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Striding on a Winding Road: Young People's Transitions from Education to Work in Bulgaria

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Abstract: The transition from education to work in the global economy is no longer a straightforward one-time move for young people. In Bulgaria, this change started with the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy in the 1990s and was accompanied by the arrival of high rates of early school leaving, youth unemployment, and a growing group of disengaged youths (NEETs). The European initiatives in support of youth labour market integration are translated locally, with a narrow focus on "employability" while neglecting the many educational, training, and social needs of young people. The analysis in this paper is informed by the theoretical framework of life course research. It starts with an elaboration of the recontextualisation of EU policies such as the Youth Guarantee in the local realities of socioeconomic structures using Eurostat and national data. Second, we present 4 case studies (selected out of a total of 42 in-depth interviews) of young adults aged 18–30 in order to highlight the ways in which young people's individual agency filters and influences the institutional policies and practices regulating youth social integration. Our qualitative analysis reveals the multiplicity and diversity of youth journeys into work through the institutions and social structures and the inadequacy of the applied policy measures.

Keywords: youth transitions; opportunity structures; agency; life course; life trajectories; youth policies

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1. Introduction

Globalisation, in the face of the increasing international interconnectedness of markets, intensifying competition, and the massive diffusion of global networks and knowledge through new information and communication technologies, together with the rising dependence on "random shocks", creates the conditions for both economic innovations and social change and a rise in the sense of instability. The increase in its pervasiveness impacts directly on the most vulnerable social groups through locally entrenched systems of employment, education, social regimes, and family patterns [1]. On the basis of the forms of employment in place, the educational opportunities, the social policies promoted, and the patterns of family formation, young people in the transition stage to adulthood make their conscious choices specific to their educational, employment, family, and reproductive careers.

The growing difficulties in young people's entry into the labour market in Europe since the last decades of the 20th century have made youth transitions a major target of both youth research and youth policy in the EU. The new global challenges arising with the COVID-19 pandemic and the mounting concerns about the war in Ukraine in 2022 make the path from education to work even more insecure, prolonged, and fragmented. This trend is exacerbated in the context of Bulgaria, which ranks among the last EU member states in their economic output but among the first in income inequality. The pandemic in the past two years brought not only a substantial deterioration of public health but also high political instability, with the country changing two caretaker governments before electing an unsteady four-party coalition. The restrictive measures taken by the changing

governments posed new barriers to young people in their access to quality education, lifelong learning, and the labour market, with the latter additionally tightened by the wave of returning migrants from abroad seeking secure employment in a very uncertain present.

Youth studies in Bulgaria tend to place their attention on young people's values and forms of behaviour in various life domains separately [2,3] rather than focusing on youth transitions between them. The shift in value orientations towards education, work, politics, and family among the cohorts of grandparents, parents, and young people is perceived to reflect the wider social change in society [4]. However, though less noticed, changes in the forms, length, and sequence of the school-to-work and housing transitions are also indicative of significant social trends. Thus, the replacement of the strictly controlled and linear youth transitions in the 1970s and 1980s of the 20th century with the de-standardised, prolonged, and precarious trajectories in the 1990s is revealing of the radical societal transformation of Bulgarian society towards a market economy and political democracy [5]. Interwoven with the changes in youth educational and employment choices is the transformation of their attitudes towards marriage and parenthood. There is a growing discrepancy between marriage and childrearing, with a rise in co-habitation. The preferred age for having a child is gradually increasing, and today, this step is taken more in the late 20s to mid-30s of the course of life [6].

This paper makes an attempt to explain the growing complexity of school-to-work transitions through a life course perspective. The approach takes into account the cumulative nature of the different transitions in individual trajectories and place them in the historical and cultural context in which they are embedded [7]. In the analysis that follows, we first delineate the characteristics of the social context for young people's lives in Bulgaria 30 years after the system change and 2 years after the spread of COVID-19 in the world. Building upon official statistical data and an overview of research reports and policy evaluations, we focus on the gaps and contradictions in the institutional arrangements for supporting the transition from school to work. We then proceed with qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 42 young people who were experiencing various hurdles in their access to the labour market. The findings draw a picture of diverse youth transitions, with a noticeable polarization between those leaving the education system without completing the primary level and university graduates. We present in more detail four cases of youth trajectories demonstrating the polarised dilemmas that the current young generations face when striding on the road between the levels of the educational system, lifelong learning programs, and into the world of work. This paper contributes to the existing studies of youth transitions by revealing the internal dynamic of the school-to-work transition instead of only comparing its starting and ending points and highlighting the ways in which young people's individual agency works to overcome the gaps in the institutional policies and practices regulating youth social integration.

2. Life Course Perspective of Youth Transitions

Youth transitions have been studied in a broad spectrum of theoretical frameworks [8–10]. The life course perspective situates youth transitions in a wider time frame and examines the interplay between the opportunity structures in the social context and young people's subjective agency in the process [11,12]. According to Elder ([13], p. 5) the life course consists of "age graded transitions through institutions and social structures, and is embedded in relationships that constrain and support behaviour—both the individual life course and a person's developmental trajectory are interconnected with the lives and development of others". The individual life course should be explored in its relationship with the historical time and the social milieu in which the individual life is lived [7,14]. The inquiry into the dynamics of youth transitions makes it possible to highlight the interlined processes of individual and social change during the period of youth.

Youth transitions are embedded in specific socioeconomic and cultural structures and institutional arrangements on multiple levels—national, regional, and local—which govern the opportunities and constraints of individual trajectories [15]. Several typologies of

youth transition regimes have been developed [16,17] which either exclude or are not fully applicable to the situation in the post-communist countries in Eastern Europe. Common trends for present-day youth policies in the countries in the region are the contraction of state support in comparison with the communist past and the rise in the importance of the market mechanisms in access to welfare, as well as the preservation of a centralised and comprehensive public educational system with growth in private institutions and a renewed reliance on the family [18,19]. However, there were significant differences in the institutional structures during the communist regime, despite its one-party rule over a centrally planned economy and highly centralised social protection, and these grew during the countries' different paths of post-1989 societal transitions, creating complex country-specific amalgams of liberal, universal, conservative, and sub-protective elements [20]. It is important to bear in mind Raffe's [21] observation that the social context in each country is unique, and it is highly relevant to treat each as a separate case. Following this advice, we describe the Bulgarian youth policy system in greater detail in the next section of the paper.

A major methodological principle in the perspective—the principle of agency [15,22]—emphasises that people do not passively follow status-based life transitions but make more or less informed choices within the available structure of opportunities and constraints. The macrostructures do not fully determine the shapes of life trajectories but allow the individuals to contribute to the process, actively constructing their biographies [8,23]. Unlike the rational choice theories that account for the estimation of the expected gains and losses in the current situation, the life course perspective explores the meanings the young attach to their choices, which change over time, and the ways in which they develop aspirations, mobilise resources, and reflect on the process. The choices that the young make at a certain point in time have consequences for their life courses expanding or restricting the opportunities in the next life stages. This approach allows a dynamic understanding of youth transitions, situating the school-to-work transition within the whole life trajectory of the individual. Agency is not constant; rather, it develops over time, and as Emyrbayer and Mische ([24], p. 963) argue, "it can only be captured in its full complexity . . . , if it is analytically situated within the flow of time" as informed by the past, oriented towards the present and the future. This intertwining of the different time dimensions presents the young as reflexive agents of their life transitions, although in different degrees and with different competences for self-reflection.

The life course perspective also underlines the social networks of young people, consisting most commonly of family, friends, and peers, through which the young receive support and resources for their life transitions. Youth transitions from education to employment are shaped and negotiated by various other actors as well [25], such as teachers, social and youth workers, and policy makers. They serve as mediators between the institutional arrangements and young people's needs, while young people's agency modifies and actively transforms their influence.

Building upon the methodological approach of the life course perspective, we first draw the picture of the changes in the opportunity structures for education-to-employment transitions in Bulgaria, then look into young people's agency along their individual journeys and the ways in which they reflect upon their past, present, and future opportunities, and explain their choices.

3. The Social Context of Youth Transitions in Bulgaria

In this section, we present an overview of the trends and specific aspects of the educational and training system, labour market conditions and their institutional regulations, changes in social inequalities, and welfare provisions in support of young people in Bulgaria in the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. These characteristics largely form the opportunity structures for youth school-to-work transitions at the national level while acknowledging that significant regional and local inequalities also contribute to the diversity of youth transitions.

The radical societal transformation of Bulgarian society towards a market economy and political democracy from a centrally planned economy and one-party regime that started in 1989 was accompanied by the replacement of the strictly controlled and linear youth transitions in the 1970s and 1980s of the 20th century, with destandardised, prolonged, and precarious trajectories since the 1990s [5]. The youth policy in Bulgaria also underwent a significant change [26,27]. In the first decades of the social transformation, with the advent of mass unemployment and soaring inflation, young people were largely ignored, and it was only when accession to the EU became a more concrete political task that the concept of youth began to be used again with the ideological aim to ease the European integration of the country [28]. At present, youth policy relies on two major documents: The National Youth Strategy (2021–2030) [29] and the Law on Youth (2012) [30], which introduced the concept of youth workers for the first time and which have undergone several changes up to now. These documents, followed by yearly action plans, indicate a strong influence of EU policies on its basic concepts and main principles. More often than not, the newly adopted programs and measures come in response to European initiatives than to problems in youth transitions identified in official statistical data or in youth research [31]. A significant deficiency of the policies in support of young people is the lack of coordination among the various sectors of this policy, with a continuing strong centralisation towards the top [27]. Youth policy at the EU level regulates a wide range of life domains in young people's transitions to adulthood [32]. Several overviews of the sectoral policies targeting youth in Bulgaria [33,34] find a trend in the Bulgarian institutional approach towards a heavy reliance on employment policies at the expense of lifelong learning and welfare services. In what follows, we cover the development in the three policy areas that define the main characteristics of the structure of opportunities and constraints for youth transitions in Bulgaria.

3.1. Trends in Education and Education Policy

The education system in the country is comprehensive, offering free education to all pupils and setting the obligatory age at 16, which coincides with the legal age for the start of employment. While this regulation implies equality of opportunities for all young people based on the meritocratic principle, in the past three decades, there has been a definite trend towards a greater student selection and segmentation between elite and mass institutions at the level of secondary education. The PISA studies on student achievement [35] measured a high degree of segregation along socioeconomic lines in Bulgaria, with students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds doing worse at reading and mathematics. The latest results place Bulgaria in one group with Albania, Argentina, Greece, and Israel as the five countries with the most unequal distribution of mathematical literacy skills (ibid, 8). In a national study of the formal educational system, Lavrentsova and Valkov [36] found a growing trend towards educational segregation between and within schools based on ethnic origin. Various studies attest to numerous instances of overt and covert discrimination towards Roma youth [37,38].

The education policy in the country after the regime change has been quick to adjust and adopt policy documents in compliance with the EU's requirements. However, the share of education expenditure in Bulgaria's state budget is below the EU average, being at 3.8% of the GDP [39], and within the educational expenditures, the share of support for private providers is rising, which further exacerbates the social inequalities among children with unequal family resources. Although all schools, including vocational high schools, allow the young to continue into post-secondary and higher education, this type of education remains unpopular among young people and their parents. Students from vocational establishments have a much higher non-completion rate than those from general schools, where the quality of teaching is often low and the involvement of employers in vocational education and training remains minimal despite the recent attempts to establish dual-learning schools [40]. Official statistical data indicate that the rate of early school leavers in the past 10 years fluctuates between 12.4% and 13.9%, and it was at 12.8% in

2020 [41]. The rate is not only significantly higher than the average for the EU (9.9%) but is expected to rise even further as a result of the spread of COVID-19 and the slow uptake of online teaching.

The country's policy interventions did not reduce the rate of early school leaving significantly while greatly promoting enrolment in higher education. Since the regime change in 1989, there has been a gradual rise in the number of students in higher education with the liberalisation of the entry requirements and the spread of private universities and colleges. The state insitutions expanded their recruitment by creating a network of branches in towns across the country. The number of students in tertiary education (among the age group of 20–24) in 2019 was 36.4%, higher than the EU average of 33.4% [41]. University education in Bulgaria in general shares the flaws of the country's vocational schools, leaning towards a more theoretical orientation and lacking a focus on the skills required by employers [42].

3.2. Labour Market Trends and Employment Policy

The societal transition in Bulgaria resulted not only in the lengthening of youth transitions but also in their precariarisation. Commonly, they involve multiple steps, with young people moving between unsatisfactory jobs and spells of unemployment, short trainings, or going back into formal education as well as inactivity. The labour market is tight and not favourable towards the young. The trend towards insecure youth employment in Bulgaria mostly takes the form of young people accepting jobs below their qualifications. This is a result largely of the shift in young people's and their parents' attitudes when responding to employers' practices. Thus, while in the first years after the regime change the unemployment rate among university graduates was very high because the young and their parents waited for the abundance of jobs expected "after the end of the Transition", at present, the young who grew up only in the years of a market economy tend to take up any available jobs [31]. Work in the informal economy is still high, particularly among newcomers in the labour market and those without vocational qualifications.

What is well above the EU level in Bulgaria is the share of NEETs, or young people stuck in a "no man's land" outside of both school and work. This is a highly illustrative indicator of the problems in youth transitions, standing for a wide variety of reasons for falling into this situation [43]. The NEET rate was highest in 2013, reaching a quarter of all young people. It dropped to 20% in 2019 only to rise again in 2020 to 21.6% [44]. The gender gap among this group is highly significant, with women overtaking men with one third of the cases. Despite the debates concerning the statistical definition of this group, the data signal for a rise in the share of this group among Bulgarian youth in the years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The national policy for youth employment developed gradually after the regime change in 1989. It came as a response to the collapse of the system of full employment that existed in the countries of the former Soviet bloc up to the end of the 1980s in the 20th century [5], similar to the situation in most of the Western countries in the 1950s and 1960s [17]. In the eastern part of the continent, under the centrally planned economy, the transitions from school to jobs were rather short and linear, eased by the system of state allocation of graduates, and job changing was strongly stigmatised. With the orientation towards a "free market" in the 1990s, youth unemployment became a permanent feature of the economy and has since remained about two times higher than the general rate. National statistical data draw a picture of a downward trend in both the general and youth unemployment rates from 2010 to 2019 [44], when the youth unemployment was less than 7%, well below the EU average. The trend was reversed in 2020, hitting a rise of 2% that is likely to continue in the near future, with the pandemic causing a significant imprint on the country's economy.

Youths became a significant target of the country's employment policy with the implementation of the EU initiative the Youth Guarantee, starting in 2014. Various schemes and programs were designed to compensate for the shortage of jobs with the ongoing

deindustrialisation and globalisation. Specific features in the design of the Youth Guarantee in Bulgaria are the wider age range of 15–29 (rather than 15–24) and the inclusion of young people with university degrees [34]. An evaluation by a private company [45] underlined other positive features of the national policy under the framework of the Youth Guarantee: the wide territorial distribution, the inclusion of key stakeholders such as employers, local government, NGOs, labour offices, and private training companies.

These achievements, however, do not compensate the disadvantages of the chosen approach. A significant fault in the policy is that it is based on the assumption that the responsibility to improve opportunities for employment falls entirely on the educational system and the individual and thus tends to turn a structural economic problem into an individualised one. While recognition of the difficulties in the transition to work for young people with higher education is a positive strand in the youth employment policy, placing them together with early school leavers as one in the same scheme results in the advantageous selection of graduates by the job centre staff. Most neglected by the policy are the NEET group, young people from the Turkish and Roma ethnic minorities, and those in poor health [46,47]. The lack of a differentiated approach by the Youth Guarantee results in not addressing the needs of other specific groups of young people in highly vulnerable situations, such as young Roma mothers [48] and rural youths [49].

The Youth Guarantee in Bulgaria is strongly influenced by the trend in European policy, being led by an "employability agenda", which assumes that the main causes of youth unemployment are the inadequate level of young people's skills. The focus of the provided measures is on-the-job training at the expense of formal learning [47]. Instead of expanding the opportunities for flexible forms of lifelong learning that would meet the diverse learning needs of young people, the dominant model is offering employability training courses with the aim of activating the unemployed [40]. Bulgaria is among the countries with the lowest rate of participation in the forms of lifelong learning, which has been around 2% in the past 10 years and declined to 1.6% in 2020, which was 6 times lower than the EU average [41].

3.3. Social Protection

The third main domain of youth policy in Bulgaria—social protection—is rather fragmented, mixing elements from different welfare state regimes without being able to reduce the rising social inequalities [50]. The reforms in social policy after the regime change are characterised by a contracting share of state financing and a rising presence of private capital in the provision of social services [20]. The weak welfare services are highly inadequate for the economic situation in the country, where the population living at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 33.6% in 2020. Although there has been a 10% reduction in this share in the past 10 years, Bulgaria still ranks first among the EU member-countries, where the average was 22% [41]. In addition, the country has the highest level of income inequality in the EU, as measured by the Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income (40% in the country compared with the EU average of 30.8%) [41]. The increased share of the "working poor" (from 7.7% to 9.7%) for the past 10 years testifies to the country's inability to provide a satisfactory standard of living for the economically active part of the population [44].

In this situation, young people emerge as the group with minimal social rights, and this is particularly true in the domain of social security. There is a growing trend of reliance upon the family in periods of unemployment and job searching [51]. The requirements of having at least 9-month contributions in the last 15 months effectively excludes recent school and university graduates from receiving unemployment benefits, while the low amount of the benefits and the short periods of receiving them discourage many eligible young people from registering with job centres. Similarly restricted for youths is the access to social assistance in the form of minimum income schemes, housing benefits, and other services [33].

In the context of present-day Bulgaria, social inequalities among youths have a strong gender dimension. Despite renewed policy efforts adopting a specific law for equality among men and women (2016) and a strategy for promoting equality between men and women (2016), there are significant differences in terms of pay, economic activity, employment rate, and the share of living at risk of poverty and material deprivation among the two broad gender categories to the detriment of women [52]. Survey evidence from 24 European countries highlights the considerable gender gaps in Bulgaria, particularly in terms of the choices for reconciling family and work life [53]. Despite the spread of more egalitarian gender attitudes among young people, factors such as the level of education and the size of a residence influence the perpetuation of gender inequalities. Thus, for young women with less education and living in small towns and villages, the possibility for combining work and family care is not a factor in choosing a particular job because, for them, the need for financial stability is more important. The practice of taking long (2 years paid) maternity leave introduced in the 1980s often results in the interruption or postponement of women's career development. An interesting finding from this study is that the higher size of child benefits minimises the importance of work-family balance in the choice of jobs for both young men and women. Parental leave policies without strong incentives for equal take up between the parents increase gender inequalities among youths by impacting their career aspirations and (possibly) result in company managers' reluctance to employ young women [54].

In conclusion, the main characteristics of the structure of opportunities and constraints facing young people in their transition to adulthood in Bulgaria are an inflexible and standardised education system with a trend towards selectivity, limited opportunities for vocational education and lifelong learning, theoretically oriented higher education, and segmented access to the labour market with undifferentiated measures for the promotion of youth employment. The opportunities through developing lifelong learning policies for the young experiencing difficulties in the formal education system and in their access to the labour market are rather neglected, and the employment policy focuses on young people's employability, understood as readiness for any job, rather than developing their full potential [55]. A less effective social policy does not compensate for the growing social inequalities, and the concrete set of opportunities for individual transitions is strongly dependent on parental resources which steer the young in class-dependent trajectories.

4. Data and Methods

The above overview of the social context has as its data source official statistics from Eurostat [41] and the National Statistical Institute [44] in Bulgaria. We also used published policy analysis reviews and the relevant academic literature to allow us to delineate the main trends in educational and employment outcomes and policy developments since the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. In order to capture the dynamics of the transition processes and the meanings the young attach to them, we carried out our own empirical research with qualitative methods. The main objective of the study was to give an account of the lived experiences of young people struggling to make the transition to adulthood and to explore the barriers they had to overcome and the sources of support that they relied upon in the process.

We conducted biographical interviews with 42 young people aged 18–30 who had experienced various challenges in their school-to-work trajectories. The interviewers were two researchers and eight students in social research who were specially trained in this method. The fieldwork took over 3 months from September to December 2021 to gather sufficient biographies and illustrate the wide diversity of youth transitions. We did not start with a fixed model for selection of the interviewees aside from "difficult experiences in the transition from school to work", allowing the interviewees to speak for themselves about the barriers they faced in their access to the labour market. We aimed to cover all three broad education groups: early school leavers, youths with high school education, and university graduates, with an equal share of men and women in the groups. We

chose the completed educational level and gender since we considered these as the main indicators of social inequality in Bulgaria. Having basic and lower education signals a disadvantaged family background, mostly in terms of poverty and ethnic minority status. Young people with completed secondary and higher education are more heterogeneous, coming from families that represent the different layers of the middle class and the upper layers of the working class. This is largely due to the expansion of recruitment from state and private universities described in the previous section. We ended up with a rich pool of interviewees, one fifth of whom had less than obligatory education, one third with university degrees, and the rest (almost half) being graduates from general and vocational high schools. This structure of the achieved sample largely corresponds to the distribution of the general population in the country [44]. For the other important structural indicators, such as living place, housing, and family configurations, we aimed at a maximum diversity, using the personal contacts of our students in the research methods, whom we also owe gratitude for carefully transcribing the texts and drawing life lines of the main events in the individual trajectories.

The interview guide generally followed the method of life story interviewing [56]. It started with a broad question, asking the young persons to present themselves as they wished and then tell the story of their lives from early childhood to the present. We then asked more specific questions about their families, friends, education and work experiences, life projects, and expectations for the future. The interviews lasted between 45 min and an hour and a half. The young people were assured of their anonymity in the research report and the opportunity to withdraw from the conversation at any moment.

The full transcripts were read several times by the two researchers and subjected to coding and categorization following the approach of Corbin and Strauss [57]. We first explored the emerging themes from young people's narratives, taking account of the commonalities in young people's views about the opportunities and constraints they faced in their journeys. Furthermore, we highlighted the differences in the experiences of the groups of young people, differentiated by gender and educational level. In a second stage, we conducted analysis of each transcript as an individual case following the timeline of life events. In the analysis, we focused on the young people's agency, differentiating between the story of events, the personal story, and the choices made at critical moments of the person's life. We also looked at the social networks mobilised and the policy opportunities used (and more often lost) in the transition.

For this paper, we selected to present four case studies of school-to-work transitions of young people from the two contrasting groups according to their educational level: young people (a man and a woman) who left school before the obligatory age and two university graduates (also a man and a woman). This selection was guided by the high polarization in the educational trends as described in the section on the social context in Bulgaria: a rise in the numbers of early school leavers and an expansion of recruitment in higher education. This sheds light on significant intersectional inequalities in Bulgaria in terms of education (also class and ethnicity) and gender. The four cases allowed us to highlight the "grey" zones of the Bulgarian youth policies which are unable to meet their divergent needs. The expectation about polarised dilemmas facing young people is in line with the findings of a representative survey conducted in 2018 with 1008 men and women aged 15–29, which measured a high impact of education and gender on youth transitions to employment [31]. It was only young men with basic or lower education that followed the normative sequence of transition events, starting with finishing school and ending with parenthood, and this took them 7 years. Women with less education on average achieved all markers of adulthood in 3 years, in which leaving school, leaving the family home, and becoming a mother often overlapped. Men and women with higher education followed much longer transition paths, usually starting with temporary jobs about 4 years before graduation and with men postponing parenthood much longer than women, although both groups tended to wait for more stable jobs before becoming parents. Another recent

study also found that family, ethnic and religious background, and the place of living were strong factors structuring youth transitions to adulthood [50].

5. Young People's Perspectives on the School-to-Work Transition

The qualitative study produced a picture of diverse and non-linear educational trajectories of young men and women who find themselves in vulnerable situations in the country. The young people's narratives demonstrated how quickly and easily their journeys through the levels of the educational system and in the labour market can be disrupted and reversed by adverse family events, bullying at school, or health problems. Our analysis confirmed the findings of other studies both in Bulgaria and other EU countries [36,58,59] that access to education was no longer a guarantee of its successful completion, and many students reported feeling excluded from meaningful and satisfactory educational experiences. Young people who left school early often could not find access to relevant programs of lifelong learning and fell into the trap of hopping from one informal and low-paying job to another without much or any social protection. Similar to other studies [40], we also found that the young with secondary education and even those from vocational schools lacked practical training to make a smooth transition into work, while their employers did not feel obliged or ready to provide quality on-the-job training. For their part, university graduates struggled with significant skill mismatches, so many continued performing unqualified jobs after receiving their diplomas or turned to accumulating degrees without building a career. A common theme discussed in the biographical interviews was that the young did not trust the available policy measures to improve their chances for employment and preferred to rely on relatives and friends. They did not perceive public institutions as their partners but rather as barriers to improving their employment situations.

The interviewees were largely aware of the structural constraints that faced them on the road to adulthood but did not consider themselves as "belonging to a vulnerable group" or a "group at risk", as the discourse in the policy documents defined them. Another common feature in their interpretations of the transitions from education to the labour market, confirming the findings of previous studies [60], was young people's conviction that they should rely on "their own efforts" to find a way out of difficult situations. They did not consider themselves as incapable to work in the aspired jobs and believed that, given the chance, they would make a successful integration into the world of work. It is also important to note that the young placed the school-to-work transition into a wider life frame, considering other transitions such as relationships, housing, and forming a family.

Despite the diverse challenges, most of the interviewees were rather positive about their individual futures and commented on their more or less defined life projects. Even the COVID-19 pandemic did not turn out to be a major obstacle in the transition of this group of youths who had already left the formal education system, although all felt its impact. A few lost their temporary jobs due to the restrictions imposed on businesses in the past 2 years. Others pointed at the decline of interpersonal trust that affected their informal jobs in the first months after the virus was officially registered in the country. However, none of the interviewees considered that the pandemic would continue to limit their opportunities in the future and saw other mostly economic barriers as having a greater significance.

Furthermore, we focused on the life trajectories of four young people, drawing attention to the role of agency vis-à-vis the structure of opportunities and constraints that they faced in their transitions from school to work. As explained in the previous section, we selected two cases of early school leavers and two cases of university graduates with one man and one woman in each group and explored the changing impact of education and gender in the process. The young people's stories highlighted the moments of biographical sense-making of the events and reflections on the choices in their transitions, thus revealing the internal dynamic of the transition, which is not a single act but a process.

5.1. Marin: "I Have to Fight No Matter How Hard It Is"

Marin is a 25-year-old man from a small town located in southern Bulgaria close to the border with Greece and Turkey. Agriculture is the dominant sector of the regional economy, with wine and tobacco growing as the most popular livelihoods. Marin lives with his mother and grandfather in the old family house. Both his parents have finished high school and have worked in farming. A critical moment for the whole family was the father's death when Marin was only 14 years of age. Taking sole responsibility for the financial survival of the household into her hands, his mother went to work in domestic care in Greece. This was a turning point in Marin's life, forcing him to make important decisions at a very young age:

> " . . . I had a very difficult childhood. One of the biggest difficulties in my life was that I was left without a father as a teenager, and soon after that my mother had to go abroad to look for work. I was too young then and had to fend for myself . . . It helped that I am a fighter and do not give up easily. I am used to fighting no matter how hard it is."

Marin conveys his life story as a struggle against an unfavourable context. He is aware of the structural limitations of his trajectory to autonomy in comparison with his peers. Left without paternal support and relying on the limited help received from his grandfather, his coping strategy was to give up formal schooling and search for work that would bring income. This was "the most natural decision" for him, as he did not attribute a high value to education. Marin describes his experiences with schooling as boring, which he associates with his lack of interest in learning:

> "The knowledge I gained was basic, because I didn't have much interest in learning . . . When I was a kid at school, the teachers tried hard to make me study, but I was quite a naughty child, I hated the school discipline . . . It was quite difficult for me to focus on learning, and after my father died I had to work and support myself. Besides, my mother could not convince me to stay at school while she was abroad."

Leaving school with only a seventh-grade education, Marin remained without a completed primary education. He changed many low-skill jobs, which for some time satisfied him as he managed to "make ends meet". His coping experiences included a trip to Greece to live with his mother, and there, he first worked in different farms and then in a store house loading and unloading trucks. He explained his decision to return back to Bulgaria as due to dissatisfaction with the pay he received for the hard physical labour that he was performing as well as with a growing feeling of sadness and longing for his home and friends. Upon his return, the young man started working on various construction sites, combining this with two summer trips to England, where he picked strawberries and raspberries on a farm. Marin was very satisfied with the latter activity, considering it a well-paid job, but this opportunity ended with the spread of COVID-19 and the various restrictions that followed.

At the time of the interview, Marin's hectic career was again in a limbo with irregular and informal jobs on various construction sites. In his words, his low educational level was proving to be a serious obstacle to finding satisfactory employment. It is only now, when the aspirations to find a better job and start a family are emerging, that he realises the consequences of the choices he made in his teenage years:

> "I work in construction mostly as a general labourer and sometimes as a bricklayer. I find work by going around visiting sites and asking if they needed a man. Oddly enough, I enjoy doing this work. The problem is that it's not regular and the pay is low . . . At the moment I'm thinking about going abroad again, when the Corona is over, because without complete primary education it's hard for me to find a job here . . . At this stage it's important for me to earn money to fix my house and find a wife to start a family with."

Marin is not satisfied with how his transition from education to work is developing, blaming both the "circumstances" and his own decision to quit school. At present, he describes his financial situation as difficult. During spells without a job, he relies mainly on his mother's help for money. Support from state institutions proved inaccessible to young people with Marin's work history. In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, he tried to register at the job centre as unemployed but could not provide the required documents. He would like "to do something to finish at least primary school", but the need to provide for himself stops him from going back to school. At this stage in his life, Marin's main aspiration is to find a better paying job, for which he will probably try searching abroad. His dream is earning and saving enough to be able to renovate the family house and start a family of his own. In terms of preferred work, Marin's dream is to have a farm of his own.

Marin's school-to-work transition is a testament to how a critical moment in childhood can impact an individual's life trajectory in education and work. Faced with economic constraints and limited parental support, as well as a lack of adequate help from educational and social services, he made an early decision to leave school that now poses multiple barriers to his access to employment, and his working career is mostly in the informal economy. He is left without any support from employers or public employment agencies despite being eligible for some of the schemes under the Youth Guarantee. He has not considered turning to professionals for advice and information about training opportunities. His agency in the form of perseverance and diligence is the main factor that has helped him cope in a vulnerable situation and still make plans "for a normal life".

5.2. Vasilka: "The Foster Home Is the Place where I Find the People I Love"

Vasilka is a 19-year-old woman of Roma ethnicity. She lives in a small town in central Bulgaria. She grew up in a residential institution and does not know who her parents are. In telling her life story, she stresses several times that she sees her mentor as her "true mother". Similarly, she names the foster home as her "home", or "the place where I find the people I love". Situated in the outskirts of a large town, being outside of the suburbs with predominantly ethnic minority populations, it is the only source of support for the young woman. She has had bad experiences at school, being bullied by her classmates, and left at the age of 14 due to a psychological disorder that she has been suffering from for several years:

> "I didn't go to school regularly because I was mentally ill. That's what the psychologists say, the psychiatrists. The ones who treated me. I don't know what they call themselves exactly. They said that I was addicted to people and objects . . . I did not acquire much knowledge because I was often absent from classes."

Vasilka has been evaluated as "functionally illiterate", which creates serious difficulties for her in the everyday contacts with people and her job search. In her view, it is not only her lack of education but also her ethnicity that places barriers on her efforts to create a life of her own. Similar to the experiences of other youth from the Roma minority, as demonstrated by various research publications in Bulgaria [38,48], the young woman has been treated with prejudice and unfairness both at school and in the labour market. Without naming it as "discrimination", she describes the negative reactions she receives regularly from strangers: "They look at me differently . . . They say: Run away from here! You are a thief; you are dirty . . . There are also people for whom I work privately. They also behave like that".

Her working career lists a few temporary jobs in cleaning and seasonal farming. "I often go with some other friends to clean houses. Last time I cleaned the Eco toilets. Usually in the spring we work picking rose blossoms and whatever is in season. I'm not working now". Vasilka is always short of money and often cannot meet her basic needs. She has never visited a job centre where she could have received training or other support with employment. Her coping strategy includes reliance on support from the foster home and finding occasional jobs that bring money. A happy day for her is "to have money for food and for a bingo game . . . I can't stop going to the bingo". In the town where she

lives, there are many bingo halls that sprang up quickly after gambling was prohibited in neighbouring Turkey.

Vasilka does not have any concrete life prospects, hoping she could stay in the foster home for years to come. She mentions that her mentor is trying to convince her to start studying as a private pupil in order to receive a diploma so that she can get a secure job, but the young woman does not believe she will manage such an endeavour. "The lady wants to prepare me for the matriculation exams, but I am sure I will fail". In her dreams, she has a lucrative job "somewhere abroad" and has a family with two children. Her family transition is also at a standstill. "Most of the Roma girls my age are already married and have several children". However, she lacks the supportive ethnic networks who could ease her family formation. The young woman faces a wide range of constraints—deficiency of proper education and relevant treatment for her mental illness as well as a gambling addiction—and these are intensified by her belonging to a discriminated ethnic minority in the country. Vasilka lacks self-confidence and has not received adequate help to develop self-reflection and agency. The social protection agency has provided housing, food, and emotional support during childhood but not proper educational and training services or advice to make her ready for an independent life. All in all, the institutional policy has failed Vasilka in her life transitions and left her in a particularly vulnerable situation.

5.3. Teodor: "When You Know What You Really Want, You Will Eventually Achieve It"

Teodor belongs to the group of young people with higher education who also experience difficulties in their transition to adulthood, albeit of a different nature to those in the group of early school leavers. He is 27 years old and lives with his parents in a small village near a large city in northern Bulgaria. His parents belong to the working class and have attended school up to the obligatory age. He has a 5-year-old daughter who lives with her mother in the city, and Teodor pays monthly child support in addition to making regular visits to spend time with his child. Teodor is the first of the family to go to university and receive a BA diploma. Family relations (with his parents) are of high importance for the young man, and in his interview, he gave a lengthy account of their interactions. The parents are a source of emotional support and advice for him in addition to providing a home and money. In contrast, he is not ready to comment on his relations with the mother of his child. The young man refers to his own parenthood as "a huge responsibility" which he sees mostly in financial terms.

Teodor made his first steps in the labour market during his university studies. Within a year and a half, he changed jobs three times, which he found through newspaper advertisements. At these temporary jobs, he experienced both unfair treatment from his employers and fatigue from the long and exhausting work shifts. He soon felt it was impossible to continue working and studying and decided to focus on his education, relying on financial support from his family. After successfully obtaining his university diploma, Teodor returned to his parents' house. Despite his BA in journalism, the young man could not start a working career in this field. His coping strategy was to look for a "temporary" job and soon started working as a bartender in a local restaurant. Although the job did not correspond to his university qualifications and the pay was not very high, he found some satisfaction in it:

> "What I liked about this job was that the restaurant had a very cool staff, mostly young people, ... and that I had time for myself ... and the employer was a decent man ... I got along with the staff, everything was in order. I wouldn't change the job just for another one with a higher pay."

However, the restaurant was closed during the first year of the pandemic, and Teodor registered as unemployed with the labour office and started receiving unemployment benefits. The young man was among the few of our interviewees who had turned to a state employment service and received financial support which, however, was so limited that his parents often had to add money to his daily expenses. Still, it was not the financial need that bothered him most. He felt a strain on his mental health. He stopped meeting friends

and rarely went out of the house. What Teodor describes as a critical moment in his life is not linked to a particular event but to a moment of self-reflection and decision making. It was during his current stage of unemployment, this time for more than a year, that he decided upon a change in his job search strategy and more generally in his life orientation. This shift came after a long talk with his parents, and he felt that he was finally coming out of "the mist of passiveness". As a result, he gave up his high aspirations and set up realistic goals, which he is now determined to pursue:

> "The important thing for me at this stage of my life is to raise as much money as possible to get a Master's degree in pedagogy, become a teacher and be able to provide a brighter future for me and my daughter . . . I have chosen my first university education without thinking much what happens after graduation and what kind of work I will be able to get . . . My parents did not interfere or impose any choice. In their youth they had goals that they followed and they knew what they wanted to do, and . . . whoever has goals is successful . . . For me, there were times when I didn't have any goals, but with the help of my parents, I changed my thinking in a positive way and with time I started thinking sensibly like them and that's how I built my new goals in life. When you know what you really want, you will eventually achieve it."

It was only recently that Teodor experienced his insightful moment and is now eager to start studying for a master's degree in education. In order to join such a program, however, he would need to find another low-qualification job to be able to pay the university fees. He is convinced that in time he will find the desired employment. He dreams of becoming a teacher and working with children. He believes that this job will finally help him create a more secure present for himself and his family.

Teodor's life trajectory is marked with early parenthood and the breakdown of a young family. He felt forced to care for his child from afar and felt obliged to take up any kind of work in order to be able to support himself and his daughter financially. The employment office provided financial support for some time but no career advice or training, and he is not included in any of the schemes under the Youth Guarantee, although he is eligible. As a result, he often has to rely on his parents' support again, and achieving autonomy seems to be a faraway goal. Despite his disappointment with the temporary jobs he managed to obtain, at present, Teodor considers that he has a concrete life project and a clear vision of what kind of job he prefers and how to achieve it.

5.4. Tanya: "I Am Free to Pursue My Own Dreams"

Tanya is 25 years old and lives with her parents in a small town near the country's capital. She is among the most successful of our interviewees, having lived independently, finished university, and had work experience in her field of study. However, at the time of the interview, she was out of a job, living with her parents, and aspiring to a life in the big city. Tanya rented a flat while studying at Sofia University, and upon graduation, she returned back to the family home. She explained her choice as "the most natural decision", similar to Teodor's account, since her relationship with her parents was "very good, almost as being friends". Additionally, like Teodor, her family background was that of the working class. Her parents finished secondary school only and were currently working low-skill jobs in pharmacy, where their pay had been significantly raised during the 2 years of the pandemic. The financial stability of the parental family plays an important role in the young woman's life strategy. Tanya admires her parents for their hard work as well as for the financial and emotional support they are always ready to offer. She feels she has the freedom to make autonomous decisions. "My parents did not influence my choice of education or job . . . I am similar to them in that I pursue my own dreams as they had done when young".

Tanya has a bachelor's degree in accounting and considers her studies at the university very useful in providing solid knowledge as well as allowing her to make valuable friendships. What she thinks she lacked in her education was "more practice in real work

settings", a phrase that regularly figures in official policy documents in Bulgaria, indicating their preferences for "employability". She worked two summer jobs as a sales consultant in a sportswear shop and a bookstore. During her studies at university, she applied for and successfully finished three unpaid internships in her specialty, which she found herself on job search sites and at a job fare. Then, in her hometown, she quickly secured her first job upon graduation. Since then, she changed her workplace twice, experiencing brief moments of unemployment during which she did not register with the labour office as she relied on her parents' support:

> "My last job was an operational accountant in a small firm. I found this place through a job search site and I liked everything about it at the beginning. I planned to stay at this job for a longer period of time but then on certain days there was a lot of stress to meet deadlines and the boss was shouting at all of us. I felt there was no point staying there any longer. I wasn't learning anything new and then why to bear such a treatment? . . . My main goal at this stage is career development, not just earning money."

She explained that she has not used the services of the job centres in Sofia or in her hometown during unemployment as she does not expect them to have good job offers. She is convinced that employers only register job vacancies with the state services that nobody wants. Having a rather smooth educational trajectory, she still faced difficulties in the labour market. What is more, she experienced intimidating behaviour from her last employer, which led to her leaving the job instead of looking for support from institutions. Relying on generous parental support, she has chosen further education as the next step in achieving her ambitious goals.

Tanya's interview attests to her agency, combined with a strong determination to achieve her goals. The meaning she attaches to her current stage of inactivity is "waiting for the normalisation after the last COVID wave". She has very concrete career plans: obtaining a master's degree in finance in 2 years, gaining work experience in a large company in Sofia for 3 years, and then, after 5 years, founding her own accounting house in the big city. "In ten years I see myself established professionally and feeling much more confident in myself". It would be after that achievement that she would think about family and children.

Tanya presents herself as an autonomous young woman, pragmatic and consistent in her educational and employment choices. She describes her patchy working career of short-term jobs and future work plans with the same admirable detail. Her practically oriented education and successful internships definitely contribute to her persistent agency. Obviously, having well-to-do and supportive parents also influences her feeling of stability, despite being out of a job currently and the lack of successful work experience.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we tried to go deeper into the interplay between opportunity structures and the subjective agency of young people in the process of major life transitions. We first presented the specific features of the social context in Bulgaria by following the main trends in education and employment and highlighted some of the deficiencies in the education, labour market, and social policies targeting youths and their transitions from school to work. Thus, following the regime change in the 1989, two contrasting trends have emerged: one towards a rise in early school leaving and one towards expansion of higher education. The education and training system has not developed innovative forms flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of young men and women on different educational paths and with various health, family, and financial resources. While school drop-outs were gradually declining before the pandemic, the restrictive measures reversed this trend. Additionally, students' academic achievements at all levels have become more dependent on income and other forms of social inequality, and the social policy in the country is not targeted towards compensating for such deficiencies. Vocational education remains underdeveloped, and university studies are still not in line with the current trends of economic development. The

youth unemployment rate is below the EU average, but underemployment and work in the informal economy are characteristic for the youth labour market. At the same time, the employment policy focuses on increasing young people's employability, steering them to work placements without adequate training and a lack of control over the role employers play in the process. While including those with higher education in the Youth Guarantee schemes is a justified recognition for the problems in their labour market access [34], it nevertheless is not matched with adequate attention and efforts to address the needs of those with less than obligatory education. The young in most vulnerable situations are overlooked by the professionals in job centres, who tend to select those with better chances to stay in the schemes until the end, with success measured quantitatively. Gender is another significant factor for structuring youth transitions in the country. Young women have profited the most from the expansion of educational opportunities in higher education in the country, increasing their involvement in university programs while delaying their transition to motherhood. In contrast to the high female employment rates in the centrally planned economy [26], 30 years later, women comprise the bulk of the inactive group of NEET. Young women with lesser educations more often than not have a short transition to work and family. However, this does not represent a privileged situation in the labour market, as they only have access to low-paying and insecure jobs. As was found in other studies [61,62], the COVID-19 pandemic further increased both old and new inequalities among young people.

Our qualitative study revealed the various challenges in the long and winding road of youth transitions to adulthood in the country. The four trajectories of young people that we portrayed in the paper illustrate the complex relationships between the uniqueness of each case and the context in which the cases are embedded. The case of the Roma woman represents a highly vulnerable situation and the inefficacy of the country's social policy not only to offer time-limited social protection and emotional help but to empower young women with accumulated disadvantages [63] in their transitions to autonomy. For young men with only primary or lower education, the transition takes longer as they feel the responsibility to provide for their family, but the jobs that they manage to acquire are in low-paying work, often being temporary and in the informal economy. Their coping strategy is searching for a better-paying job, and their income is insecure, so they cannot afford much beyond the minimum daily necessities. Any paid forms of education or training are beyond their means. In this vulnerable situation, they find it impossible to obtain adequate educational and training opportunities. This is also valid for their access to the services of state institutions, offering unemployment support in the form of benefits, training, or mediation. For the group of young men and women with lesser education, the support channels are limited to the closest circle of relatives and friends, who are in difficult financial situations themselves. In most cases, the best solution perceived by the young who have dropped out of the education system too early is emigration, as their expectations are for a friendly labour market in the more developed European countries with lots of low-qualification jobs and better pay. Their agency involves various coping mechanisms, moving from one insecure job to another while improving their educational credentials prove impossible because of the lack of financial resources and time that they have to invest in the endeavor. Ethnic discrimination is also a structuring factor limiting the effect of subjective agency [37,38].

For young people with higher education, career development is of higher importance, but they are often faced with a lack of jobs in their university specialties. The young graduates take up low-qualification jobs, viewing them as temporary solutions before embarking on the desired career tracks. In their job search strategies, the quality of the working environment and team relations are also highly valued, in addition to the higher remuneration. Trainees often have to combine their university studies with temporary and precarious employment as their first work experience which, to a large extent, shapes their views on work and their requirements for the "ideal" workplace. The parents of those young men and women are the main and preferred source of financial support. While this

group of young people reported greater access to and actual experience of institutional support during unemployment, this proves insufficient financially and even less so in terms of advice and training. Young people often have to rely upon the help offered by parents, which gives them a sense of security and the opportunity to take time to reflect upon their current situations and plan more adequately for the future. The transition to employment can be consistent, based on preset goals and clear strategies to achieve them, but also and more often fragmented, led by imageries of a desired future, since there are no resources available to achieve them quickly. Both young men and women with higher education are more reflexive on the structural limitations and more likely to devise their own life projects. Young women, however, feel stronger time pressure to limit their career plans and direct their agency towards a secure job before starting a family.

Unlike some recent studies which have focused on exploring the social impact of lifelong learning programs in European countries [64,65] and the created typologies of youth trajectories, our research design did not aim to evaluate the Bulgarian policy measures in support of youth transitions. We presented the policy programs as ingredients of the social context but did not select our interviewees from the participants of such policy programs. The starting point of our empirical research was to look for raptured youth transitions and then to highlight the hindrances experienced and opportunities mobilised by the transition actors themselves. That is why in the narratives of our sample of Bulgarian youth some policy schemes were rarely mentioned and even more rarely used. We came to the conclusion that the state institutions in Bulgaria applied a very limited range of support programs to tackle the diverse problems and difficulties faced by young people in their journey to autonomy. Most often, the young either did not know or did not trust the official policy measures. Our findings suggest that rather than grouping all youths as "at risk" together, a more individualised approach by experts and street-level professionals is needed to overcome important institutional "holes" and address the employment challenges in front of young people in diverse vulnerable situations.

In this paper, we drew on the life course perspective, applying a case study approach to youth transitions. We did not just pick up the cases as already existing stories but constructed them as complex constellations of various dimensions [66]. Focusing on specific cases allowed us to take into account the uniqueness of the various life journeys from education to employment and their biographical dimensions [67]. A similar approach has been used for international comparisons of youth transitions [7,68,69]. While comparing cases in one national context, our paper still managed to highlight different configurations of the link between the context and the cases. We consider that this strategy enabled our analysis to dive deeper into the interplay between opportunity structures and individual agency and better understand the combined effect of the inequalities in education and gender in youth transitions.

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