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AN EU LEVEL ANALYSIS OF SEVERAL YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RELATED FACTORS

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Abstract:

Over the last decades, youth unemployment has attracted serious attention of the public, politicians and researchers of social phenomena. Economic and sociological literature of the past 20-30 years abounds in studies aiming at clarifying the causes of this phenomenon. Statistical data show that youth unemployment rate is twice or even three times higher than the rate of general unemployment. Also, there are major discrepancies in youth unemployment rates across countries. The main purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the evolution of this phenomenon and to present and debate on the main factors causing its high rates in several European countries. Both objective factors such as, educational system, government policy on wages and education etc. and subjective ones, related to the role of family, traditions, mentality, habits etc., are discussed.

Key words: *youth unemployment, cultural factors, education, minimum wage, policy*

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, youth unemployment has represented a large share in general unemployment making it one of the main problems for nations around the world. The existence of a high youth unemployment rate in several European countries

is a major cause for concern. Basically, at the level of EU-28 countries, the maximum rate is more than six times higher than the minimum one.

Such a complex phenomenon and of such a great magnitude, with rates to almost 50% of the total active population aged 15 to 24 in Greece, for example, cannot be explained successfully only using conventional economic theories. The main purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the evolution of this phenomenon and to present and debate on the main factors causing its high rates in several European countries.

To achieve these objectives, we process, compare and interpret statistical data for EU-28 countries and, using economic logic and deduction, we try to discover logical associations between the level of youth unemployment (very high in some European countries and quite low in others) and the factors considered as common sources of youth unemployment. These factors are separated into two categories: economic factors (such as minimum wage) and non-economic factors, cultural factors (the importance of families in supporting young people, traditions, mentality etc.).

This paper is structured as follows. Drawing from the existing interdisciplinary literature on this topic, the next section provides an image of the main factors associated with youth unemployment. Subsequently, we analyse the European reality regarding youth unemployment and its evolution and compare it with general unemployment. Then, we provide a discussion on the main factors leading to youth unemployment and to the large differences in its rates, existing at European level. The last part of the paper summarizes the main conclusions.

2. Factors related to youth unemployment: a brief literature review

Young people are one of the most vulnerable groups in our societies. Over the last decades, youth unemployment has represented a large share in general unemployment making it one of the main problems for nations around the world. This phenomenon has been seriously enhanced by the deep economic depression in recent years, which has attracted serious attention of the public, politicians and researchers of social phenomena.

Consequently, economic and sociological literature of the past 20-30 years abounds in studies aiming at clarifying the causes of this phenomenon.

A very important thing to note is that the efforts of researchers exceed the area of economic explanations and try to find unconventional explanations of this phenomenon. Thus, the analysis of youth unemployment becomes interdisciplinary *par excellence*.

However, most of the studies converge on the fundamental idea that unemployment greatly affects this category of the population due to difficult transitions from the education system to the labour market (Hannan et al., 1997; Hannan&Werquin, 2001; Wolbers, 2007; Mascherini et al., 2014; Vuolo et al., 2012). But researchers tend to find different sources of this difficult transition. Some focus on the economic support offered to young people by their families (Kotowska, 2012;

Tagliabue et al., 2014), especially in Southern and Eastern Europe, others on the increasing importance they attach to extend their period of study (Kirkpatrick&Mortimer, 2011).

Dietrich (2012) finds several reason for youth unemployment such as education and training systems, labour market and employment policies and the stratification and distribution of opportunities in society. Scarpetta et al. (2012) believes that the key policy priority in all countries should be the investment in youth in order to give them a chance in the labour market. A college education is an investment that, according to Antosova (2010), can give young people a substantial economic benefit that lasts over their lifetime, preparing them for high-skilled jobs. The lack of education and apprenticeships is a cause of youth unemployment (Görlich&Katznelson, 2018). A high vocational specificity can increase school leavers' chance of finding a job (Brzinsky-Fay, 2017).

A large number of graduates are employed in non-standard jobs, including temporary and part-time work, jobs that tend to be less stable and secure, due to the need of work force during the weekends or after regular working hours (Gontkovičová, Mihalčová&Pružinský, 2015). Persons who are employed on temporary contracts also have less access to training and do not develop competence that employees with permanent contracts do (Scarpetta, Sonnet&Manfredi, 2010).

There are numerous other studies explaining the difficulties of young people to find a job by insufficient experience (Carole&Pastore, 2009). Levels, Van der Velden&Di Stasio (2014) consider that the main reason for youth unemployment is the lack of signals that show work experience and thus, less information for employers about the graduate's qualification and productivity. Also, Gontkovičová, Mihalčová&Pružinský (2015) consider that work experience is one of the most important competitive advantage in acquiring a job, making it an obstacle for many young people because they cannot obtain work experience and also they cannot find a job because of lack of work experience. Furthermore, a disadvantage for young people is the imperfect information of employers regarding the qualifications and future productivity of graduates as they do not have work experience and no references from earlier employers (Brzinsky-Fay, 2017). Employers are reluctant to hiring young people because their productivity is unknown and there is not a track record of their performance in a job (Skans, Edin&Holmlund, 2009). Young people are more vulnerable and face a strong competition with people who are looking for a job that have work experience (Bălan, 2014).

The individuals who are already employed have more resources in order to negotiate their wages and working conditions in contrast to the newly comers. The latter do not benefit from employment protection, making it even harder for them to enter the labour market (Brzinsky-Fay, 2017). Because of the employment protection, employers are restricted in their freedom of dismissing unsuitable workers and potentially hiring young workers. Also, other author consider that the degree of employment protection is an important factor that contributes to youth unemployment.

If this level is high, seniors have a lower risk of being laid off, while new workers are more likely to lose their jobs or not even to gain one (Breen, 2005).
At the same time, the literature of the last decade tends to highlight a very important aspect of unemployment among young people, specifically the impact of crises or economic depressions (Islam&Verick, 2011; Pratap&Quintin, 2011; Blazek&Netrdova, 2012; Bartlett&Uvali, 2013).

Some researchers highlight the need for young people to retool their capabilities, acquire new skills and align their knowledge in order to not be outside the labour market (Chițiba, 2012). There are also many studies that show that high unemployment in this age group (15-24) is caused by discrepancies between the structure of demand for labour and the skills provided by the education system. Basically, it shows that the public monopoly on the education system creates a huge gap between the skills required by employers and the knowledge offered by public schools resulted in skill mismatches, which complicates enormously the process to finding a job for the young graduates, and extending the waiting period in the labour market. Inadequate subsidies offered by the government to education system leads to discrepancies between the structure of the labour force and labour demand structure, and the first victims of these discrepancies occur when young graduates seek their first job.

Also, social networks have an impact on youth employment. This group has a limited occupational contact network and it usually depends on parents' social position or on friend's networks. This limits their access to information about jobs and the chances to influence (Hällsten, Edling&Rydgren, 2017).

At the same time, a wide range of studies explain that some government interventions generate negative effects on the labour market, especially on young people (for example, minimum wage legislation) (Chuang, 2006).

Besides these objective factors, there are also subjective reasons, related to traditions, mentality, habits, that may provide possible explanations for the high rates of youth unemployment in some countries (Mursa et al., 2015).

3. The reality of youth unemployment in EU countries

When comparing youth unemployment rates in European countries, we notice that there are important differences between countries. There are countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria, with low and very low rates, and on the other hand, there are countries such as Greece, Spain, Italy, Croatia, Cyprus and Portugal, with high and very high rates. Basically, in 2016, between the maximum rate (Greece – 47,3%) and the minimum rate (Germany – 7,1%), there is a ratio of more than 6,5 (Table 1).

Table 1. Youth unemployment rate in EU-28 countries

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Austria	11	9,8	9,4	8,5	10,7	9,5	8,9	9,4	9,7	10,3	10,6	11,2
Belgium	21,5	20,5	18,8	18	21,9	22,4	18,7	19,8	23,7	23,2	22,1	20,1
Bulgaria	21	18,3	14,1	11,9	15,1	21,9	25	28,1	28,4	23,8	21,6	17,2
Croatia	31,7	28,9	25,4	23,6	25,4	32,3	36,6	42,2	49,9	44,9	42,3	31,8
Cyprus	13,9	10	10,2	9	13,8	16,6	22,4	27,7	38,9	36	32,8	29,1
Czech Republic	19,3	17,5	10,7	9,9	16,6	18,3	18,1	19,5	18,9	15,9	12,6	10,5
Denmark	8,6	7,7	7,5	8	11,8	13,9	14,2	14,1	13	12,6	10,8	12
Estonia	15,1	12,1	10,1	12	27,4	32,9	22,4	20,9	18,7	15	13,1	13,4
Finland	20,1	18,7	16,5	16,5	21,5	21,4	20,1	19	19,9	20,5	22,4	20,1
France	21	22	19,5	19	23,6	23,3	22,6	24,4	24,9	24,2	24,7	24,6
Germany	15,4	13,6	11,8	10,4	11,1	9,8	8,5	8	7,8	7,7	7,2	7,1
Greece	25,8	25	22,7	21,9	25,7	33	44,7	55,3	58,3	52,4	49,8	47,3
Hungary	19,4	19,1	18,1	19,5	26,4	26,4	26	28,2	26,6	20,4	17,3	12,9
Ireland	8,8	8,9	9,3	13,6	24,8	28,4	29,9	31,1	27	23,7	20,5	17
Italy	24,1	21,8	20,4	21,2	25,3	27,9	29,2	35,3	40	42,7	40,3	37,8
Latvia	15,1	13,6	10,6	13,6	33,3	36,2	31	28,5	23,2	19,6	16,3	17,3
Lithuania	15,8	10	8,4	13,3	29,6	35,7	32,6	26,7	21,9	19,3	16,3	14,5
Luxembourg	14,6	15,5	15,6	17,3	16,5	15,8	16,4	18	16,9	22,3	16,6	19,1
Malta	16,1	15,5	13,5	11,7	14,5	13,2	13,3	14,1	13	11,7	11,8	11
Netherlands	11,8	10	9,4	8,6	10,2	11,1	10	11,7	13,2	12,7	11,3	10,8
Poland	36,9	29,8	21,6	17,2	20,6	23,7	25,8	26,5	27,3	23,9	20,8	17,7
Portugal	20,8	21,2	21,4	21,6	25,3	28,2	30,2	38	38,1	34,7	32	28,2
Romania	19,1	20,2	19,3	17,6	20	22,1	23,9	22,6	23,7	24	21,7	20,6
Slovakia	30,4	27	20,6	19,3	27,6	33,9	33,7	34	33,7	29,7	26,5	22,2
Slovenia	15,9	13,9	10,1	10,4	13,6	14,7	15,7	20,6	21,6	20,2	16,3	15,2
Spain	19,6	17,9	18,1	24,5	37,7	41,5	46,2	52,9	55,5	53,2	48,3	44,4
Sweden	22,6	21,5	19,2	20,2	25	24,8	22,8	23,7	23,6	22,9	20,4	18,9
United Kingdom	12,8	13,9	14,3	15	19,1	19,9	21,3	21,2	20,7	17	14,6	13

Source: Eurostat.

At European level, youth unemployment was 18.7% in 2016 and decreased to 16,8% in 2017. Table 1 shows the levels of youth unemployment recorded in European countries in the period 2005–2016. The youth unemployment rate is higher than the average in 13 of the EU-28 countries.

In particular, the youth unemployment rate is very high in Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Cyprus and Croatia, in some of these countries the rate exceeding the average even more than two times. Romania can be included in the category of

countries with relatively high youth unemployment, its rate increasing from 19,3% in 2007 to 24% in 2014 and then decreasing and reaching 20,6% in 2016.

In Greece, the rate "exploded" from 21,9% in 2008 to 58,3% in 2013 and in Spain it increased from 18,1% in 2007 to 55.5% in 2013. In Italy and Croatia, it increased from 20,4% and 25,4%, respectively, in 2007 to 40% and 49,9%, respectively, in 2013. If compared to the general unemployment rate (Fig.1), youth unemployment levels in 2016 are, in some cases, twice and almost three times higher.

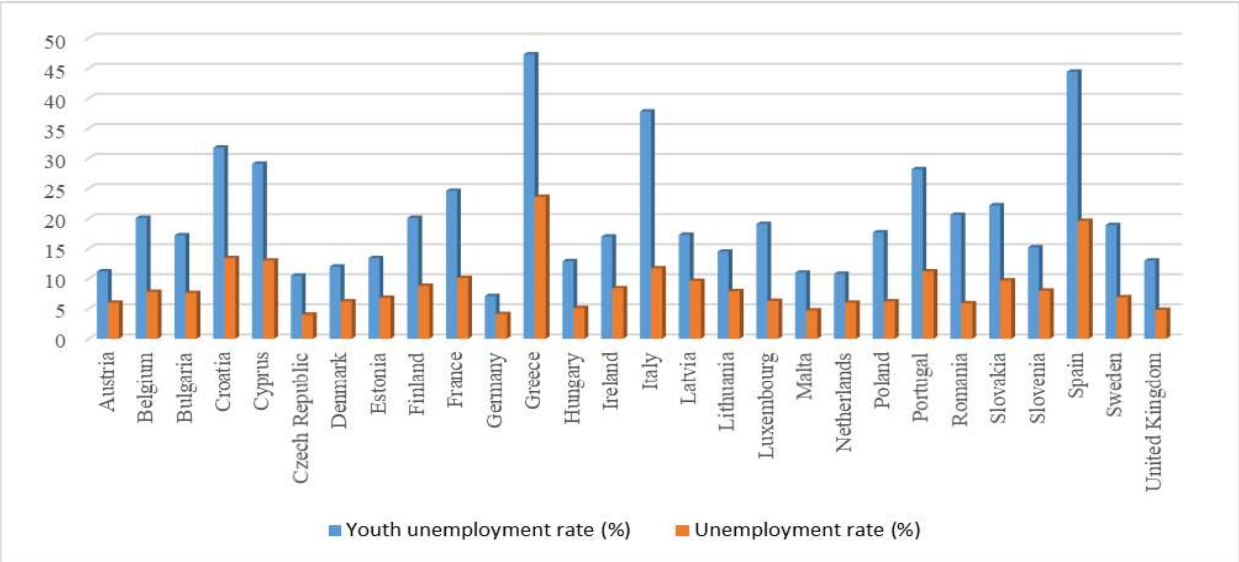

Figure 1. Youth unemployment and general unemployment rates in EU-28, in 2016

Source: Authors' presentation based on data from Eurostat.

4. Discussions

The huge differences between European countries in terms of youth unemployment rates have many explanations.

First, these countries were affected differently by the last economic depression. Evolution of GDP since 2000 clearly shows that the Southern European countries went through an impressive economic boom, but they were hit by a sharp contraction of production after 2008, which had as main consequence a massive increase in youth unemployment, 15-24 years' category being the most vulnerable. It is known that in the short run, there is a negative correlation between changes in GDP and the unemployment rate.

Table 2. Real GDP growth rate - volume (Percentage change on previous year), EU-28

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Austria	3,5	3,7	1,5	-3,8	1,8	2,9	0,7	0	0,8	1,1	1,5
Belgium	2,5	3,4	0,8	-2,3	2,7	1,8	0,2	0,2	1,4	1,4	1,5
Bulgaria	6,9	7,3	6	-3,6	1,3	1,9	0	0,9	1,3	3,6	3,9

Croatia	4,8	5,2	2,1	-7,4	-1,4	-0,3	-2,2	-0,6	-0,1	2,3	3,2
Cyprus	4,5	4,8	3,9	-1,8	1,3	0,3	-3,1	-5,9	-1,4	2	3
Czech Republic	6,9	5,6	2,7	-4,8	2,3	1,8	-0,8	-0,5	2,7	5,3	2,6
Denmark	3,9	0,9	-0,5	-4,9	1,9	1,3	0,2	0,9	1,6	1,6	2
Estonia	10,3	7,7	-5,4	-14,7	2,3	7,6	4,3	1,9	2,9	1,7	2,1
Finland	4,1	5,2	0,7	-8,3	3	2,6	-1,4	-0,8	-0,6	0,1	2,1
France	2,4	2,4	0,2	-2,9	2	2,1	0,2	0,6	0,9	1,1	1,2
Germany	3,7	3,3	1,1	-5,6	4,1	3,7	0,5	0,5	1,9	1,7	1,9
Greece	5,7	3,3	-0,3	-4,3	-5,5	-9,1	-7,3	-3,2	0,7	-0,3	-0,2
Hungary	3,9	0,4	0,9	-6,6	0,7	1,7	-1,6	2,1	4,2	3,4	2,2
Ireland	5,5	5,2	-3,9	-4,6	1,8	3	0	1,6	8,3	25,6	5,1
Italy	2	1,5	-1,1	-5,5	1,7	0,6	-2,8	-1,7	0,1	1	0,9
Latvia	11,9	10	-3,5	-14,4	-3,9	6,4	4	2,4	1,9	3	2,2
Lithuania	7,4	11,1	2,6	-14,8	1,6	6	3,8	3,5	3,5	2	2,3
Luxembourg	5,2	8,4	-1,3	-4,4	4,9	2,5	-0,4	3,7	5,8	2,9	3,1
Malta	1,8	4	3,3	-2,5	3,5	1,3	2,7	4,7	8,1	9,9	5,5
Netherlands	3,5	3,7	1,7	-3,8	1,4	1,7	-1,1	-0,2	1,4	2,3	2,2
Poland	6,2	7	4,2	2,8	3,6	5	1,6	1,4	3,3	3,8	2,9
Portugal	1,6	2,5	0,2	-3	1,9	-1,8	-4	-1,1	0,9	1,8	1,6
Romania	8,1	6,9	8,3	-5,9	-2,8	2	1,2	3,5	3,1	4	4,8
Slovakia	8,5	10,8	5,6	-5,4	5	2,8	1,7	1,5	2,8	3,9	3,3
Slovenia	5,7	6,9	3,3	-7,8	1,2	0,6	-2,7	-1,1	3	2,3	3,1
Spain	4,2	3,8	1,1	-3,6	0	-1	-2,9	-1,7	1,4	3,4	3,3
Sweden	4,7	3,4	-0,6	-5,2	6	2,7	-0,3	1,2	2,6	4,5	3,2
United Kingdom	2,5	2,4	-0,5	-4,2	1,7	1,5	1,5	2,1	3,1	2,3	1,9

Source: Eurostat.

Secondly, not all European countries have a minimum wage legislation (Table 3a and b). In Germany, the minimum wage was introduced in 2015. The existence of minimum wage acts as a barrier to entry to the labour market, penalizing especially persons lacking experience or low qualified, that is, especially the young people. There are exceptions also exceptions from this rule. For example, Italy and Cyprus do not impose a minimum wage, but the unemployment rate in these countries is heavily and negatively influenced by mentality and strong cyclical fluctuations of production.

Table 3a. Minimum wages (EUR/month), EU-28 (2004- 2009)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Austria	:	:	:	:	:	:
Belgium	1186,31	1210	1234	1259	1309,6	1387,5
Bulgaria	61,36	76,69	81,79	92,03	112,49	122,71
Croatia	:	:	:	:	:	373,46
Cyprus	:	:	:	:	:	:
Czech Republic	206,73	235,85	261,03	291,07	300,44	297,67
Denmark	:	:	:	:	:	:
Estonia	158,5	171,92	191,73	230,08	278,02	278,02

Finland	:	:	:	:	:	:
France	1215,11	1286,09	1217,88	1254,28	1280,07	1321,02
Germany	:	:	:	:	:	:
Greece	630,77	667,68	709,71	730,3	794,02	817,83
Hungary	201,9	231,74	247,16	260,16	271,94	268,09
Ireland	1073,15	1183	1292,85	1402,7	1461,85	1461,85
Italy	:	:	:	:	:	:
Latvia	118,96	114,63	129,27	172,12	229,75	254,13
Lithuania	130,34	144,81	159,29	173,77	231,7	231,7
Luxembourg	1402,96	1466,77	1503,42	1570,28	1570,28	1641,74
Malta	540,84	555,06	584,24	601,9	617,21	634,88
Netherlands	1264,8	1264,8	1272,6	1300,8	1335	1381,2
Poland	175,25	207,86	232,9	244,32	313,34	307,21
Portugal	425,95	437,15	449,98	470,17	497	525
Romania	68,03	78,7	89,67	115,27	138,59	149,16
Slovakia	147,68	167,76	182,15	220,71	241,19	295,5
Slovenia	470,99	490,07	511,9	521,8	538,53	589,19
Spain	537,25	598,5	631,05	665,7	700	728
Sweden	:	:	:	:	:	:
United Kingdom	1054,2	1134,67	1212,61	1314,97	1242,24	995,28

Note: :=not applicable

Source: Eurostat.

Table 3b. Minimum wages (EUR/month), EU-28 (2010- 2015)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Austria	:	:	:	:	:	:
Belgium	1387,5	1415,24	1443,54	1501,82	1501,82	1501,82
Bulgaria	122,71	122,71	138,05	158,5	173,84	184,07
Croatia	385,48	381,15	373,36	372,35	395,67	395,61
Cyprus	:	:	:	:	:	:
Czech Republic	302,19	319,22	310,23	318,08	309,91	331,71
Denmark	:	:	:	:	:	:
Estonia	278,02	278,02	290	320	355	390
Finland	:	:	:	:	:	:
France	1343,77	1365	1398,37	1430,22	1445,38	1457,52
Germany	:	:	:	:	:	1440
Greece	862,82	862,82	876,62	683,76	683,76	683,76
Hungary	271,8	280,63	295,63	335,27	341,7	332,76
Ireland	1461,85	1461,85	1461,85	1461,85	1461,85	1461,85
Italy	:	:	:	:	:	:
Latvia	253,77	281,93	285,92	286,66	320	360
Lithuania	231,7	231,7	231,7	289,62	289,62	300
Luxembourg	1682,76	1757,56	1801,49	1874,19	1921,03	1922,96
Malta	659,92	664,95	685,14	702,82	717,95	720,46
Netherlands	1407,6	1424,4	1446,6	1469,4	1485,6	1501,8
Poland	320,87	348,68	336,47	392,73	404,4	409,53

Portugal	554,17	565,83	565,83	565,83	565,83	589,17
Romania	141,63	157,2	161,91	157,5	190,11	217,5
Slovakia	307,7	317	327	337,7	352	380
Slovenia	597,43	748,1	763,06	783,66	789,15	790,73
Spain	738,85	748,3	748,3	752,85	752,85	756,7
Sweden	:	:	:	:	:	:
United Kingdom	1076,46	1136,22	1201,96	1249,85	1251,05	1378,87

Note: :=not applicable
Source: Eurostat.

A second set of factors that are well correlated with the rate of youth unemployment include non-economic or cultural factors. Among them stands out the influence of paternalistic mentality that causes families to support young people from an economic point of view. Analysing differences in youth unemployment rates in European countries, we can see that where young people are independent in relation to their own family, unemployment rates are low (e.g. Denmark) (Fig.2).

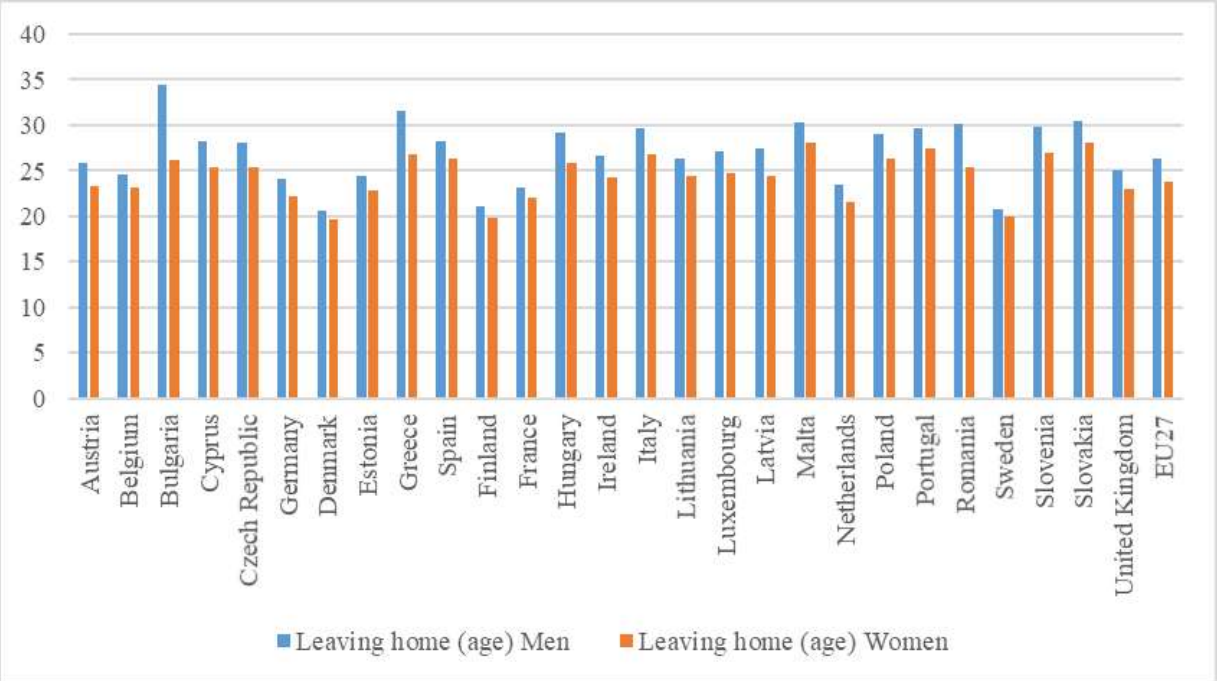

Figure 2. Age at which 50% of young people leave home
Source: Authors' presentation based on data from Eurofound (2014), *Mapping youth transitions in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, p.23

Independent mentality makes an individual able to refuse financial support from his family and to become economically independent and to accept a job easily.

In contrast, the Southern countries, where young people live with their parents until the age of about 30 years, the unemployment rate is very high, which is explained by the fact that a Spanish or an Italian is very selective when entering the labour market, and that extends the period of the search for a job. There is a positive association between the age of leaving parents' house and the size of unemployment.

In other words, traditionalist mentality, showing the strong influence of family on young people's lives, adversely influence the rate of youth unemployment and explains well enough differences between countries.

Another key factor is the massive gap between what the labour market needs and what the educational system provides. Across Europe, the state is involved in different ways in the educational process. In some countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany, the private companies are more involved in the educational process, making the skills acquired to be closer to the labour market needs. But where educational system is an autistic one, there are major discrepancies between the demand of labour market and the supply of educational system, which creates difficulties when young people seek their first job. The so-called skill mismatches are the direct result of inadequate financing of the education system through government policies.

When referring to the educational aspects and to the different policies of the countries, the existing literature (Vogel, 2002; Pastore&Giuliani, 2015) points to the following classification and characterisation:

The model of *Scandinavian* countries which, from the EU-28 states, includes Finland and Sweden. These are known for the educational system that is sequential and provides general education. The employment agencies play a significant role on the labour market. Also, these are the countries with well-developed welfare systems, a strongly unionization, where policies are applied on large scale and there is support for the unemployed.

European continental countries, such as Germany, Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands or France, offer both general education and vocational training during the schooling period so that the young graduates will be ready to enter the labour market after they have finished their education.

Anglo-Saxon countries – UK and Ireland - have a high-quality education system and a relatively low youth unemployment rate. Employment agencies are usually private and income support is available, but people need to prove that they are in a search for a job.

The group of *Mediterranean* countries includes Portugal, Spain, Greece, Italy is the “worst performer”. These countries have sequential, inflexible educational systems and underdeveloped labour market infrastructure. The youth unemployment rate is very high.

The *new member states* of the European Union, like Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Estonia, the Czech Republic are characterised by relatively high youth unemployment rates, an increased labour market policies expenditure but increasingly flexible labour markets.

5. Conclusions

The main purpose of this paper was to provide an overview of the evolution of youth unemployment phenomenon in European countries and to present and discuss the main factors causing its fluctuating levels.

Analysing the existing statistics related to the phenomenon we can say that there are important differences between European countries. If referring to the influencing variables, and based on deduction and economic logic, we can say that this phenomenon is not caused by the inability of the free market to create jobs, but rather by the cultural rigidities and inadequate public policies. Data analysis shows that in countries which are "flexible" in "cultural" terms and with free market-oriented policy, the youth unemployment level is in reasonable margins. From the perspective of the labour market, two main models can be identified (this separation is not based on a strictly geographically criterion): the Mediterranean one, which is traditionalist and conservative and the Nordic one, which is more flexible and favours adaptability, a culture of independence and an easier school-to-work transition.

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