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Is there a uniform NEET identity in the European Union?

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ABSTRACT

During the last decade, the policy efforts aiming to tackle the NEET situation (young people who neither study nor work) have increased dramatically in the European Union. Meanwhile, many studies challenged those policies, showing how they failed due to lack of understanding the NEETs. Thus, we analyse the factors that influence the appearance, modification and elimination of a NEET identity. The results reveal the presence of a shared NEET identity in the countries with high NEET rates, despite the considerable differences in the countries' and NEETs' characteristics. The NEET rate stands out as the key factor influencing the NEET identity, showing that this identity depends more on economic cycles than on the specific country or its culture.

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Introduction

The acronym NEET refers to a young person *Not in Education, Employment, or Training*, which is a label established for decades in the scientific literature and in public youth policies (Mascherini, 2019). Since its appearance, the category's limits and the concept's use, both in society in general and particularly in public policies that seek to tackle the problem, changed over time. However, those uses are not the same. Therefore, it is important to signal that, although the concept may be useful at the academic and technical levels, it also carries different social connotations (Instituto de la Juventud de España, 2011); in some cases it has become some kind of insult and in others a label of survival. Understanding that depending on the context, the use of the label can be unproductive, in this research we restrict the concept to its technical definition and are really careful when using it outside the academic environment.

Applying that concept, Institutions and governments have been developing NEET public policies until they became key policies, like the Youth Guarantee being an European Union (EU) policy flagship (Escudero & Mourelo, 2015). That entails the need to solve the classification of NEETs, because it is an issue that has resulted in multiple criticisms linking the conceptualization of NEETs and lack of policy success (Liszka & Walawender, 2018; Tamesberger & Bacher, 2014; Yates & Payne, 2006).

The first step to solve how to catalogue NEETs is to know their characteristics. However, the concept has evolved and expanded (regarding its criteria and use). Thus, authors such as Maguire emphasize that 'NEET has become a "catch all" definition for young people who have failed to make successful transitions' (Maguire, 2015, p. 534). Nonetheless, this does not deny that there are shared aspects, mainly highlighted in what the acronym reveals and the idea of youth to which it refers.

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Therefore, some opt for an operational definition that allows them to work on the concept easily, in order to analyse its incidence and that of any policy on the subject (Escudero & Mourelo, 2015; Eurofound, 2012) while others highlight the difficulty of finding people who fit the description of NEETs when trying to carry out a more humane approach (Holte, 2018).

While a definition may be useful to carry out macro analyses of public policies, research confirms that adapted NEET policies are necessary to avoid their failure (Erdogan et al., 2021). It implies that cataloguing NEETs should be more exhaustive than using the definition derived from just the acronym. Therefore, we focus on the main characteristics of NEETs in the EU, as a first step to understand the NEET diversity. More specifically, we seek to understand how these characteristics affect the NEETs and how they feel and see themselves.

Therefore, the general objective of this research is to understand NEET identity, if it exists, how it varies and what is the common and different between the different EU countries. That follows the work of Thornham and Gómez Cruz (2018), who show that NEETs are more than a number and how their identity plays a crucial role in the cataloguing process. As secondary objectives, we seek to understand the perception of usefulness and trust in the institutions that implement public policies on NEETs, as well as the perception of their effectiveness. We also wonder about the effects that the COVID19 pandemic may have had on NEET's expectations. Those objectives should work as a tool for policymakers and technicians who are focused on NEET policies.

To answer these questions, we combine quantitative and qualitative research. We carry out a quantitative analysis of secondary data that allows us to highlight the main characteristics of the NEETs and their differences between countries. Once we portray a picture of NEETs in the EU, we implement a qualitative approach using primary data collected through in-depth interviews, focus groups and field notes.

To conclude, we reveal the importance of the NEET characteristics in the process of generating a common NEET identity. We highlight how this common identity spreads across the EU, reveal the key elements of the identity modification process and forecast its future according to the observed data. Furthermore, we produce knowledge that can contribute to the improvement of current and future NEET policies.

Theoretical framework

Youth is the vital stage in which a person changes from the inherent dependence of childhood to the responsibility of adulthood (Furlong, 2009). Thus Gramsci (2014) defined it as a state of crisis. For the Italian, the old seeks to maintain the status quo, while the young seeks to undermine it. This gives rise to conflict and *crisis of authority* and *crisis of hegemony*. Even functionalist authors such as Parsons (1942) speak of concepts such as *Youth culture* as opposition to adult life, both in its aims of hedonism in the face of adult responsibility and in dealing with a process of resistance to parental roles.

Building on these contributions after more than half a century, Feixa Pàmpols (2020) takes up this perspective of youth and crisis by defining youth as a period of instability, rupture and innovation. Feixa Pàmpols aims to show that rupture is constant. Building on many elements introduced by classical theories, Feixa defends that youth constantly disappears to be replaced instantly by the next generation.

However, this process can be seriously altered. This is what Feixa Pàmpols, Planas Lladó and Soler Masó (Planas-Lladó et al., 2014) highlight when they apply their theory to the NEET problem. It leads them to wonder if innovation is really possible, considering that access to the tools and resources necessary to carry out such an innovative process is diminished.

Delving into the youth topic with the focus on NEETs, research such as that by Addabbo et al. (2017) focuses on gender as an important element to understand the issue. The authors show the highest risk for women to be NEETs in southern Europe. However, this inequality depends on the country cluster, being altered in multiple countries (Eurofound, 2016). For their part, Pesquera and

Strand (2020) verify this variability in terms of gender and add the factor of age groups to illustrate the increased risk that is generated when both factors are combined. This approach in age groups is also taken by Caroleo et al. (2020), demonstrating the relevance of dividing NEETs into two age cohorts by showing that the youngest cohort (19–24 years) is framed in a stage of transition towards the so-called adult stage. On the other hand, authors such as De Luca et al. (2020) analyse the group of NEETs under the magnifying glass of the level of attained education. The authors see the group as young people who for one reason or another have not finished compulsory education and leave the educational system without the accreditations required to find a job. Despite this, authors such as Strecker et al. (2021) oppose this categorization, arguing that it leads to the low success rate of public policies aimed at NEETs. The authors highlight the error of considering the NEETs as a homogeneous group exclusively composed of early leavers, showing that the group is a very heterogeneous one in regard to educational level. This means that, if the attained education is not a unifying and unison factor of the group (Rambla & Scandurra, 2021), many policies treat young people with substantially different profiles as a homogeneous group, which reopens the debate on it there is a sufficiently homogeneous NEET identity.

Despite the critics De Luca, Mazzochi, Quintano and Rocca (2020) received, these authors highlight the relevance of the mobility that derives from the NEET situation as well as Roberts (2011), who retrieves Bynner et al. (2002) 'fast and slow lanes to adulthood' to advance on that, on how obtaining resources through the labour market, their social mobility and transition to employment (i.e. to the adult stage) are severely limited. Roberts focused on how this affects the identity of young people. Thus, without the ability to modify their environment, the NEETs' identity is limited to a great extent.

Contrasting youth and adulthood, Jongbloed and Giret (2021) argue that they connect via entering the world of work. In that regard, training is the passage between one world and the other. This inexorably moves the crisis that defines the youth to the dichotomy between employed and unemployed. A similar reason was behind the first appearance of the NEET concept, as the researchers lacked a category for those between youth and adulthood; education and work (Mascherini, 2019).

This conflict regarding identity is clear to authors such as Roberts (2011), who highlights the importance of work as a determinant of identity. The NEETs react to the system and, therefore, to what it represents. This generates a distrust that influences their identity. For this reason, they show a reinforced detachment from politics, even to a greater extent than it is present among young people in general (Eurofound, 2012).

These visions of the youth, as an element of conflict that every generation experiences (Feixa Pàmpols, 2020) and the identity of the NEETs linked to work, are rekindled under the umbrella of the common criticisms of the capitalist system as an always repeating cycle. Offe (2018) produced a framework that denounces the conflict between the different actors that coexist in the current Welfare States. If we focus on the case of the NEETs, under that framework, the said categorization of these young people appears as a by-product of the systems' contradictions, which implies that it follows the evolution of constant economic cycles. Thus, in accordance with Offe's theory, the NEETs' phenomenon would be another consequence of the current social structure, the current capitalist system. In other words, NEETs' identity adapts more to the inherent ups and downs of the system than to the intrinsic characteristics of each individual NEET in particular: both NEET rates and NEETs' identity are a consequence of the structural struggles within the Welfare State.

Continuing the focus on the Welfare State, under the approach of Esping-Andersen and Myles (2009), we can analyse NEETs as a conjunction of processes occurring due to what each type of Welfare State prioritizes. Robson (2010) delves into this approach, showing that under the model of the Welfare State of Southern Europe, social and family networks are the main pillars for NEETs, while the reality of the NEET problem under other welfare regimes is substantially different. However, Kotroyannos et al. (2015) signalled that in those countries, in general, NEETs do not feel excluded,

despite meeting the criteria to be considered as such and receiving support measures from the State. Therefore, under this perspective, the NEETS' characteristics would not be as relevant as the consequences caused by the structural elements of the Welfare State.

The last approach to the theorization of the identity of the NEETs leads us to take a step back and proceed to a meta-theoretical analysis. Studies such as *Exploring the diversity of NEETs* (Eurofound, 2016), which underlines the problem of calling such a diverse group only *NEETs*. Eurofound proposes the division of NEETs into 7 subgroups based on very different characteristics (Re-entrants, Short-term unemployed, Long-term unemployed, Illness/disability, Family responsibilities, Discouraged and Other NEETs) for their correct treatment. Also Yates and Payne (2006) mention this problem of using one label for the whole group. In this way, dissonances between the identity seen by the NEETs and how the society sees them are revealed.

Methodology

Considering the study object of this research, the identity of the NEETs of the European Union, we opted for a combined use of both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Therefore, we follow Holte's line, accepting that 'research designs will need to translate the NEET category into categories that resonate better with everyday speech' (Holte, 2018, p. 12) but understanding that 'such an approach must remain sensitive to the fact that NEET is a category of population statistics' (Holte, 2018, p. 12). In the same way, with regard to the sources of the information, we divide the data for this research into two distinct groups, separated by the different methodologies: The first concerns secondary sources, to which we will apply a quantitative approach, while primary sources, that will be analysed according to a qualitative methodology, belong to the second group of data.

The initial approach to the reality of the identity of the NEETs is carried out with quantitative techniques. In order to achieve this, we apply a statistical methodology through databases obtained through standardized surveys provided by the national offices of the EUROSTAT network of the European Union (Eurostat, 2021). Following this, aiming to investigate in depth the issue of the identity of NEETs, we apply qualitative techniques to the information collected directly from us (Valles, 2000). For this second step, we limit the number of countries selected to represent the total. Thus, taking into account that our main interest is to study NEETs, we give more space in our selection to countries with high NEET rates, but at the same time we do not forget about the wide spectrum of these percentages. As a result we selected 5 countries: Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus and Germany.

Deepening in the implemented quantitative techniques, we present descriptive statistics that help us to show a photograph of the socio-demographic composition of the NEETs in the selected countries. This presentation serves as an introduction that visualizes relevant differences in the typology of NEETs between the different study countries. Its aim is not to start the debate on how the NEETs understand their own identity, but to show the general qualities that characterizes the group in each country. The main indicator used is the NEET rate, the percentage of young people who are NEETs. After showing that indicator, we present the same NEET rate but divided by gender, age groups and attained educational level, each one in a different table.

Once the NEETs in each country have been described according to the aforementioned quantifiable characteristics, we give rise to the contributions of qualitative techniques. The techniques applied in this case are adapted to the two groups with which we have worked: relevant stakeholders who work with public policies aimed at improving the situation of NEETs and young people who can be categorized as NEETs.

Data on relevant stakeholders come from in-depth interviews (Foddy, 1994) and field notes (Emerson et al., 2011). The interviews were carried out in different periods between April 2019 and October 2021 in the selected countries, they included a total of 27 stakeholders who work on measures and policies directed towards NEETs. Field notes are limited to the study countries and were collected between April 2019 and March 2021.

The field notes also include NEETs. Nonetheless, the main technique we applied to get closer to their perspectives was that of the discussion group (Valles, 2000). More particularly, given the global conditions at the time of data collection, we had to adapt the discussion group technique to the online status (videoconference; Lobe et al., 2020). In this case, we held 5 discussion groups, one for each study country, in an official language of the country. A total of 23 young people participated in the discussion groups and these groups took place between January 21 and 18 March 2021.

We divide the structure of the applied methodologies into three blocks on responsibility, expectations and public policies. In the first, we focus on perceived social and individual responsibility, which refers to how the NEETs blame themselves/their society for their situation. It also includes knowing what their personal context is and what they consider to be the social context. For the second block for expectations, the focus is on the hopes and vision for the future of NEETs and how such expectations have evolved, which affects them and how the personal expectations of NEETs differ, or not, from those they have for society as a whole. In the last section, on public policies, our interest is to show how NEETs understand and value public policies, if they are aware of them, if they believe that they influence, if they perceive that participating in them is useful, if they make use of them, etc. .

Finally, we mention that, both through quantitative and qualitative techniques, we collected information related to the general theme of the NEETs, but not directly related to NEETs' identity. For this reason, in the following section we focus exclusively on the contributions that we consider most relevant within the subject matter that this article constraints. In other words, we prioritize the most direct quotes of those who provide the collected information, but it is only a synthesis of all of the contributions of the NEETs and stakeholders. Thus, to indicate the source of the citations, we will use the initials of the techniques (I for the Interviews and FG for the Focus Groups) followed by the identification according to the country where it was carried out.

The average NEET

The first step to understand the NEETs' identity is to see their distribution and the characteristics that we already denote as most relevant. For this purpose, we use the NEET rates, shown in Table 1. This table shows that the percentage for the whole youth, and divided by sex, varies considerably between countries. Among the data, it stands out that in general women suffer this problem more than men, but it is not an homogeneous process. In the different countries of the EU, arranged in Table 1, there are cases of equality in the percentages according to sex (e.g. Spain with 17,3% men and women), with a great difference to the detriment of women (e.g. Bulgaria with 14,9% men and 21,6% women) and even the opposite situation, where the aforementioned gender dynamic is reversed (e.g. Luxembourg with 8,8% men vs 6,6% women).

Table 2 shows the comparison of NEET rates by age cohort. The table shows that, in general terms for the EU countries, as age increases the NEET rate increases. However, as in Table 1, this process does not occur in every country. The most common change is seen among the oldest age groups (20–24 and 25–29 years) in cases such as Lithuania (17,5% in 20–24 years vs 17,1% in 25–29 years). We also see some more exceptional cases, such as in Malta, where the youngest group (15–19 years) had a higher NEET rate than the middle group (9,3% versus 9,2%).

The third key characteristic that contributes to the understanding of the NEETs' identity is their educational attainment, presented in Table 3. The table shows the percentages of NEETs by the maximum educational attainment level, according to the ISCED 2011 system (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). The data reveals the great diversity with respect to the attained education of NEETs. For example, countries like Greece or Latvia, where the lowest percentage of NEETs is among those who have just attained the lowest tier of educational level (8,3% and 7,9% respectively), while in countries such as Bulgaria or Germany it is among those who have completed tertiary education (11,8% and 5,1% respectively).

Table 1. Percentage of NEETs by sex (2020).

Countries	Total	Males	Females
EU27	13,7	12,2	15,4
Belgium	12	11,7	12,4
Bulgaria	18,1	14,9	21,6
Czechia	11	4,7	17,6
Denmark	10,2	9,9	10,5
Germany	8,6	7,8	9,5
Estonia	11,2	8,6	14
Ireland	14,2	13,8	14,5
Greece	18,7	17,8	19,7
Spain	17,3	17,3	17,3
France	14	13,2	14,9
Croatia	14,6	13,3	16
Italy	23,3	21,4	25,4
Cyprus	15,3	14,2	16,3
Latvia	11,9	11,3	12,6
Lithuania	13	13,6	12,4
Luxembourg	7,7	8,8	6,6
Hungary	14,7	10	19,7
Malta	9,5	8,5	10,5
Netherlands	5,7	5,4	6
Austria	9,5	9,4	9,6
Poland	12,9	8,7	17,3
Portugal	11	11	11,1
Romania	16,6	11,4	22,1
Slovenia	9,2	7,8	10,9
Slovakia	15,2	10,4	20,2
Finland	10,3	10	10,5
Sweden	7,2	6,9	7,6

Source: Eurostat (2021)

Understanding NEETs

Firstly, we remind that this analysis is carried out under the framework of the three categories mentioned in the methodology: responsibility, expectations and public policies. But, before proceeding with them, we start focusing on the article's main topic: the feeling of belonging, the NEET identity per se. We have found that in all countries, in line with the clash between the academic and social definition of *NEET* (Lunsing, 2007; Yates & Payne, 2006), the barrier between what a NEET is and what not is blurred. Young people who stop being NEETs during short periods, due to sporadic jobs or training, do not necessarily stop considering themselves NEETs. Likewise, some who are NEETs avoid defining themselves as such, highlighting other aspects of their identity.

"I am working in a Telepizza from where I get less than half the minimum wage. [...] And I consider myself a NEET."
(FG Spain)

On the other hand, there is a feeling of community, not insofar as they feel that they belong to a community to which they adhere with pride or dedication, but because they understand that they are not alone in their situation. This happens both locally and internationally, despite distances and cultural differences. However, we found the first contrast between countries with high and low NEET rates, where such sentiment is not present.

"The same for everyone. I think everyone. We are in the same boat. Aren't we?" (FG Cyprus)

The latter is seriously linked to the first section of responsibility, in particular to individual responsibility. In the case of countries with low NEET rates, the feeling of individual responsibility, or that their situation depends on a personal decision, is greater.

"All the people who fall into this category, they do it whether they do something on their own or work on the farm themselves or something." (FG Germany)

Table 2. Percentage of NEETs by age cohort (2020).

Countries	15–19 years	20–24 years	25–29 years
EU27	6,3	15,7	18,6
Belgium	5,1	13,1	17,1
Bulgaria	9,7	19,3	24,1
Czechia	2,7	10,5	17,5
Denmark	4	10,6	15
Germany	5,2	9,1	11
Estonia	4	13,7	14,9
Ireland	9,3	14,9	18,7
Greece	7,8	19,5	28,9
Spain	7,9	20	23,7
France	6,1	17,4	19,7
Croatia	9,1	15,1	19,2
Italy	11,1	26,6	31,5
Cyprus	8,9	19	16,4
Latvia	2	12,6	19,5
Lithuania	2,8	17,5	17,1
Luxembourg	2,4	10,3	9,4
Hungary	6,8	16,3	19,6
Malta	9,2	9,4	9,7
Netherlands	2,3	6,6	8
Austria	4,6	10,9	11,9
Poland	2	14,7	19,4
Portugal	3,7	14,3	15
Romania	10,1	19,4	20,2
Slovenia	3,4	11,5	12
Slovakia	5,3	15,5	22
Finland	4,2	14,1	11,9
Sweden	3,2	9,7	8,5

Source: Eurostat (2021)

Meanwhile the NEETs in countries with high NEET rates, despite showing clear differences in the countries' characteristics, NEETs share a kind of contradiction in terms of individual responsibility. This is expressed through the acceptance, partly, of the guilt of being in this situation; either because they could have chosen other paths, trained more, accepted jobs that were not related to their training, etc., or because they understand that they do not have the tools to change their situation.

"Maybe it's also a matter of promoting yourself, apart from the rest, the unemployment and the lack of jobs." (FG Greece)

The context of their personal situations¹ is considerably different, which does not prevent a shared idea about their possibilities to change it, the paths that exist before them. In countries where the NEET rate is high, NEETs feel that society in general perceived the group negatively, but that it is a sentiment that has changed and/or is changing. This influences their own identity, but it does not eliminate the conflict between feeling like a failure and understanding that it is not their fault.

"That they have been calling us big babies. That we want to stay at home pampered, up to 30 years. For 30 years I have been trying to leave home." (FG Italy)

"So it's not the guy's fault if we can't find a job, or if we can't find ... It's no one's fault." (FG Spain)

Despite the substantial differences between the economic levels of NEETs, there is a clear acceptance of the importance of having the means to support themselves while being NEETs. Those who are in a situation of greater vulnerability are those who suffer the most from this problem, placing themselves in a limbo between being and not being NEETs, by not escaping from no-contract jobs (often even only one hour long).

"You see, I work in undeclared jobs, that is, I have no insurance, and this is a great hassle of part-time employment." (FG Greece)

Table 3. Percentage of NEETs according to maximum educational attainment level (2020).

Countries	Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (levels 0–2)	Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (levels 3 and 4)	Tertiary education (5–8)	No response
EU27	15	14,1	10,7	:
Belgium	15,1	12,3	7,8	:
Bulgaria	23,1	16,1	11,8	:
Czechia	9,6	11,8	11,5	:
Denmark	11,3	8,8	10,1	:
Germany	12,5	6,8	5,1	:
Estonia	8,9	14,5	8	:
Ireland	13,3	16,6	10,9	:
Greece	8,3	21	28,6	:
Spain	21,1	13,5	15,8	:
France	15,8	15,3	10,1	:
Croatia	7,4	17,3	16,6	:
Italy	21,8	25,4	20,7	:
Cyprus	12,8	17,8	14,5	:
Latvia	7,9	14	14,5	:
Lithuania	9,7	17,4	9,3	:
Luxembourg	7,1	8,6	7,4	:
Hungary	16,9	14,1	11,4	:
Malta	22,6	7,3	4,3	:
Netherlands	7,1	5,4	3,4	37,7
Austria	12,7	9,7	5,4	:
Poland	9,1	16,7	9,4	:
Portugal	10,1	11,9	10,7	:
Romania	20,6	15,4	8,2	:
Slovenia	8	10,7	7,3	:
Slovakia	15,3	15,9	13,2	:
Finland	10,1	11,7	6,1	:
Sweden	7,5	8,3	4,6	:

Source: Eurostat (2021)

In low NEET rate countries, the family mainly exercises the function of providing protection to those who are in the situation of being NEETs, while in the other countries that function is mainly exercised by the state, in line with what Esping-Andersen and Myles (2009) argued. The impact that this has on the NEET identity is clear, since it induces pressure on the youth identity via feelings of burden and guilt.

"I am surviving. I have had to return to my parents' house after four years" (FG Spain)

That pressure is also intertwined with the options that are considered to escape the NEET category. For this reason, many are waiting to find something related to the previous training/education they have received, something to which the family unit supports. Also, not everyone is willing to accept unskilled jobs or help in family businesses. On the other hand, those who do accept such jobs usually continue to consider themselves NEETs, even though they do not fit under the NEET label anymore.

"What I really want to do is not to lose the long term perspective. There are several qualifications. I have time to get them." (FG Italy)

Something that unites the groups in countries with a high NEET rate are contradictory expectations. It is common to see NEETs asserting both that everything is going to be better (i.e. that they are following the right path), and that the situation is not going to improve.

"I'm on the way to achieving my dreams, but I just have slowed down. How fast I'm doing it, but I'm doing it. Regarding my friends, when I tell people or my parents or my friends and everything, they just lose it with this situation." (FG Cyprus)

This is valid both from the point of view of their individual paths and those of society at large, especially as it relates to the impact of the COVID19 pandemic.

"I don't know when this [COVID] thing will end, and this thing is making me nervous and making me lose even the hopes that I had until some time ago." (FG Italy)

However, this message does not appear among young people in countries with a lower NEET rate. The NEETs there feel that they can escape the NEET category if they want or need to.

"It is easy to start working here in Germany, it is easy to start earning money" (FG Germany)

Nonetheless, the disruption of COVID19 also modified these ideas and impressions in countries where the NEET rate is low. It made the situation of being a NEET much more usual and easier to understand by those who are and when it is perceived by those who are not NEETs.

"I think it changed massively because of Corona and now it is much normal and it is not so bad" (FG Germany)

Deepening these expectations to a greater extent, we see that among the countries with high NEET rates, there is a common message of instability and precariousness in the future. On the contrary, where the pressure on youth in this regard is low, we do not come across this message.

"Temporary contracts, in my opinion. Now and in the future. There are and will be few fixed jobs, let's say, steady jobs. Unless you own a business." (FG Italy)

These ideas undoubtedly influence their identity, adapting their life plans to such expectations, postponing decisions that have a direct influence on their situations. We highlight both those of economic security and those of the construction of a new family nucleus or postponing moving to a home outside the parents'.

"I, like many people here, think that this is the moment when I would have to start a family. at 29 years-old? I don't know the others. 24? 25? Nobody. Nobody does it." (FG Spain)

With regard to the family section and the creation of a new family nucleus, the direct relationship with gender is revealed. Thus, we find another contradiction: they say they perceive gender differences in society, but they do not perceive them among the risk of being NEETs.

"Actually, no. There are opportunities for women, there are opportunities for men. Not that I see that as an obstacle." (FG Spain)

At the same time, they are aware that young women who want to have children are exposed to a greater probability of being NEETs and of not being able to escape the category.

"Namely, that women who choose to start a family and . . . possibly have stayed off the market for two or three years then find it very difficult to reenter." (FG Greece)

According to the NEETs, regarding the different public policies directed at them, we again come across the division between countries with high and low NEET rates, regardless of the characteristics of the NEETs. The young people who suffer the most lack knowledge about the public policies directed at them. They do not have the information about the existing options that they could use and do not show interest in learning about them.

"The only thing is that not many people know about these programs. So it will be more beneficial to help people get to know these programs and trust the process of the program. And then, many people are gonna get into them." (FG Cyprus)

This situation is driven by a lack of confidence that those policies could be useful.

"Obviously the policies implemented, at least for this issue, are deplorable! They're all wrong! Basic issues are not taken into account" (FG Greece)

This is strongly opposed to those who live in societies in a better situation with respect to the NEET rate.

"I've really met people who do this job as mediators . . . they really want people to find their calling." (FG Germany)

In countries with a high NEET rate, this mistrust seems to be deeply ingrained. Especially noteworthy is the rejection of public employment services as institutions that can help them. However, in low NEET rate countries, NEETs perceive those services as reliable for finding employment or training.

"They do not help when you are over thirty years old. I am still 27, but personally I have always worked finding work on my own and not through agencies, they have always wasted my time." (FG Spain)

In contrast, NEETs place their hope in their contacts and social networks. However, it is also linked to the negative thought of fearing that they do not have options to achieve success if they do not know someone who will facilitate them job offers.

"Most likely in many interviews or many questions that I have asked in certain jobs I have not been called because I did not have the right push, the recommendation. It is that." (FG Italy)

We also see this distrust in the administration among those who implement this type of public policy. This dynamic again is common between countries with high NEET, regardless of inequalities in terms of the characteristics of NEETs.

"We can have an impact, but the root of the problem is not what we tackle. They come to us when all the previous steps didn't work. If we do not fix that, we will always be late." (I 26 - Spain)

This indicates that not only the perception of these workers confirms the speeches of the young people, but also adds an uneasiness for the long-term solution of the problem. In other words, the expectation of long-term success is questioned by both NEETs and experts working to solve this problem.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, based on the contributions of authors like Gramsci, Feixa Pàmpols and many others, we characterized youth as a time of crisis and conflict. The data we introduced confirmed that characterization, even despite the disparity within the NEETs and the agglutinative use of the NEET label. Our generalist approach between countries, based on quantitative data, confirmed the mentioned disparity between the average NEET in the EU. Considering that the data includes indicators related to key characteristics in the formation of identity (sex, age, education), this approach highlights the problem of using the concept *NEET* to agglutinate all of them in the EU, and shows the difficulty of theorizing about the existence of a generalized NEETs' identity in the different study countries.

Building on the data, the qualitative methodology reveals that other social and cultural factors overcome the barriers illustrated by the quantitative characterization. In this sense, the NEET rate in each country plays the most important role. Parallel to Feixa Pàmpols' (2020) characterization of the youth as a crisis, finding oneself as a NEET (a characteristic that hinders the integration process) generates a dynamic of identity creation in line with the crisis of knowing oneself as a NEET. Thus, the young people in this situation tend to identify with the common label *NEET*, despite the differences in terms of educational levels, gender and/or age. The NEET identity appears as a process of integration, as a reaction within a dynamic of disintegration, facilitated by the strength of a process that relies on knowing that the group is relatively large.

We have partly focused on the effect of COVID on the NEET identity, especially regarding their expectations. Thus, we found that, although this has had an impact on the topic, the effect of COVID on this issue is small. Insofar, its impact is temporary and no relevant consequences are revealed on the NEET identity generation processes.

The data bring to light that where the NEET rate is low, NEETs a NEET identity does not emerge. Meanwhile, where it is high, despite factual differences, a similar NEET identity arises. Our work shows that the perception of the NEET group's size by young people is crucial for the NEET identity as

it generates awareness of being a NEET. Then, that awareness leads to the acceptance of the dependence on the social process against their free will; which is the aspect that most affects the generation of the NEET identity.

However, NEETs are full of contradictions. In the same way Offe (2018) shows the contradictions of the different actors within the Welfare State, NEETs emulate them through their struggle between knowing that they are outside of social structures and wanting to be within them. Fears and hopes of NEETs clash, forming a conflict between desire and scepticism. Their identities are in a constant conflict between a dreamed and expected future and a bleak one: ideal expectations versus negative experiences. Hope is lost in the face of the impotence of not being able to carry it out (Simões et al., 2021), which becomes part of their identity in constant crisis.

This internal conflict is revealed by a general feeling of detachment (Eurofund, 2012). In line with previous research (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018), we confirm that the lack of trust affects what NEETs see as optimal or probable in order to modify their personal and group situations. Hand in hand with the arguments regarding the relevance of the relative number of NEETs, their identity is influenced by a lack of motivation, seeing that the chances of escaping their situation are limited and they do not depend on them, because it is a social process. Although this detachment is not expressed exclusively in political terms (Alfieri et al., 2015), it influences the NEET identity trend to mistrust the structures of the Welfare State and this process directly influences the effectiveness of the Welfare State possibilities, in regard to achieving positive results.

This youth crisis becomes an identity crisis when it is interrelated with the lack of integration in the labour market. This key element of identity in today's society involves defining NEETs as non-productive, because they do not have a job or are not training for a job; a criticism highlighted by Yates and Payne (2006). Thus, this identity clash generates anomie in a line similar to that mentioned by Durkheim (1987) in the nineteenth century. The youth in this situation lack a framework that provides them useful guidelines that could help them know how to proceed when facing the future that awaits them. NEETs live the experience of not being able to feel like adults, in the sense of not being able to escape the stage of youth, a space between dependence on others and personal independence. Even those who should not formally be included in the category of NEETs, because they are sporadically employed in temporary jobs, are defined by precariousness. Therefore, their identity is enclosed within a categorization of *not entirely adults*.

The importance of the structures available, according to the typology of the Welfare State, is revealed following that topic of independence and adulthood. There is a dissonance between the states where much of the responsibility falls on family networks and those where the institutions of the state assume that responsibility. Thus, the process of system perpetuation is revealed, in which families are the pillar for the NEETs where the state is not strong enough (Ciccarelli & Fabrizi, 2017) and where it is not strong because there are a high number of NEETs. And as there are a lot of NEETs, there is no trust in the institutions of the Welfare State. This spiral is reinforced by the effect of pressure and/or influence of families by which they press the youth to find a future in better sectors and higher employment positions than their parents reached. It is what Ciccarelli and Fabrizi call 'wait and see' (2017, p. 35), and it generates an increase in the NEET rates when the demand is greater than the job supply.

The consequence of the previous paragraph is that the system ends up perpetuating itself, and this goes hand in hand with the forecast that we obtain from this investigation: there is no substantial change in the NEET identity. With this assertion, we do not deny the fact that an identity has been generated among the NEETs, which has fluctuated considerably between the different periods of economic boom and crisis. What we highlight is that the NEET identity depends more on the relative number of NEETs than on other factors. It means that this problem is a structural problem, one that is not tackled acceptably, which is a very important factor to consider when developing NEET policies. The causes behind that problem are not demolished by public policies, because they aim at the surface of the issue, and not to the pillars that are the source of the problem (Pemberton, 2008). Therefore, we predict that the NEET identity will change again. The variations in

identity, their awareness as NEETs, the reduction of feeling guilty NEETs have (for understanding that it is a social process rather than an individual one), etc. Those elements are generated more by changes in the NEET rate than by effects derived from an inherent change. Thus, in line with the cyclical tendencies of the capitalist Welfare State system, we argue that the NEET identity will return to a situation similar to that of previous boom periods, when the relative number of NEETs is reduced due to the improvement in the economic situation. Recovering again the contributions of Offe (2018), despite the conflict of interest, if the contradictions are not addressed, if the bases of the problem are not solved, all changes will be superficial and both the NEET identity and NEET problem will fluctuate following the usual systemic cycles. Therefore, the NEET identity will return to the state it was before the outbreak of the last or penultimate crisis, but it will also return to the current state after the collapse and return to a new (but similar) situation, a similar crisis.

Note

1. In order to achieve coherent diversity, the groups consisted of NEETs whose key characteristics vary considerably.

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