

# Visegrad Youth

Comparative review  
of the situation of young people  
in the V4 countries

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# Executive summary

The Visegrad Group (also known as the Visegrad Four or simply V4), formed on 15th February 1991, is constituted by the Czech Republic (CZ), Hungary (HU), Poland (PL) and Slovakia (SK). Young people constitute about 1/5 of the population in the V4 countries, but the ageing of the population will cause shrinking of the young cohorts in the future. Participation in schooling is very high, with most of the young people being in formal education until the age of 18 and with growing numbers of those in tertiary education. The risk of poverty of young people differs between the V4 countries (ranging from about 20% to almost 40%), but in all of them the economic crises cause widening of poverty or stagnation in improvement of young people's economic situation. Targeted assistance is directed at selected groups of youth. Among the ethnic communities, most activities are directed towards Roma young people.

## **Employment and entrepreneurship**

Unemployment in the V4 countries is relatively high, with Slovakia having the highest unemployment rate. Issues indicated are, among others, skills mismatch, frequent occurrence of temporary contracts (PL), and little preparation for job search by the educational institutions. Difficulty to find jobs in the locality and low salaries remain young people's concern. The situation of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) in PL, HU and SK indicates the difficulties in transitioning from education to work. Young people from the V4 countries declare to be willing to move for a job. Many of them, mostly from Poland and Slovakia, migrated to Western European countries after EU accession. The good practices aim at supporting young people's entrepreneurship, recognition of non-formal skills on the labour market as well as at career guidance.

## **Voluntary activities and their international dimension**

Young people from the V4 countries are relatively rarely involved in voluntary activities compared to other EU countries. The lack of recognition of volunteering, its low profile, the existing career model, economic situation of young people, little NGO resources and capabilities in involving volunteers are among the reasons of this low participation. On the other hand, the analysis shows that there is a strong basis developing for the new attitude towards volunteering. European Voluntary Services as one of the tools for abroad experience of volunteering is increasingly more used. The investments of the V4 countries in local volunteering projects, promotion of volunteering as well as building structures for volunteering are shown as best practices.

## **Participation and decision-making**

Even if young people from the V4 countries believe that to make one's voice heard it is important to participate in debates with policy makers, the protests are being increasingly used by young people as a political tool. In each of the V4 countries in 2012, young people demonstrated against certain political decisions. Other actions, which are considered important to ensure that one's voice is heard by policymakers, are: signing a petition, being a member or supporting an NGO or joining a political party. On the top of this, new forms of participation are appearing which include activities involving interactions of young people and policy makers, private and artistic expressions, city movements and new media involvement. Two structural solutions which aim at ensuring young people impact on policy decisions are national youth councils, which exist in all the V4 countries, and the European structured dialogue. The latter involved both national youth councils as well as informal groups and online consultations. The good practices presented concentrate at involving

young people in decision making on the local level (through capacity building and mentoring) as well as involving wider range of young people in policy debates through new tools, structures and methodologies.

### **Non-formal learning**

Participation in the activities of diverse organisations is higher than membership. About 10-15% of young people are members of organisations, while about 30-45% of them take part in activities as such. International experiences are not so common compared to other EU countries, still about 13-18% of young people in the V4 countries stayed abroad for education or training. Some students studied abroad as Erasmus students or interns (in total about 27,000 people from the V4 countries in 2010/11), participated in Youth in Action projects or other activities fostering cooperation with youth from other countries (about 10%). Diverse forms of non-formal learning are indicated by young graduates as useful in their future job search. Good practices involve recognition of non-formal learning of youth workers, as well as improving of non-formal learning of young people e.g. through raising quality of leisure time education, staff training, and new innovative projects.

# Introduction

The aim of the report is to provide the reader with a comparative analytical review of the situation of young people in these countries for the prospective development of youth policy in the region of the Central Europe. The report is to present the specific situation of this region and indicate some good practices from the region for consideration of the other countries.

As the V4 countries, similarly to other European countries, are faced with new challenges caused by economic and financial crises, they continue to search for varying solutions to appearing issues. Therefore, the exchange of ideas within youth policy field appears critical.

# Young people situation in the V4 countries

## Background information

Among the four Visegrad countries, Poland (PL) is the biggest with the population of 38.5 million. Hungary (HU) and the Czech Republic (CZ) have a population of around 10 million inhabitants and Slovakia (SK) of 5.5 million inhabitants. The demographic structure in all four Visegrad countries is rather similar, indicating the occurrence of post-war boom and then the echo of this boom in 70s/80s. Youth population (counted as those aged 15-29) in those countries is relatively large – young people constitute around 22% of population in PL and SK and about 19% of CZ and HU populations.

# Employment and entrepreneurship

The height of **youth unemployment** in the V4 countries has been fluctuating in the last decade. The unemployment for PL and SK was the highest in the beginning of the 2000s, reaching level of today's unemployment rates for the southern European countries. In case of these two countries, the drop in unemployment could be assigned to some extent to the outflow of young workers to other EU countries, but, in general, it can be due to a positive economic climate of that period. The rise of unemployment was observed after 2008 as an effect of economic and financial crises. Similar trend is visible in the Czech Republic, but the general level of unemployment remained relatively low, coupled with much less intensive work emigration. In Hungary, unemployment rate is the highest in the last 10 years. This situation stimulates emigration from Hungary<sup>12</sup>, but if the unemployment in other V4 countries continues to rise, the new migration waves might occur also from these countries.

In 2011, unemployment of young people in the V4 countries is in general below the rates of Southern European countries or Ireland, but still relatively high. The average youth unemployment in 2011 in EU-27 was about 21.4%, and only the Czech Republic had a rate lower than this. Poland's youth unemployment and Hungary was on the level of about 26%, and in Slovakia it equalled 33.5%. Additional issue in Slovakia is the frequent occurrence of **longterm youth unemployment** (of 12 months or more).<sup>13</sup>

Concerning the opinions of young people on the challenge of getting a job after finishing education, in the V4 countries **lack of jobs available in the locality** was quite often cited by the respondents (excluding Czech young people). **The low level of salaries** was also very often mentioned, most often in PL.

The number of **young people not in employment, education or training** (NEET) in PL, HU and SK is rather of average level, compared to other EU countries – with relatively low level in CZ. The NEET in the Czech Republic are mostly unemployed, medium-skilled, with work experience, which indicates some difficulties in finding work, but not as much as in other EU countries more harshly suffering from the economic crises. The NEET's characteristics in the three other countries (PL, HU, SK) indicate the difficulties in transitioning from education to work, as these young people are more often inactive on the labour market, have high skills and a good education level, but no work experience. As they are more often female, this might indicate the process of pushing women off the labour market in connection to childbearing. As noticed, these young people have usually no or little work experience.

**Skills mismatch** in the V4 countries between 2007 and 2011 decreased, but still remains very high. Still, a big share of students believes that studies are not enough for finding a job and that a diploma does not guarantee a career – more than half of graduates from the Central Europe believe that the university did not prepare them well for the professional duties. In effect, 81% of Polish students and about 50% of Czech and Slovak students acquired professional experience through internship, job or self-employment

All the V4 countries are taking concrete measures to develop **career guidance and counselling services** to young people. As in three out of four countries young people encounter difficulties in the transition from education to labour market, there seems to be a clear need to develop the career guidance services. Additionally, students of the new member states rated universities negatively as far as preparing graduates for the process of looking for a job is concerned. The opinions on guidance and counselling on future employment opportunities that the young people have received during their school education differed among V4 countries, with Czech young people rating it relatively the highest, followed by Hungary (higher number of answers 'satisfactory') and Slovakia, with Polish students rating it the lowest.)

As indicated by evaluation reports for Europe 2020, **public employment services** should be strengthened in the V4 countries in order to improve the transition to employment. Attention should be paid to the provision of more individualized services, taking into account

particular situation of the groups disadvantaged on the labour market.

Interesting question concerns **the participation of women and men in the labour market**.

In all V4 countries women are less often active at the labour market (this concerns especially women with low education attainment).

All the countries declared that they took effort to facilitate **reconciliation between professional and private life** for both young women and young men.

The intention to **set up a business** differs between young people of the V4 countries. In Poland 2/3 of young people (62%) would like to set up their own business in the future, and in Slovakia such intention is shared by almost half of them – 48%. This attitude is not so frequent in Hungary – 28% and the Czech Republic – 35%. Still, the number of those who actually set up a business is quite similar and amounts to about 5-7% of young people who said they already did set up their own business (PL 6%, CZ 6%, HU 5%, SK 7%).

The event experienced by the new EU member states, including to some extent also the V4 countries, was the **post-EU-accession migration**. It occurred most intensively in the years 2004-2008. From the V4 countries, Poland and Slovakia were main emigration sources.

Today, still many young people **would like to emigrate for work**.

Summing up, in general young people from the V4 countries are **willing to be mobile** on the labour market, about 2/3 are willing to move to another city and about 2/3 are willing to move abroad to take up interesting job offer (for CZ, SK, PL). 49% of young Hungarians (aged 15-29) plan to work abroad once in the future, 10% of them plan also to study abroad. Only 12% can imagine leaving Hungary forever.

## Voluntary activities and their international Dimension

The common concern for the V4 countries is a **low level of participation in the voluntary activities** by young people when compared to other European countries.

The **lack of recognition of volunteering** and its value by the society seems to be a common issue of the V4 countries matched with low profile of volunteering.

The change of generations, with new ideas on participation and little memory of previous political system, constitutes a basis for establishment of **new attitude toward volunteering**. There are also other opportunities appearing in the V4 countries such as development of corporate initiatives and business engagement in voluntary activities, information on volunteering being easier accessible through new media and internet, raising fashion for volunteering, including volunteering in big sport events and school programmes, together with political engagement and interest (also at the local level).<sup>44</sup> Also, almost half (46%) of graduates who gained volunteering experience in the new member states said that it was useful in looking for jobs later in life.

**European Voluntary Service** (within the Youth in Action Programme) is one of the most renowned programmes providing opportunity for a long-term volunteering abroad. In many countries, it remains the main tool for long-term volunteering. In 2011, Slovak National Agency of Youth in Action sent 92 Slovak volunteers abroad and 143 young volunteers came to do volunteer service for various organisations and institutions.

## Participation and decision-making

**The importance of active protests** is raising in the V4 countries, in 2007, young people of the new EU member states (NMS12) were less frequently of the opinion that demonstration is a good way to make one's voice heard compared to the young people from the EU15. They also believed more rarely that joining political party or signing a petition is a good tool. They tended to more often believe that being a member of or supporting an NGO or a trade union can ensure that impact.

The young people from V4 countries as well as other young Europeans believe most strongly that to make one's voice heard it is important to participate in **debates with policy makers**. Signing a petition followed by joining a political party is considered important in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, while in Poland and Hungary there is more belief in NGO structures followed by petition signing.

The **decline in the political participation traditionally understood as voting** in national elections is notable in the Czech Republic and Slovakia – the number of young voters is relatively much lower than those of voters aged 30 or more. These numbers, however, have to be interpreted with caution. It is important to say that the **interest in political life** is still declared to be strong – 83% SK, PL and HU, and 77% CZ young people are interested in politics and current affairs in their countries.

There is a perception that **new forms of participation** are more attractive to young people (e.g. flashmobs, artistic actions), while traditional forms such as joining a political party are no longer that much appealing (only 4% of young people in HU, PL, SK are members of political parties, in CZ 1%).

One of the most known forms of civic participation is **active participation in the work of non-governmental and other civic organisations**. Youth membership in NGOs is not so common in the V4 countries – CZ 15.5%, HU 12.8%, SK 11.5% and PL 9.1%. In Slovakia, it is noticed<sup>59</sup> that more and more emphasis is placed on private expressions of social policy issues and the style of 'do it as you feel it' is preferred by young people. For young people the anonymous forms of participation are becoming increasingly attractive. These include, for example, petitions, charity activities, ethical consumerism lifestyle and environmental behaviour. These forms of participation are not yet perceived by public and policy-makers as the activities with political message. The same applies to the artistic subcultures which are often ideologically influenced or affected. But at the same time they also innovatively and creatively express civic opinions of the authors on injustice or intolerance.

**Internet** is considered to be a space where young people's social and civic participation could be developed and strengthened. There is a growing engagement of young people in the civic processes in the virtual space, such as usage of the social media e.g. Facebook, Twitter for community activities, virtual protests, petition signing, and commentaries concerning social and political life. Young people use also emails for sending their opinions or commenting on activities of the Members of Parliament or different institutions. As far as statistics are concerned (see table 7), every fifth young person in the Czech Republic uses internet for discussing civic or political issues, while in the rest of the V4 countries it is a bit less frequent. Concerning the usage of internet for interaction with public authorities, in Slovakia 40% of young people use internet to this end, while in other V4 countries it is much less frequent.

## Non-formal learning

Non-formal learning takes place through an **active participation in the work of youth or other civic organisations**.

The membership in organisations was not very common among young people from the V4 countries. More young people participate in the organisations' activities. Around 40% of young people participate in different kinds of activities (CZ 43%, HU 40%, PL 33%, SK 46%). Participation in sport clubs is

again most popular, as well as participation in leisure or youth clubs and cultural organisations.

Participation in activities or projects aimed at **fostering cooperation with youth from other countries** was most often declared by young people from Hungary – 13% (CZ 9%, PL 7%, SK 7%).

**Recognition of non-formal learning** is an important issue, as it allows to recognise diverse forms of learning besides formal education, underlines their value and outcomes, as well as provides certification for those activities that can be used later e.g. when searching for a job. This might, in return, popularise the participation e.g. in the civic initiatives or organisations' work. In the V4 countries, some young people who participated in volunteering did receive a certificate or diploma for voluntary activities (CZ 23%, HU 23%, PL 39%, SK 16%). While in Poland the percentage of those with certificates is the highest, one can see that the fact of receiving the diploma does not seem to impact on the participation rate which in Poland is still very low. Concerning the policy efforts, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are actively working on recognition of non-formal education in youth work thanks to national projects supported from European Social Funds.

# Conclusions and recommendations

The comparative analysis of the situation of young people in the Visegrad countries indicates common issues to be tackled by the countries, but also the need to take into account in each case specific situation of a given country. Unemployment of youth appears today as the most critical issue to tackle by the Visegrad countries, similarly to many other EU member states. On the other hand, the participation of young people has to be assured also in other diverse spheres of the social life – in education, civil society, decision-making and political sphere, as well as in the development of youth policy.

As the report has shown, the employment of young people, but particularly **quality employment**, remains the first sphere of needed actions from the countries concerned. While a lot of initiatives are being carried out by the V4 countries, there is still a need for more support for employment of young people. The **internships** (or job) remain the most valuable experience for the graduates when looking for work. Still, their quality and professional relevance has to be assured. Similarly, while subsidised traineeships reveal a good tool for inserting young people into the labour market, they might be exploited by employers avoiding employment costs. Therefore, the incentives scheme could be designed for the traineeship providers, so these would lead to further employment. In order to support young people in job search, **individualized counselling** is needed for allowing them better reflection on the past learning experiences, as well as prospective opportunities. The public employment services should invest in the provision of personalised services, similarly to university career offices. As positive attitudes towards **entrepreneurial activity** are very common in Poland and Slovakia, the programmes encouraging and supporting the start-up initiatives should be made more available. In Hungary and in the Czech Republic more initiatives towards stirring up entrepreneurial spirit, also within the formal education, should be considered. Possibly, the good practices encouraging the start-up activities within the educational establishments should be considered there. The childcare provision needs to be assured in all V4 countries in order to improve **participation of young women** in the labour market. The enrolment rate in preschool education in all countries is quite low. The policies should be based on the vision of partnership in family, where the child care is provided by both mother and father, otherwise the traditional division of parental roles as the basis for policy might cause discrimination of women at the level of recruitment, promotion, and remuneration.

As the analysis has shown, however many barriers to **voluntary engagement** appear, young generation has nevertheless a great potential to become further engaged in diverse forms of social participation. The activities being run by the Ministries aim at promoting voluntary engagement of different nature – short-term/long-term, local/international, spontaneous/organised, as well as cross-border. Voluntary service of students shown as a good practice in parallel developing skills of engaged volunteers, also contributes to social inclusion of children and young people from small towns.

There are fears expressed by one of the National Ministries, which are also noticed by many researchers and young people themselves, that participation of young people in decision making is in many cases only 'decorative' gesture of authorities which allow young people to present their ideas or needs. Paternalistic approach of local and regional authorities to 'take care' of young generation is still present and accepted. This is possibly why young people choose now **alternative ways of influencing the political decisions**, and turn to the protests more often than previously. Internet appears also as the space of young people activity and a good share of them engages into discussing of civic or social matters in the **virtual space**. The question still remains if these new forms of participation, being often creative and really directed by young people, will have a power to impact the policy-making and influence relevant decisions? Within the good practices presented, the projects directed at strengthening the capacities and competences of young people for the **active participation** in decision-making, as well as building structures e.g. in forms of city youth councils are the valuable contribution to ensure that young people's voice will be heard. On the other hand, there are presented good practices which aim at finding new ways of 'gathering voices' from young people e.g. through face-to-face workshops or online chatting. The remarkable numbers of young people take part in these initiatives, which now need to assure that the voice of young people is not only **heard**, but also seriously considered and possibly **impacting** the policy making.

Finally, **the recognition of non-formal learning** is a topic being considered within national youth policy lines. Many young people of the V4 countries participate in organised activities of clubs or youth groups or organisations, while much less of them are actually the members of them. While the question on the value and meaning of membership remains valid, the efforts towards the stronger engagement of those who participate in organisations' activity should be undertaken. Possibly, the **leadership schemes and trainings** would allow some of the activities' participants to become further engaged in activities' development. Also, more young people should be motivated to participate or organise activities which involve **intercultural and international encounters**. It is actually encouraging that students do value diverse learning activities in the future job search, which matches with the results of research by the European Youth Forum suggesting the **high importance of non-formal learning for employability**. The great example of connecting labour market and non-formal education are projects in the V4 directed at recognising the potential of leisure time activities and youth work for skills development. While many young people in the V4 countries are engaged in diverse forms of non-formal learning, the projects aiming at recognising and strengthening the value of youth work start to be of particular importance. The good practices presented not only show how the learning process of youth and their initiatives could be strengthened and supported, but also show the concentrated **investments into the youth workers' competences**.

To sum up the list of suggested actions, it is worthwhile to underline the importance and added value of **close cooperation within the V4 youth sector**. Sustainable contacts between ministries for youth and other stakeholders would have a potential to create unique regional cooperation which is in line with the current European trends of mutual learning and exchange of good practices via the open method of coordination.