Political participation

Although throughout the region, youth suffrage is set at close to 18 years of age, the age of eligibility is not always the same. The actual representation of youth in decision making bodies at the national level is extremely disproportionate to the actual size of the population group they represent. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the global trend shows that the percentage of Members of Parliament (MPs) under the age of 30 is just 2.2%, while that of MPs under the age of 45 is just 28.1%. As of 2018, only Norway, Sweden, Finland, Montenegro, Austria, Italy, Tunisia, Romania, Denmark, and Malta have more than 5% of their single or lower chamber MPs under the age of 30. Only Ukraine, Finland, Romania, Norway, Sweden, The Netherlands, Italy, Montenegro and Georgia have more than 30% of their single or lower chamber MPs under the age of 40. For upper chambers, the data available are even worse. Furthermore, among young MPs, gender inequality is also evident, usually in terms of 60%–40% in favour of male MPs (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018).

Although it was not feasible to acquire accurate and comparable data for a sound sample of regional countries for the other levels of government, most of the international and regional reports on youth point out that youth participation in the decision-making process at communal, municipal, and local government levels is at best problematic, even among EU member states (OECD 2020; OECD MENA n.d.).

⁶ Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Libya, Syria and Tunisia have no youth policies in place, while Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine do. <https://www.youthpolicy.org/nationalyouthpolicies/>. Also: OECD MENA Governance Programme, 'Seven Key Findings from the Youth Governance Survey'.

⁷ Of the ENP-East, three countries: Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia or 68% of the area's population receive visa-free status, while for ENP South, only Israel or 3% of the area's population, has a similar status. Furthermore, visa applications from ENP-East countries are approved at a rate of 97%, while visa applications from ENP-South countries are approved at a rate of 71%. Source: <https://statistics.schengenvisa.info/>

Ownership of the empowerment process

An important factor in the success of any empowerment process is the feeling of ownership of the process on behalf of the beneficiaries. In the previous section, we have already established the lack of representation of youth in the decision-making process at all levels of government. A similar trend is observed within organisations working with youth and those running youth programmes. Although there are programmes that call for and fund youth-led projects, the majority of youth-related projects are run by people that are not peers of the beneficiaries.⁸ This is not always a negative aspect, but total control of the operation, methods and content of empowerment projects, if combined with the rest of the challenges mentioned above, may result in irrelevant or low impact outcomes.

Conclusions and recommendations

Having briefly analysed the status of young people in the region and the main challenges they face, along with setting up the basic foundations on which any youth empowerment project has to be built, considering the various aspects of the region like intercultural trends, geopolitical tensions, and financial realities, this report has tried to define and describe the youth of today. Certain compromises had to be made during the analysis, like not including gender, religion, progressiveness or even the democratic nature of institutions in each country, which affect the whole population, including its youth. Our target was to concentrate on the age factor and youth per se, and not to segmentalize this vulnerable group other than at the national or subregional level.

We have further to take into account that the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new challenges and possibilities. Live events, in situ actions, field projects, and mobility have been limited or suspended for almost 18 months now. Major international programmes and their projects have been adjusted to the new reality, new deadlines, or in some cases, have failed and have been cancelled. While new methods of communication and new technologies have been imposed on the general population by necessity, there is still a lack of personal contact, personal exchange, and personal experience, including the beguiling aspect of travelling and shared activities which are at the core of any international exchange project.

The post COVID-19 era will surely be a revised version of the previous situation, with the enhanced use of technology, hybrid events, and, for a time, further restrictions and obstructions to youth mobility across the region, due to the health regulations imposed.

Taking this into consideration and given the analysis of the challenges experienced by youth in the region, the following recommendations could be followed up on:

⁸ It was not possible to obtain viable data on the age of all those actively involved in youth projects. Officials aged 18–34 represented 26% of the total staff of entities in charge of youth affairs in 2019, in OECD countries. OECD. 2020. Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice: Fit for all generations? Highlights. <https://www.oecd.org/gov/governance-for-youth-trust-and-intergenerational-justice-c3e5cb8a-en.htm>

1. All youth projects should aim and focus on solutions that address multiple challenges. For instance, the development of self-confidence should be combined with leadership skills; leadership skills should be combined with entrepreneurial and other skills that may be capitalised in the market later, etc.
2. Any Youth Empowerment strategy has to make provisions and even provide solutions that will assist youth in their transition to fully-fledged adults, by mainly preparing them to enter the labour market. There is a need for advanced internship programmes, targeted voluntary exchanges in the likes of the European Solidarity Corps or even its expansion to include ENP countries, using new communication methods and methods of training to reach the NEETs.
3. Although it is not always possible to fully assign to youth the organisation of a project, especially ones that entail vast logistical aspects, the youth should be included in the creation of the contents and outcomes of each project. By involving young people in project design and implementation, the project will be more relevant to them and also promote youth ownership of the project.
4. Ensure less bureaucratic procedures for the creation of youth-led projects, equip the young to manage such programmes in order to become more self-reliant in their responsibilities. Bureaucracy is a great burden for the inexperienced, but also for small voluntary organisations outside the large urban areas. Actions like the decentralisation of the funding procedure and entrusting part of it to civic society or local stakeholders, outside the standard governmental channels, will provide better access to youth in general, and to youth workers. Furthermore, targeting the training of young people in managerial skills will provide them with useful skills, boost their self-confidence and strengthen their sense of ownership.
5. Support projects that make young people active advocates for their local communities. Apart from developing the personal skills of the young person, if carefully handled, this will also raise his/her status among the local community. This process will facilitate the emergence of young leaders and may aspire them to pursue more active roles in the policy and decision-making bodies of their local and national governments.
6. Support youth mobility across the region, by making provisions that will allow the young and youth workers from the South to travel more easily to Europe, in order to share experiences and expertise with their northern counterparts.

7. Inspire Youth with a specific target and multi-year term commitment. The United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, aka the 17 UNSDGs, is a unique communication tool to inspire young people to dedicate themselves to a measurable and tangible cause, along with others of their generation, stakeholders, NGOs, governments and the private sector, in a global effort that may be exercised locally, nationally and regionally.

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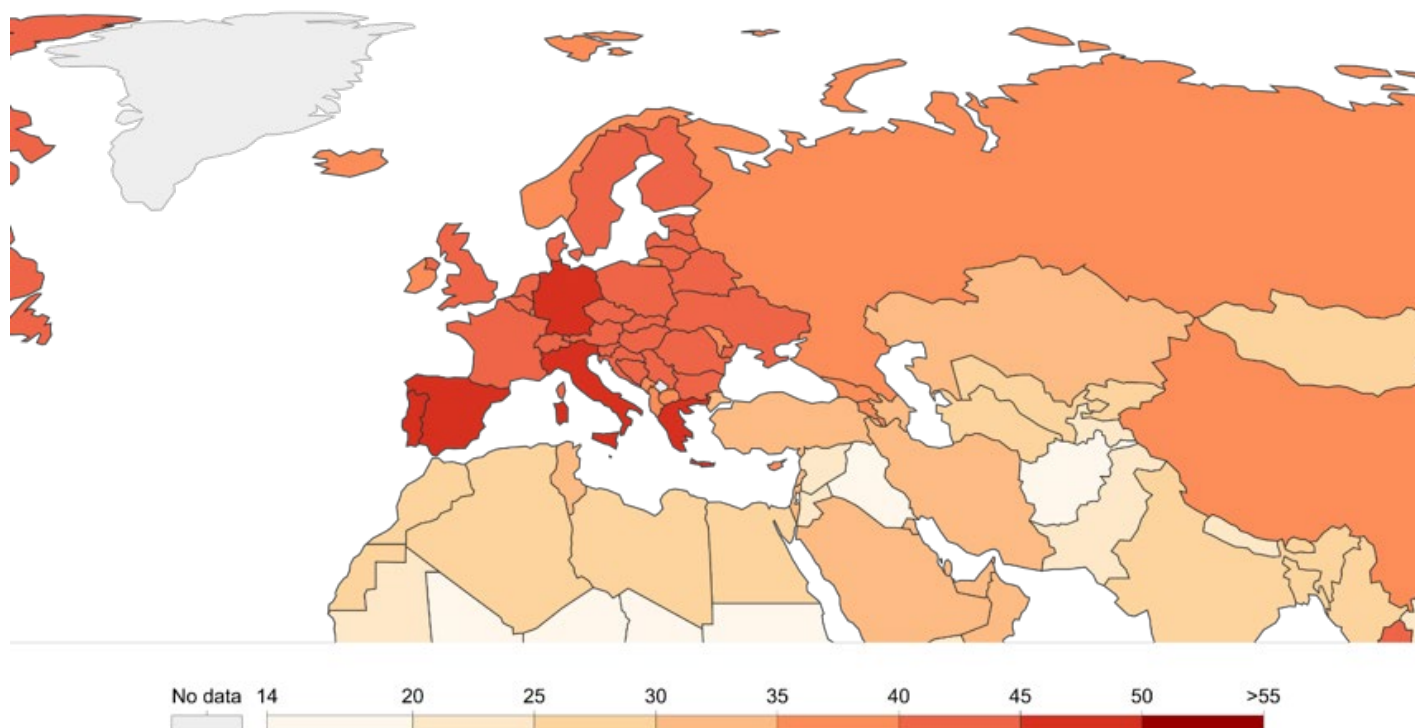
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Appendix A.

Median age maps for 2020 and 2050

Median Age, 2020

The median age divides the population in two parts of equal size: that is, there are as many persons with ages above the median age as there are with ages below the median ages.



Source: UN Population Division (Median Age) (2017)

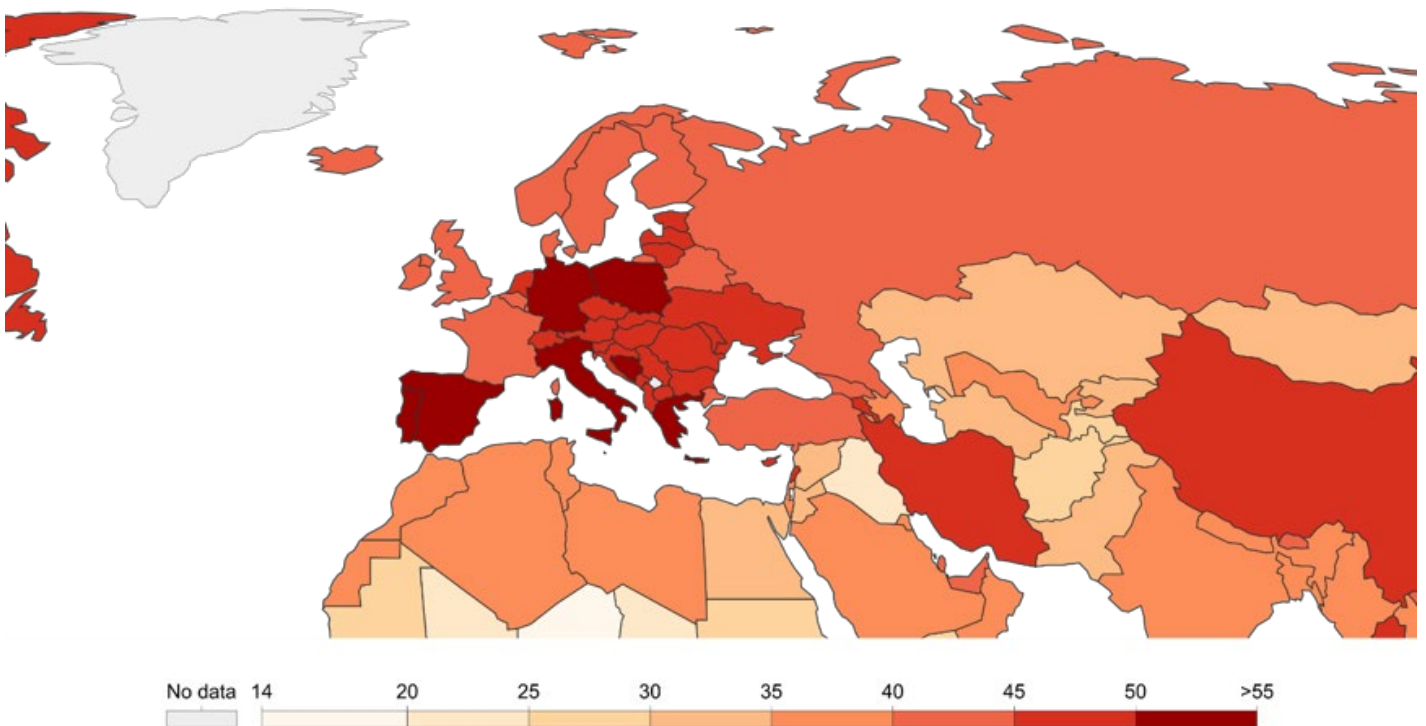
Note: 1950 to 2015 show historical estimates. From 2016 the UN projections (medium variant) are shown.

OurWorldInData.org/age-structure • CC BY

Source: Our World in Data. Age Structure. <https://ourworldindata.org/age-structure>

Median Age, 2050

The median age divides the population in two parts of equal size: that is, there are as many persons with ages above the median age as there are with ages below the median ages.



Source: UN Population Division (Median Age) (2017)

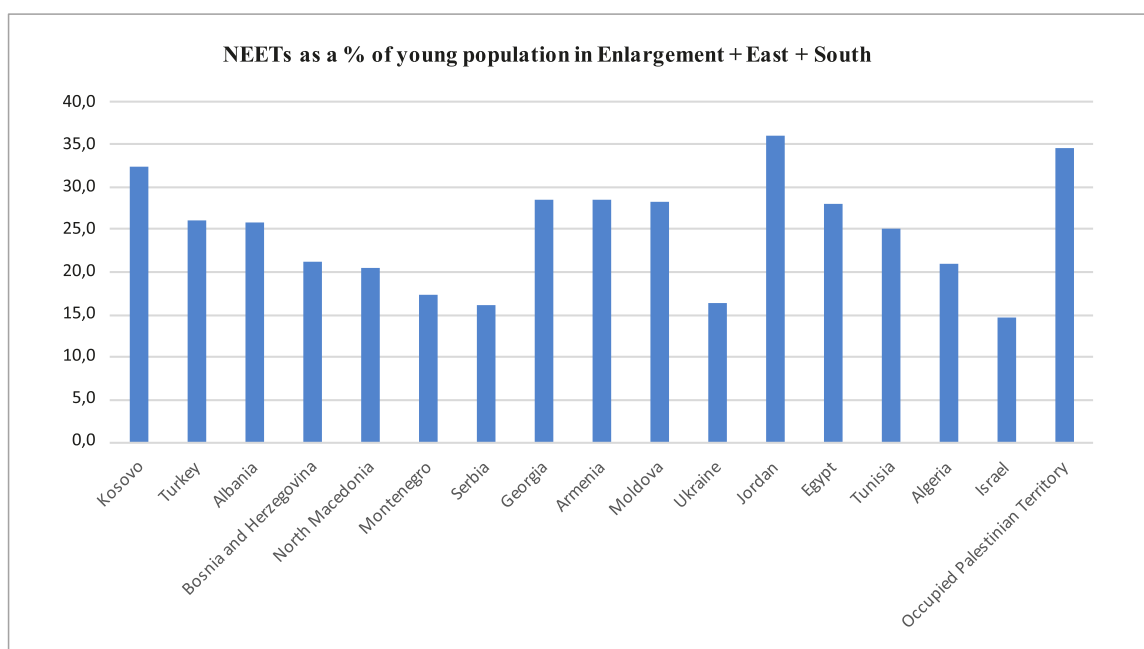
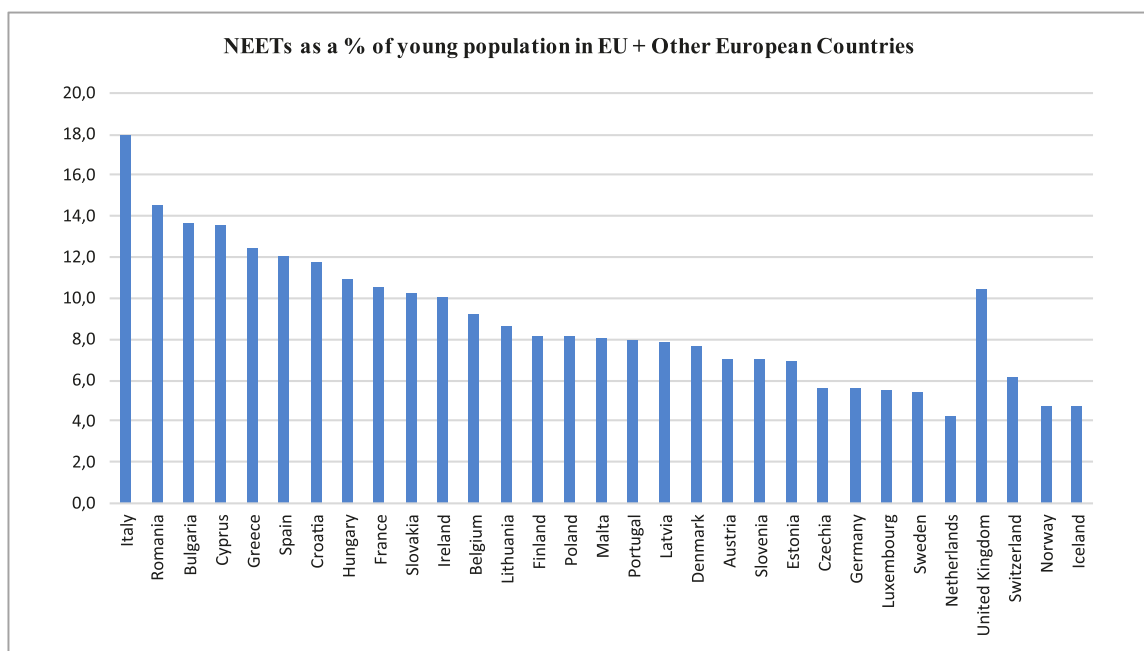
Note: 1950 to 2015 show historical estimates. From 2016 the UN projections (medium variant) are shown.

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Source: Our World in Data. Age Structure. <https://ourworldindata.org/age-structure>

Appendix B.

NEETs as percentage of the population

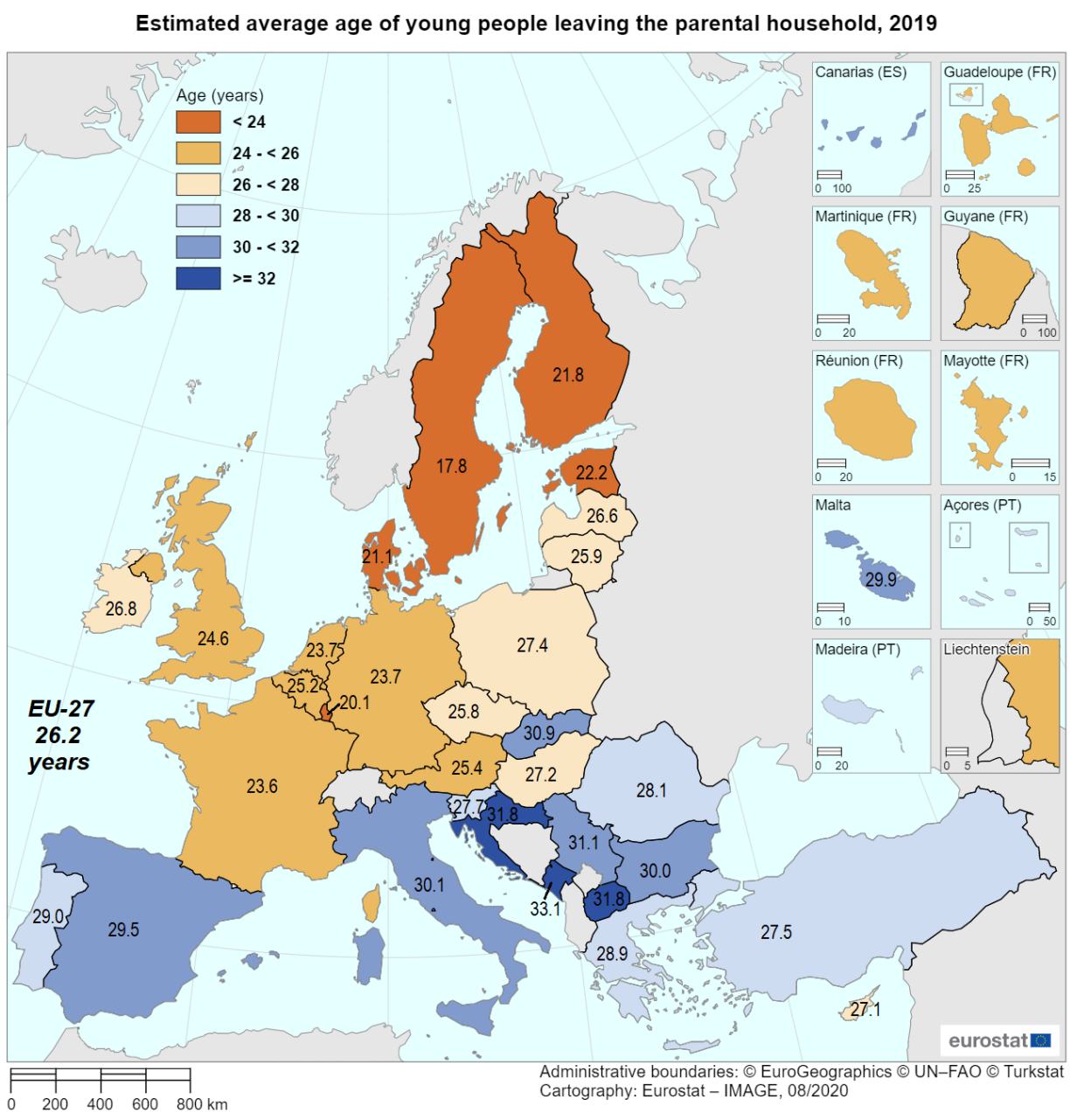


Source: Based on data from ILOSTAT: SDG indicator 8.6.1 – Proportion of youth (aged 15–24 years) not in education, employment or training (%) – Last update March 28, 2021.

https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer54/?lang=en&segment=indicator&id=SDG_0861_SEX_RT_A

Appendix C.

Estimated average age of young people leaving the parental household, 2019



Source: Eurostat (online data code: yth_demo_030)

Source: EUROSTAT, https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=yth_demo_030&lang=en

EDITORS:

Nadiia Bureiko, Dimitrios Triantaphyllou

PARTNERS



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