

## Youth unemployment in Greece: Situation before the government change

### KEY FINDINGS

- **Young people in Greece have been more adversely affected by the crisis than in the other countries analysed** (Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus). This holds true for all parameters considered - employment, unemployment, long-term unemployment, NEET youth (Neither in Employment, Education or Training). Youth unemployment has been declining in all these countries since 2013 (Cyprus: 2014) while economic adjustment was ongoing, but remained at a high level of 50.1 % in January 2015 in Greece.
- Greece shows a number of **specific structural features** having caused a **comparatively weak performance before the crisis** started: a prolonged and incomplete transition from education to work, a high share of highly educated unemployed aged 25-29, strong gender differentials, (flattening) regional disparities, sectoral labour market segregation and a high share of informal employment.
- As a reaction to soaring youth unemployment, **European and national initiatives have been intensified** to cope with structural weaknesses and to improve short-term job perspectives. These include, for example, a national Youth Action Plan (December 2012), funding from the Youth Employment Initiative and support from a Commission Task Force Greece.
- Given a persisting lack of labour demand and budget constraints, **recommendations from recent analyses** include the expansion of temporary, subsidised public work programmes, further increasing the effective use of EU funding, efficiency gains in shaping ALMPs and expanding the age limits of the Youth Guarantee. They also point to a dilemma: a further increase in resource allocation for programmes targeted at young people could come at the expense of other numerically larger groups of recipients.

### 1. LABOUR MARKET SITUATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

For all parameters considered (employment, unemployment, long-term unemployment, NEET youth, young people at risk of poverty), **young people in Greece have been more adversely affected than in the other selected countries**, i.e. the so-called "programme" countries Ireland, Portugal, Cyprus and Spain which received a lighter form of conditional financial assistance<sup>1</sup>.

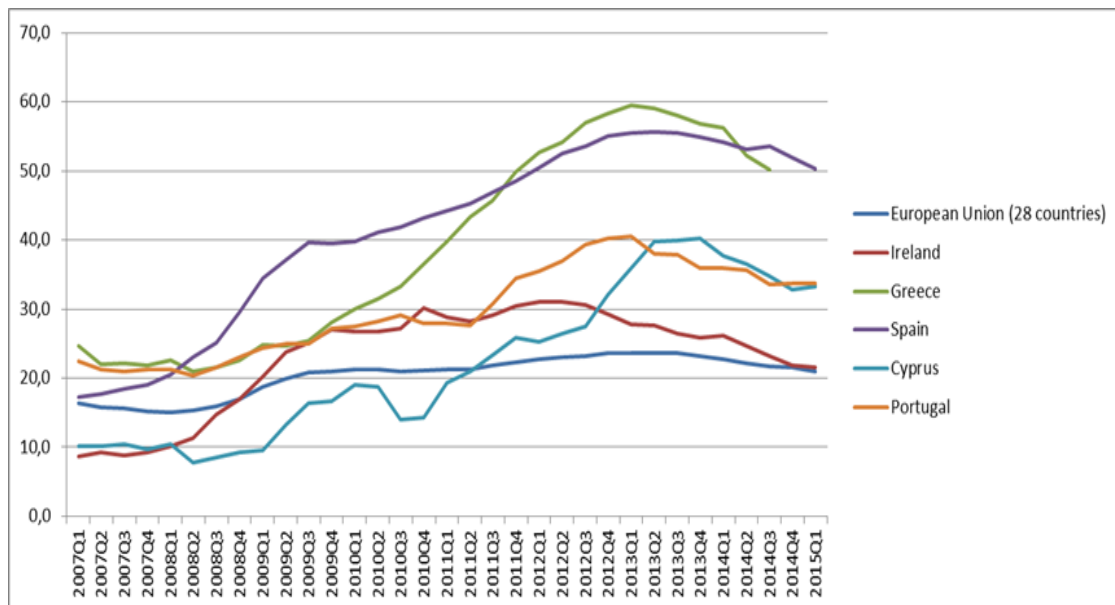
The **youth employment rate** in Greece **decreased to 11.8 % in 2013** which is by far the lowest rate in the EU28 including countries particularly affected by the crisis (EU28 average 33.2 %, Ireland 29.0 %, Cyprus 23.5 %, Portugal 21.7 %, Spain 16.8 %). In Greece, the number of employed youth declined three times more than that of adults: by 55.2% compared to 18.5 %<sup>2</sup>.

## Youth unemployment - incomplete recovery

In general, young people tend to be disadvantaged when entering the labour market due to limited or no work experience, a mismatch between the skills young people possess and those demanded by the labour market, a lack of career management / job search skills or access to professional networks, as well as a higher share of temporary contracts<sup>3</sup>.

This phenomenon tends to be more pronounced in times of recession. At its peak, Greece experienced an alarming **youth unemployment rate of 59.5 %** in the first quarter of 2013. Since then youth benefitted more than adults from an improving labour market situation, though the youth unemployment still more than doubles the rate before the crisis: the youth unemployment rate fell to **50.1 % in January 2015** (149 000 young people) compared to 21 % in the second quarter of 2008. Overall unemployment rose from 7.7 % in 2008 to 27.3 % in 2013, going down to 25.3 % in January 2015 (= 1,2 million unemployed).

### Youth unemployment rate in selected countries (2007-2015, %)



In all selected countries, **youth unemployment is at a higher level than before the crisis** and the discrepancy is larger than for the EU28 average. However, in Greece and Spain young people were hit hardest<sup>4</sup>.

### Background: Measurement makes a difference (Greece 2013)

**Youth unemployment rate** = 58.3% - proportion of unemployed / labour force

**Youth unemployment ratio** = 16.5% - proportion of unemployed / total youth population

The commonly used unemployment rate is by definition higher as the denominator is restricted to the labour force. A number of researchers consider the unemployment ratio more valid as it is not triggered by the size of the youth labour force in a country. In general, this is increasing with age as young people move from education into the labour market. However, there is strong variation across countries, reducing comparability<sup>5</sup>.

To explain the soaring youth unemployment in Greece and other countries under the procedure of economic adjustment, a number of scholars point to the **impact of austerity**, i.e. effects from cuts in public spending, privatisation, wage decreases, partial tightening of social protection, liberalising of temporary contracts and part-time arrangements and reducing employment protection<sup>6</sup>.

Data for the selected countries show a strong impact of the crisis in 2008 while a correlation with economic adjustment is more complex and ambiguous. **Unemployment began to go up immediately after the crisis started in August 2008 or even before** (since the second

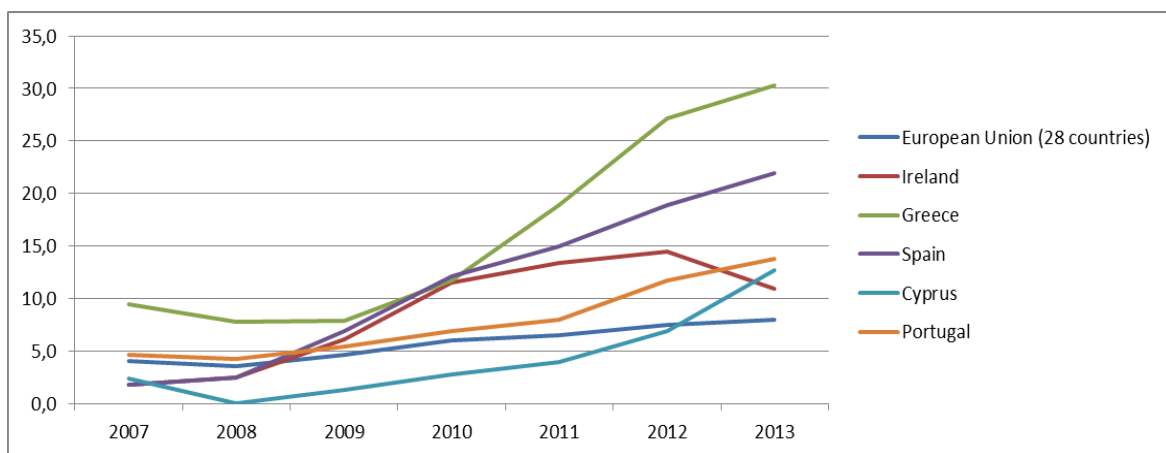
or third quarter of 2008, from 2007 already in Spain) and **started to decline in 2013 while economic adjustment was still ongoing**, in Ireland even from the second quarter of 2012. After the launch of the economic adjustment programmes, in Greece and in particular in Portugal youth unemployment rose at a higher pace, while in Spain, Cyprus and Ireland most of the rise occurred in the private sector before structural reforms began.

Country	Start / end financial assistance / adjustment	Abrupt rise unemployment From	Decline youth unemployment (peak)
Greece	05/2010 - ongoing	Q3/2009 (Q3/2010)	Q1/2013
Ireland	01/2011 - 2013	Q2/2008 (Q3/2010)	Q2/2012
Portugal	05/2011 – mid-2014	Q2/2008 Q2/2011	Q1/2013
Spain	07/2012 - 01/2014	Q4/2007 Q1/2010	Q3/2013
Cyprus	05/2013 - ongoing	Q1/2009 Q4/2010 Q4/2012	Q4/2013

### Increasing long-term youth unemployment - a major challenge

Given the deep and protracted crisis, many EU countries are confronted with persisting unemployment: **One out of three young unemployed** in Greece has been **unemployed for more than a year**. In all selected countries, long-term youth unemployment increased considerably and exceeds by far the EU28 average, except for Ireland where overall youth unemployment started to decline from 2012.

**Long-term youth unemployment rate in selected countries (2007-2013, %)**

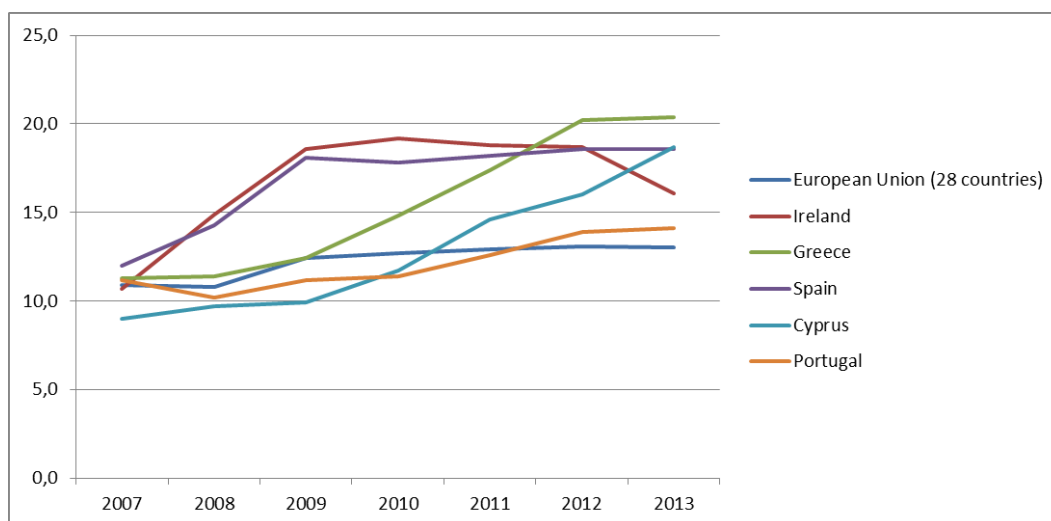


Long-term unemployment has **severe consequences**. As employability decreases with duration of unemployment, **integration becomes more challenging and costly**. There is evidence that longer lasting unemployment of young people has scarring effects on the whole work biography<sup>7</sup>.

### NEET youth (Neither in Employment, Education, Training) - highest rate in Greece

Furthermore, in all countries analysed, the rate of NEET youth encompassing involuntarily inactive, discouraged and unemployed young people has gone up.

### NEET-youth rate in selected countries (2007-2013, %)



In Greece, as a result from the crisis, the NEET-youth rate has nearly doubled since 2007 when it was close to the EU average. It went up from 11 % to more than 20 % in 2013. This is twice as high as the Europe 2020 target set at 10 %. In Spain, Portugal and Cyprus, the rate has been stagnating at a higher level than before the crisis. Again, the rate declined in Ireland alone where the economy recovered more quickly and resources for ALMP had been increased as reaction to the crisis<sup>8</sup>.

### One in two young people in Greece was at risk of poverty already in 2012

Household disposable incomes fell by over 30 % in 2009-13, and **poverty in Greece shifted away from elderly towards younger couples with children and to young workers**<sup>9</sup>. While in 2007, one in three young Greeks aged 15-24 was at risk of poverty and social exclusion (33.6 % compared to an EU average of 28.7 %), in 2012, according to Eurostat data, the rate climbed up to one in two (45.5 % in Greece vs. 31.4 % EU average).

Poverty among young people (15-24) has been **increasing in all countries analysed** according to the most recent data available: It was second highest in Ireland (42.5 % in 2012), followed by Spain (37.4 % in 2013), Cyprus (32.4 % in 2013) and Portugal (32.2 % in 2012) according to the most recent data available.

Even if youth unemployment has been declining since 2013, a diminishing risk of poverty may not be taken for granted **as influencing factors go into opposing directions**: The positive effect of decreasing unemployment has partially been foiled by decreasing wages, inconsistent effects of benefit reforms and underemployment.

In compliance with the economic adjustment programme, in 2012 **Greece reduced minimum wages** by 22 % from EUR 751 to EUR 586, with an additional discount for people younger than 25 years: Their minimum wage fell by 32 %. Today the minimum wage for this age group stands at EUR 511. However, despite this reduction, Greece is still in the middle group of EU countries having set a minimum wage between EUR 500 and 800. The practice of setting a youth minimum wage at lower level than the standard is applied in many countries, including in the EU, and has sparked a **controversial debate on wage discounts for young people**, ethical aspects and employment effects<sup>10</sup>.

**The potential impact from reforms** of unemployment benefits was **inconsistent**. Notes prepared by the European Parliament show that public social transfers had been comparatively low in Greece already before the crisis. As a reaction to the decrease of the minimum wage, the monthly **unemployment benefit was lowered** from EUR 454 to EUR 360 for all workers irrespective of age. On the other hand, young people benefited from an **extension of coverage**: Since 2014, they are entitled to long-term unemployment

benefits (20 - 66 instead of 45plus before). In addition, a special fund for self-employed was established and a new minimum income scheme has been piloted in 2014<sup>11</sup>.

**Underemployment is on the rise**, increasing the risk of poverty: the share of involuntary part-time employment in Greece has nearly doubled from 5 % to 11 %<sup>12</sup>.

## 2. SPECIFIC FEATURES OF YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN GREECE

The recession exacerbated persisting structural weaknesses and disparities in Greece which was **traditionally showing a weaker youth employment performance**, though **progress** had been made **during the last decade**<sup>13</sup>. Specific features include:

**A prolonged and more incomplete transition from education to work:** Underlying reasons are skills mismatches, low esteem of manual work, **low quality of VET** (Vocational Education and Training) and a low degree of cooperation among firms and the education system, a high share of **informal employment** and a modest performance of the Greek **Public Employment Service**<sup>14</sup>.

**Skills mismatches:** Greece showed the **highest incidence of over-qualification** (26 %) between 2001 and 2011. Universities most in demand in Greece prepared graduates for a limited range of qualifications: in particular for **liberal professions** and the **broader public sector** which was large and offered better paid and protected jobs before economic adjustment programmes came into force. **Shortages** exist in Greece in ICT, wholesale and retail trade including for highly qualified posts, whilst recruiting difficulties in general were less pronounced in Greece, Cyprus and Spain compared to other EU countries in 2013 as a result of the strong recession<sup>15</sup>.

**Regional disparities:** In 2013, youth employment rates reached from 23 % in South Aegean to a low of 6 - 9 % in mining regions, such as Western and Central Macedonia. Traditionally, youth unemployment was lower in regions with touristic and agricultural activities (e.g. Eastern Macedonia, South Aegean and Crete). Regional discrepancies partially flattened towards a **negative convergence** across regions: **All regions** in Greece were **eligible for funding under the Youth Employment Initiative in 2012** (meaning they had a youth unemployment rate higher than 25 %)<sup>16</sup>.

**Sectoral labour market segregation and rigid labour market:** In the private sector, where micro- and small enterprises are prevalent, employed young people are concentrated with a high share of **42 % in two industries only** (accommodation and food services, wholesale and retail trade). Many of the current NEETs have got limited seasonal and casual work experience. Before the adoption of fundamental reforms between 2010 and 2012, the Greek labour market **was among the most regulated and rigid** in the EU, making labour market entry difficult for 'outsiders'<sup>17</sup>.

**Higher age and educational level of unemployed:** The **unemployment rate of those aged 25-29** is highest in Europe and numerically, their unemployment is larger than for younger people. Contrasting with the common pattern in EU, in Greece **highly qualified** persons holding university degrees have a higher risk of unemployment and NEET situations, which aggravated with the recession.

**Gender differentials:** Female activity rates and employment-to-population ratios are consistently lower and unemployment rates higher for females than for males in the Greek labour market and Greece shows the **highest proportion of female long-term unemployed in the EU**. At the same time, **young women are more mobile**<sup>18</sup>.

**A strong family safety net and decreasing youth autonomy** diminish the visibility of unemployment, underemployment and inactivity. Most NEETs live with their parents, brothers or sisters and many have health insurance provided by the company of their parents. The proportion of those aged 25-29 not living with their parents fell from 41.7 % in 2005 to 36.2 % in 2012 (compared to 79.5 % in UK). At the same time, **fertility** has been decreasing in Greece since 2009 from 1.49 to 1.3<sup>19</sup>.



## Young people in Greece: feeling marginalised and ready to move

Answers from young people in Greece to a European-wide survey demonstrate the impact of the crisis on their perceptions and show need for further policy action<sup>20</sup>:

- **Only 19 %** (vs. 55 % in EU28) **think that training, school and university education are well adapted to the current world of work**
- **87 %** (vs. 57 % in EU28) feel that they have been **marginalised** in their country by the economic crisis (excluded from economic and social life)
- **More than one in two** (51 % vs. 26 % in EU28) feel compelled to study, to undergo **training or to work in another EU country** because of the crisis.

### 3. POLICIES TARGETED AT YOUNG UNEMPLOYED / NEET YOUTH

Greek authorities took measures to alleviate youth unemployment already before the crisis began. The initiatives aimed at sustaining youth labour market outcomes included the development of specific programmes for the promotion of youth employment, cuts in social security contributions, training programmes in tourism, construction and ICT, as well as help to become self-employed or conversion of unemployment benefits into wage subsidies. Other initiatives included counselling such as vocational guidance and job-search training<sup>21</sup>.

#### Intensified European and national efforts

The **European Union** has developed a number of initiatives to complement Member States' action in this field. **As part of the Economic Adjustment Programmes, Greece** received **technical assistance** with support from a dedicated **Commission Task Force Greece**. Taking a comprehensive approach, this aimed at increasing administrative capacities, eliminating administrative barriers, facilitating access to financing for enterprises and **ensuring better labour market integration and social inclusion** (e.g. effective use of the European Social Fund, refining the Greek Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan, re-engineering the Greek Public Employment Service OAED). The Task Force has continued its work after a hiatus since the election of the new government in January 2015<sup>22</sup>.

In addition, special activities were taken to **combat youth unemployment**:

#### 1. Youth Employment Action Teams

In February 2012, at the initiative of the European Commission, **Youth Employment Action Teams** were put in place in the eight Member States with the highest youth unemployment rates, among which Greece. Their task was to mobilise EU structural funding, including from the European Social Fund, still available in the 2007-2013 programming period to support job opportunities for young people and to facilitate SME access to finance. By the beginning of 2013, around EUR 16 billion of EU funding had been targeted for accelerated delivery or reallocation. In Greece, EUR 1.2 billion of structural funds were reprogrammed to address liquidity needs of SMEs.

As part of this initiative in January 2013, the Greek government adopted a **national 'youth action plan'**. With an **EU funding of EUR 517 million**, the plan aimed at promoting youth employment, training and entrepreneurship, targeting around 350 000 young people in Greece<sup>23</sup>.

**Concrete initiatives** under this plan combine **demand and supply side policies** including subsidised full-time employment of university graduates, **apprenticeship programmes and career guidance** in tertiary education, promotion of entrepreneurship in education and for unemployed, temporary hiring of young unemployed people in community-based programmes in the cultural sector as well as in social support structures. The launch of a **'voucher for access to the labour market'** is another scheme targeting around 45 000 young unemployed under the age of 29. It combines training with a five-month job placement in a business.

## Government Action plan of targeted interventions to strengthen youth employment (December 2012)<sup>24</sup>

- Axis 1:** Creating jobs for the youth based upon formal qualifications, through **subsidised employment**
- Axis 2:** Strengthening of **vocational education and training** and of apprenticeship systems placing emphasis on the combination of training and work experience and on further **investment in job placement and in traineeship scheme** during and after education
- Axis 3:** Establishment of **systematic school-to-work programs** in order to support acquisition of first work experience (combined with mentoring, counselling, training and employment), adjusted to the special profile and needs of young unemployed
- Axis 4:** Enhancing of **counselling and career guidance** focusing on young unemployed. Boosting of school career guidance, career mentoring and counselling in entrepreneurship in tertiary education
- Axis 5:** Strengthening of **youth entrepreneurship**, focus on new/innovative products, services and sectors of entrepreneurs
- Axis 6:** Investing in measures aimed at **mitigating school drop-out**

Many of these initiatives contribute to the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. To combat skills mismatches, in 2013, the Greek government set up a **permanent diagnostic mechanism** to identify labour market needs based upon information from employers (ERGANI information system)<sup>25</sup>.

## 2. Implementation of the Youth Guarantee

The implementation of the Youth Guarantee adopted by the Council in April 2013, has started in all EU countries<sup>26</sup>. This Guarantee aims at ensuring that all young people under the age of 25 years receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. All countries prepared implementation plans in 2013/2014 including concrete measures, a timeframe and financing.

Greece submitted a **Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan** in December 2013 which was updated in June 2014 and is scheduled to be fully implemented by 2016. Compared to previous ALMP programmes including the Youth Action Plan, it has been **evaluated as "real improvement"** by the Task Force Greece, as it provides a systematic analysis of the problem and contains a **multidimensional strategy**: The Greek labour ministry coordinates implementation taking a **partnership approach**. The Coordination Committee and the Working Group on the implementation of the Youth Guarantee involve a number of other relevant ministries, bodies, social partners and civil society (youth) organisations. Local public employment services (OAED) serve as contact point for NEETs. Activation measures for young people within the context of the Youth Guarantee include individual action planning, programmes to acquire work experience, newly introduced outreach strategies and career guidance for high-school students. The OAED is running own vocational schools where it is introducing apprenticeship years<sup>27</sup>.

There is consensus in research that the **implementation of the Youth Guarantee** is an **'excellent opportunity for Greece to 'work on several long standing problems'**<sup>28</sup>.

## 3. Youth Employment Initiative

The **Youth Employment Initiative (YEI)**, proposed in February 2013 by the Council, exclusively supports NEET youth in regions experiencing youth unemployment rates above 25 %. It is funded from three sources: ESF national allocations (EUR 3.2 billion), specific EU

budget (EUR 3.2 billion) and national co-financing to the ESF part. In **Greece**, the YEI specific allocation is EUR **171.5 million for the period 2014–2015** (matched by the same amount from the ESF). The Greek **operational programme for Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning** for the ESF programming period 2014-2020 was adopted in December 2014<sup>29</sup>. All YEI measures will target young people directly. Funding can support measures, such as direct support for high-quality traineeships and apprenticeships; provision of first job experience (placements for at least 6 months); start-up support for young entrepreneurs (mentoring and access to finance); quality vocational education and training.

To speed up project implementation in February 2015, the European Commission has proposed an **amendment to the ESF regulation**: the **YEI pre-financing rate** will be paid already after the adoption of the Operational Programmes. At the same time, it will be increased from 1-1.5 % to up to 30 % in its 2015 budget allocation. In Greece, the pre-financing would reach EUR 51.5 million. **Welcoming the initiative, Parliament** has adopted its report on 24 April 2015, **taking over the Commission proposal without tabling any amendments** to speed up the procedure<sup>30</sup>.

#### 4. CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

The **Commission assessments of the 2013 and the 2014 national reform programmes** for Greece acknowledge **progressive changes** in the functioning of the labour market, the education sector and the Public Employment Services. At the same time, they stress the necessity of further implementation:

##### Commission Assessment of Reforms in Greece (2014)<sup>31</sup>

- The **ambitious reforms** implemented in the labour market have allowed Greece to recover the competitiveness (...) in terms of unit labour costs.
- Dealing with the very high unemployment rate, in particular for youth, (...) remains a priority. (...) **A good rollout of the Youth Guarantee scheme** as early as possible in 2014 is of greatest importance.
- **Reforms to upgrade the Greek education system** have already produced **significant efficiency gains**, but more efforts are needed to **improve the quality of education**. Greece needs a major reform to upgrade and expand vocational education, training and apprenticeships.
- Improving social safety nets and addressing increase in poverty: Key actions include the development of a **guaranteed minimum income scheme** and a comprehensive review of the social welfare system.

To conclude from recent analyses, strategies to combat youth unemployment in Greece have to cope with a **double challenge**: to set up capable systems, services and ALMPs in an economic context where resources are scarce and an impact is less certain.

#### Integration strategies in a context of weak demand and budget constraints

**Weak demand for labour** together with a **prevalence of micro- and small enterprises** and a high share of **informal employment** hampers the effect of targeted ALMP measures, such as training or subsidies for employers. Low readiness on the side of employers goes together with high resource-intensity to serve them and to change perceptions. It is challenging to achieve the short-term job effects needed to implement the Youth Guarantee as these require considerable economic growth<sup>32</sup>.

A number of international studies recommend the expansion of **temporary subsidised public work programmes** to bridge the persisting gap in demand. Such an approach was supported by the Commission in its reviews of the Memoranda of Understanding and Greece intended to expand them in 2014 targeting long-term unemployment and NEET youth<sup>33</sup>.



Another proposal to create demand and enhance formal employment sets out **guidance for SMEs and promotion of entrepreneurship**<sup>34</sup>.

To improve the match of existing demand and supply, **mobility across regions** should be enhanced. This is comparatively low in Greece due to rigidities of the housing markets and a strong tradition of family networks<sup>35</sup>.

A second challenge is **costs of integration programmes in a context of austerity policies**. A recent study comparing Greece and Portugal concludes that the **modernisation effects of the Memoranda of Understanding** in general were **challenged** by the combination of demands for budget cuts, improvements of competitiveness together with the increase in demand for social and labour market support due to mounting unemployment rates<sup>36</sup>.

Against this background, **associated costs of the Youth Guarantee** are considered to be a problem. Roughly 160 000 unemployed young people, if paid the legal minimum wage of EUR 510 when participating in a programme would require around EUR 76.5 million per month in addition to the and costs for PES and ALMPs<sup>37</sup>. Given the situation in Greece, a number of scholars recommend an **expansion of the age span of those eligible to the Youth Guarantee from 25 to 30 years**. In its resolution on Youth Employment of 17 July 2014, the European Parliament equally called on the Commission to adjust the Youth Guarantee in order to cover young people aged between 25 and 30<sup>38</sup>. However, this would considerably augment the associated costs taking into account that this group is numerically even larger.

Looking at data on ALMP expenditures and staffing of the Greek PES confirms that **budget constraints** currently severely **limit the scope of labour market measures and service modernisation**. Total **ALMP expenditure by PES was more than halved from 2011 to 2012**, down from EUR 986.3 million to **EUR 440.7 million** and has not recovered since. According to a Commission study of 2014, financial capacities in Europe strongly vary. For example, the expenditures for ALMP and PES are strikingly higher in Austria where unemployment is relatively low. ALMP expenditures of the Austrian PES accounted for EUR 13.7 billion in 2014. Moreover, the individual caseload per employment advisor was considerably lower than in the Greek PES: Around 4 400 advisors were serving around 300 000 registered unemployed, compared to 2 300 advisors in Greece, serving more than one million registered unemployed, making outreach and quality individual action planning difficult<sup>39</sup>.

**Against this background, European Funding** from the Youth Employment Initiative and the ESF **has an important mitigating function**. However, it will not compensate for the augmented need for action even if progress has been made in using European funding. Compared to the programming period 2007-2013, the overall ESF allocation for the programming period 2014-2020 is lower by a full EUR 500 million (EUR 3,862,511,049 including the Youth Employment Initiative vs. EUR 4,363,800,403 2007-2013, usage rate 80 % according to information from the Commission).

**Efficiency gains in national programme design** could contribute to **optimise the use of available resources**. An evaluation of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in Greece for the Commission Task Force (2014) recommended, for example, to make more systematic use of evaluation of previous ALMPs as basis for future planning, to systematically define why proposed ALMPs are targeted at certain age groups of young people other than that defined by the Youth Guarantee in order to ensure eligibility for European funding, and to explore why unit costs of programmes for subsidised jobs are relatively high in Greece<sup>40</sup>.

Finally, the evaluation points to a dilemma as additional resources allocated to young people in a context of budget constraints may come **at the expense of programmes devoted to other recipients** of national and EU funds which are numerically larger.

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