

WHAT SHAPES YOUTH ATTITUDES TOWARD THE JOB MARKET? ROMANIAN MENTALITIES AND REALITIES

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Abstract: *In Romania, the relationship between younger generations and the labour market is shaped by multiple factors, including economic, social, and cultural ones. Compared to past generations, today's youth have access to more opportunities but also face challenges distinct from those of their predecessors. Their approach to employment reflects not only individual aspirations but also the influence of mentalities shaped by the country's recent history and the demands of a globalized and globalizing capitalist economy. Caught between different economic realities, inheriting a deficient education system, and adopting cultural models from abroad, young people strive to find jobs that meet their needs—needs that only partially align with employers' demands. In our paper, we will examine several key aspects of the complex relationship between young people and the labour market, as reflected in articles and publications from the fields of human resources and business.*

Keywords: *young people, jobs, labour market, mentality, Romania*

1. Introduction

Among European Union countries, Romania has, for many years, recorded a significant percentage of young people who, after completing secondary school, neither pursued any form of further education (academic or vocational) nor entered the labour market (Eurostat data for 2008–2017, in Bădescu et al., 2019: 4). Consequently, Romania often ranks at the bottom in Eurobarometer surveys regarding youth integration into the labour market, job options, and opportunities to secure employment. Currently, Romania reflects a widespread situation where many young people are employed in jobs that do not correspond to their aspirations or qualifications. Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, a report by the German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (as a result of a research study conducted in 2018 on the values of young people from ten countries in Southeast Europe) indicated that less than one-third of surveyed young Romanians were employed in the field for which they had been trained. At the same time, over one-third had jobs in a different domain than their field of study (Bădescu et al., 2019: 44). A few years later, we find a similar percentage concerning people aged 18–35: “33% of surveyed Romanian youth stated that the available job openings they found were not interesting or suitable for them, 30% complained about the low salary offered for their first job in Romania, and 27% said employers had overly high expectations of them” (Zamfir, 2023).

These data, along with many others, reveal both the inadequacy of the education system in meeting employer requirements (and more broadly, the trends in the labour market) and the unwise choices made by graduates. A series of opinion polls also highlight a tendency to blame employers for the difficulties encountered in their first job experiences (Zamfir, 2023). However, little is said about the options young people make regarding their future professional training. Many do not understand what they want in terms of a career, while others choose fields or professions for which they are not well-suited. This inadequacy, less visible or studied, also contributes to the broader picture of the relationship between recent generations and their jobs.

2. The perpetuation of old mentalities

The (im)possibility for young people to find a job — and one that aligns with their aspirations — depends primarily on human factors but also reflects a particular connection to the recent history of Romanian society. Some pre-1990 mentalities and behaviours have persisted, albeit in a diminished form, into today's generations. For instance, the idea of financially supporting young people after reaching adulthood, especially those who are studying.

In Western countries, many young people had to (and still must) work to finance their education. In Romania, however, young people have not faced such challenges [according to a 2022 Eurostat report, Romania had the lowest percentage of young people employed during their studies, at 2%, compared to

73% in the Netherlands] (Popa, 2023). Under the communist education system, all levels of schooling, up to the highest, were fully funded by the state. Employees (not just the young ones) could earn a high school or university degree through evening classes. While this required sustained effort from participants, it did not incur the costs seen abroad, where private educational institutions are the most expensive.

Even today, there is a certain expectation that the state should cover educational expenses. Similarly, there remains the belief that a diploma (particularly a university degree) should guarantee a job. As one commentator observed: "Due to the enthusiasm for pursuing higher education — one degree after another, some more or less accredited — and every parent's desire for their child to have a diploma, we have theoretically raised the country's cultural level. Because we have tens of thousands of graduates [...]. But in reality, many of them are not adequately prepared. In 2001, out of 2,200 candidates for the bar exam, only 21 were admitted." (Călin Zamfirescu, on TVR, 2012).

Young people are not professionally prepared, yet parents push them forward when this should have been done earlier. "Parents would come to us with their child's résumé and say, 'I want to get my child hired.' 'How old is your child?' '25.' 'Well, they're not a child anymore; they're an adult!' I mean... This has a lot to do with the excessive pampering that our system, particularly the distinctly Romanian parental system, fosters in children." (Cătălin Nan, president of the National Association for Parents, in Nechita, 2024).

Such views and behaviours persist, and like any entrenched mentalities, they will not disappear easily. During the communist era, the prevailing idea was that a young person studying should focus exclusively on school: where parents could afford it, they bore the entire financial burden. This was particularly true for academic education, with the expectation that after graduation, the young person would secure employment, usually in their field of study. The notion of supporting young people financially until they complete university (and sometimes even a master's program) still exists in certain families today. Some parents see it as their duty to provide this support (often with sacrifices in families with modest incomes), which delays the young person's real engagement with the challenges of the labour market.

3. There are so many motives for not succeeding

Some young people are in no hurry to find a job and develop a narrative that critiques employers, the education system, society—or all these together. Achieving financial independence is seen as a daunting task, so complex that it demoralizes and discourages young people from making efforts toward self-fulfillment. Some parents themselves contribute to their children's (very) delayed integration into the labour market, believing that their offspring should enjoy benefits they themselves were denied in their youth. "It's part of our cultural story, somehow, where young people are still encouraged by parents to stay a bit longer and not take a job, even after finishing university," said Aida Chivu, an HR specialist, in a ProTV News report (2024). Parents seek to be protective in a highly volatile world undergoing significant transformations, where new professions are emerging that did not exist before. These new jobs increasingly value soft skills, an aspect not heavily emphasized in Romanian education. A few decades ago, Romanians knew that obtaining a diploma would clearly lead to various professions. Today, however, many occupations have disappeared, and diplomas have lost their value, as only work experience matters. Therefore, can we expect Romania to continue ranking at the bottom of EU opinion polls? Alongside Italy and Greece, Romania was identified this summer in a Eurobarometer as having "the highest number of unemployed individuals among those who have completed a form of education" (ProTV News, 2024). Italy is well-known among European countries for its high number of young adults living with their parents for extended periods. Romania is in a similar situation regarding young people under the age of 30 (Euronews, 2024). In both countries, we see the same pattern of parents remaining protective of their children, even after they reach adulthood, including in decisions about their professional paths.

However, the cultural model is not the only factor at play; the limited financial capacity of these individuals to pay rent—or even more challenging, to buy a home—before the mentioned age must also be considered. Some young people come to feel that, despite putting significant effort into finding a good job, they are still unable to afford housing or more ambitious projects. In other cases, frequently changing jobs or occupations becomes a mere effort to ensure financial survival, leaving little to no resources for professional development. "Many adolescents end up accepting jobs with low wages relative to the effort required, which can exhaust them both physically and emotionally, leading to discouragement and a loss of hope that they will ever achieve the goals they have set for themselves in life," (Cohut, 2023). This trend toward de-skilling increasingly contributes to a reduced engagement with the labour market, reflected in diminished interest, openness to learning new things, and acquiring new job skills. These are also plausible

explanations for young people's demotivation—or, in extreme cases, their indifferent attitude toward obtaining any job. As a result, we are witnessing the emergence of a critical mass of young people who are interested in working just enough to survive at a minimal level. These young individuals feel like prisoners of an era, a system, or a world that fails to value them, treating them instead as mere cogs in a larger machine.

The demotivation and disorientation of young people are understandable realities, especially in the context of the chronic lack of support exhibited by the Romanian state. Some timid initiatives come from the Ministry of Labour: in the spring of 2024, the ministry announced in a press release the allocation of funds for young people determined to enter the workforce. The money, disbursed through the National Employment Agency [AJOFM], is referred to as "incentives" and falls into three main categories: the activation bonus, the integration bonus, and mobility bonuses. For instance, the first category provides "1,000 lei for employment (approximately 200 euros, author's note), for a minimum of three months, to unemployed youth without unemployment benefits who find a job." The relocation bonus (a subcategory of the mobility bonuses) is granted for up to three years, amounting to a maximum of 900 lei per month, covering $\frac{3}{4}$ of the rent paid by young people (approximately 135 euros, author's note), when they take a job more than 50 km away from their place of residence (Ministry of Labour, 2024).

It is worth noting that the first two categories of incentives are aimed at young people registered with the AJOFM, which effectively excludes those who are not enrolled in the agency's records. It remains unclear what impact this initiative has among young people (to the extent they are even aware of it), particularly those living in rural areas, who find it more difficult to reach the towns where AJOFM branches are located. Moreover, Romanian youth generally do not view these agencies as key resources in their job search efforts, given that the jobs offered are often considered either poorly paid or lacking in prestige.

The ministry's initiative comes very late, after decades during which young people—especially those with minimal education and from rural areas—have emigrated in the hundreds of thousands to earn a living abroad. "Younger emigrants come almost exclusively from the poorest layers of society." (Bădescu et al., 2019: 77). In any case, young people's expectations do not refer on palliative measures but on stable, diverse jobs and a regulated labour market. The fact that many young people no longer return to the country shows that, in reality, these expectations have almost vanished.

4. What is to be done?

Most young people understand that the key to success lies in cultivating a desire for growth and continuously seeking development opportunities. Under the economic pressures imposed by globalization, many young individuals (some of whom are pursuing professional or academic education) apply to multiple jobs, hoping to be called for an interview for at least one. Beyond their personal aspirations for their professional future, they recognize that without an open attitude toward challenges, they risk failure. This mindset often involves accepting work that is less desirable or enjoyable—and possibly lower paid—with the understanding that it represents a transitional stage toward something better or more desirable. This perspective explains the tendency to gravitate toward sectors requiring either unskilled or minimally skilled labour.

Thus, a series of reports, studies, opinion polls, and the expertise of human resources specialists highlight the preference of graduates or those seeking part-time collaborations for industries such as retail, HoReCa (Hotels and Restaurants), marketing, promotion and sales, food delivery, education and tutoring (Gigs Team, 2023), or the events industry ("hostess or brand ambassador at various social events, concerts, or conferences") (Glăvan, 2023). Young people are also open to jobs in call centers, tourism, and roles such as "in-store sales, call center support, BPO (business process outsourcing, author's note), [and] if they speak a foreign language, the added value is greater than work experience. And not least, but still prominent, HoReCa/tourism, where people without experience are sought after" (Ana Visian, Best Jobs, in *Știrile ProTV*, 2024). Other less commonly mentioned but still in-demand sectors include the food industry, transportation/logistics, and manufacturing (Enache, 2024). For rural areas, in particular, young people may turn to occasional or seasonal work, often as day labourers (Gigs, 2022).

In the industries mentioned above, young people face fewer competitors, as older and more experienced individuals are less likely to pursue these roles. On the other hand, jobs in these sectors do not pay as much as young people might aspire to, but they provide a space to gain both experience and life lessons. These experiences, even if less pleasant, help individuals gain insight into the labour market and adjust their behavior for future job opportunities.

The strengths of these industries lie in the variety of job opportunities available, flexibility, and even the possibility of supplementing income for those who already have a primary source of earnings.

However, the most significant advantage is the opportunity to develop or refine individual skills that are typically in demand in the labour market.

It is noteworthy that industries such as retail, sales, HoReCa, and particularly event organization, should not be seen merely as sectors that absorb unskilled or low-skilled labour. Even when young people are accepted for jobs for which they lack formal qualifications, their performance depends on their willingness to put in effort and remain open to new and sometimes initially unpleasant challenges. These industries demand the presence and/or development of soft skills to a greater extent than other fields. The ability to communicate effectively, interact with enthusiasm and courtesy, attract customers (Glăvan, 2023), maintain presence of mind, and accept overtime are critical in these sectors.

The skills developed in these areas represent, in the long run, more significant gains for young people than the immediate monetary rewards. The way young people understand and embrace the stakes of employment in sectors with high levels of human interaction ultimately reflects their approach to jobs they might not have initially aspired to, but which serve as essential learning experiences for the labour market. Moreover, refining or acquiring soft skills broadens a young person's employability, enabling them to transcend local or regional limitations in securing a job.

Aware of the growing need to improve their abilities, Romanian youth are increasingly active on recruitment platforms, as evidenced by statistics from recent years. For over two decades, submitting resumes on specialized websites has been an accessible method for young people. The anticipated economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic likely explain the increased interest among applicants. For instance, last fall, young people applied to an average of "8–9 jobs each, a significant rise compared to the beginning of the year, when they applied to 6–7 positions. Additionally, the number of new resumes increased by 15% in October compared to the previous month" (Vișian, 2023).

Although the source does not specify the percentage of young people among the over 1.1 million applicants recorded in October 2023 alone, other statistics suggest that they form a leading demographic. For example, during the summer of this year, individuals aged 18–24 represented the second-largest group in terms of applications submitted on the eJobs platform (Enache, 2024). It can be inferred that youth interest peaks during summer months due to seasonal jobs available during vacation periods. However, statistical trends have become less predictable than in the past. Another example, focusing on the BestJobs platform, revealed a similar level of interest in October 2023 among students and entry-level candidates as in the summer, likely driven by the appeal of part-time and seasonal positions (Vișian, 2023).

5. Conclusions

The relationship between younger generations and the labour market is a key factor in the economic sustainability of any society. In Romania, policymakers and economic leaders have neglected – and continue to ignore – the potential and needs of younger generations. Young people represent one of the most vulnerable segments of society, often following an educational system misaligned with labour market demands and being forced to navigate the peculiarities of Romanian capitalism, which leaves large segments of the population exposed to varying degrees of poverty. These are the primary reasons many young individuals end up working in jobs and fields unrelated to their training. This disconnect fosters widespread dissatisfaction with their work and frustration about having studied in one field while working in another. Equally important are those who lack access to professional training, forcing them into low-skilled, physically demanding, and low-prestige jobs.

For some, changing fields or taking a temporary job is seen as a compromise and a transitional phase until they can secure employment aligned with their professional qualifications. For others, it is a pathway to financial independence. Additionally, a job in a new field may stem from a deliberate decision to pivot professionally, which is more common among those with higher education compared to those with only secondary education. Some university or master's program graduates realize, even before completing their studies, that they are unlikely to succeed in their field and instead choose to explore other career directions.

On the other hand, the evolving expectations of recent generations (compared to youth from previous centuries) complicate their relationship with current or future jobs. Moreover, delayed entry into the labour market—often occurring several years after reaching adulthood—makes it challenging to adapt to an economic reality perceived as harsh. Of course, comparisons must account for the vastly different socio-economic contexts and labour market structures of the 21st century. Today's youth often aspire to high salaries, easy work, and rapid advancement in career hierarchies. However, such ambitions are more sustainable on an individual level than at the group or generational level. However, recruitment specialists emphasize that companies "seeking to attract young workers must better understand the profile of the

younger generation within a society where jobs have largely become digitalized. They should consider that today's young people desire flexible work schedules that allow them the freedom to work from anywhere without requiring their presence in a specific location." (Mihaela Forgaciu, in Cohut 2023).

There is also a certain detachment among young people regarding both the prospect of securing and losing a job. This reflects the ease with which their generation approaches life and their lack of attachment to values with which they do not identify. Some young people have realized that the effort invested in obtaining a diploma is rarely rewarded with the extraordinary career they dreamed of – or even with a position in their field of study. The likelihood of applying to a dozen jobs without receiving a single response is increasingly common, perpetuating disappointment across entire generations.

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