

## SOCIOLOGICAL PROGRAM

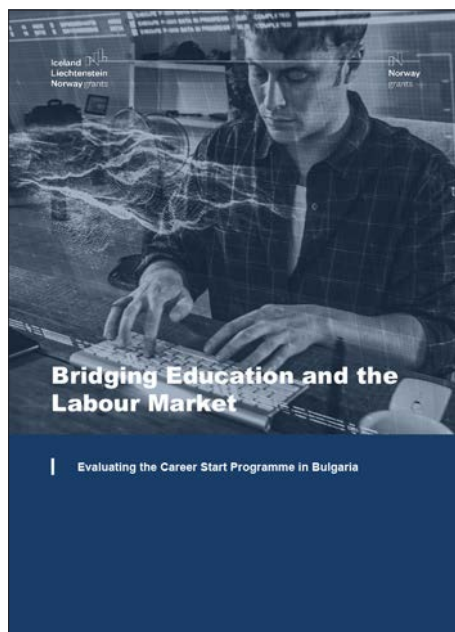
In 2023, the Sociological Program focused its work on the following areas:

- **Youth employment policies and initiatives** supporting young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs). CSD focused on understanding the challenges faced by NEETs in the EU and providing actionable policy recommendations for improving national and EU-level policies targeting NEET inclusion in the labor market.
- **Governance of religious diversity.** The Sociological Program built upon previous analyses to deepen knowledge on how the governments of post-communist European states use religious nationalism to make policies which create boundaries between groups belonging to the commonly-agreed idea of the nation and groups which appear as external, typically religious minorities.
- **Energy citizenship and energy democracy.** The Sociological Program continued to work on supporting energy citizenship in the EU, specifically encouraging the active involvement of Bulgarian women in the process. The Center developed the Energy Citizenship Atlas.
- **Migrant integration and prediction of migration flows.** Recognising the global importance of migration, CSD was actively involved in engaging policy-makers, civil society representatives, journalists, and researchers in a constructive dialogue about the possibilities to predict migration flows and the best practices in providing successful migrant integration across the EU.

## I. Youth employment policies and initiatives supporting NEETs

In 2023, CSD produced policy analyses and recommendations about a much neglected issue – the need to activate young people who are not in employment, education and training in the Bulgarian labour market. Although the share of NEETs in Bulgaria is steadily declining, it is still among the highest in the EU, especially among young people between 25 and 29 (25+NEETs).

CSD highlighted the general situation by producing a [policy brief](#) on the integration of 25+ NEETs into the Bulgarian labour market. The brief looks into the intricacies of policies tackling the issues of 25+ NEETs in Bulgaria. Proper policy strategies should involve drafting a comprehensive national NEET strategy, prioritising additional resource allocation, enhancing the general appeal of youth employment in the public sector, and enforcing comprehensive policy evaluation and monitoring.



CSD conducted a [study of the Career Start Programme](#) – one of the national programs for youth employment targeting university graduates and providing



*CSD's Lilia Yakova and Alexander Politov participating in a discussion on the Career Start Program, Sofia, 21 November 2023*

12-month jobs in the public administration. The effects, impact and results of the program over a ten-year period (2013–2022) were evaluated by CSD in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the National Employment Agency and its local labour offices, and the Ministry of Education and Science. To raise the public visibility of NEET youth employment issues, CSD hosted the policy forum “[Youth Employment Policies and Initiatives in Bulgaria: Challenges and Directions](#)” held on 21 November 2023 in Sofia. Representatives of parliament, the government, the business and the civil society sector, as well as the media deliberated on youth employment policies in Bulgaria, ways to bridge the gap between education and the labor market, as well as possibilities for inter-institutional policy approaches.

One of the major problems impeding the effective and sustainable implementation of youth employment programmes and initiatives is the insufficient moni-

toring and the superficial collective assessment of their impact by the implementing institutions.

To overcome this, CSD collaborated with the relevant institutions in enhancing their capacities to conduct monitoring and ex-post impact evaluation of policies and initiatives to activate young people in the labour market. To this end, the Center held a training seminar for representatives of public institutions entitled “[Methods for Monitoring and Evaluation of the Impact of Youth Employment Programs and Initiatives](#)”.

CSD also compiled a comparative analysis of the major policy challenges related to 25+ NEETs in 9 EU Member States (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Spain). The analysis outlines similarities between these states and their policy needs. One such common trait is the heterogeneity of 25+NEETs, which requires tailored policies corresponding to the needs of the affected



*Policy forum “Youth Employment Policies and Initiatives in Bulgaria: Challenges and Directions,” Sofia, 21 November 2023*



*Dr. Alexander Gerganov, Director of CSD's Sociological Program, opening the conference "Lost and Found: Reimagining Europe's Employment Policies", Brussels, 28 November 2023*

sub-groups. Policy-makers need to fill major gaps to prevent youth inactivity on the national labour markets and secure long-term employment options.

These findings were the highlight of "Lost and Found: Reimagining Europe's Employment Policies," an international policy forum co-organised by CSD in November 2023 in Brussels. The event brought together policy-makers, researchers, and practitioners to discuss future directions for youth employment policy in Europe. The forum showcased research findings by CSD and its European partners and delved into the effectiveness of policy strategies in tackling unemployment among certain NEETs, particularly women, migrants, and youth living in economically-disadvantaged areas in the EU.

## II. Governance of religious diversity

Over the last three decades, the governance of religious diversity has been

marked by significant changes in post-communist European countries. The end of communism opened up new directions in religion management, in-



roducing markedly pro-diversity tendencies and tolerance to the various religious groups. However, in the aftermath of events with global impacts such as 9/11, the 2015 European migrant crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and others, local (political) actors in these countries have used nationalism, at times of religious nature, to address perceived national threats.

To call for more equitable governance of religious diversity, CSD took leadership in compiling a special issue of *Ethnicities*, a reputable peer-reviewed academic journal, devoted to the impact of religious nationalism on relevant policies in post-communist European states. The review contains analyses by leading international academic experts in the religion and politics in the regions. Across a number of these countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia and Russia), national policies towards religious minorities are motivated by ideas about the historical identities of the nation, which create divisions. Religious ideology is not a driving force in the design of such policies. Instead, religion is used as a strategic tool by ineffective governments to create imagined enemies to the nation, so that these governments can gain political support.

### **III. Energy citizenship, energy democracy and just energy transition**

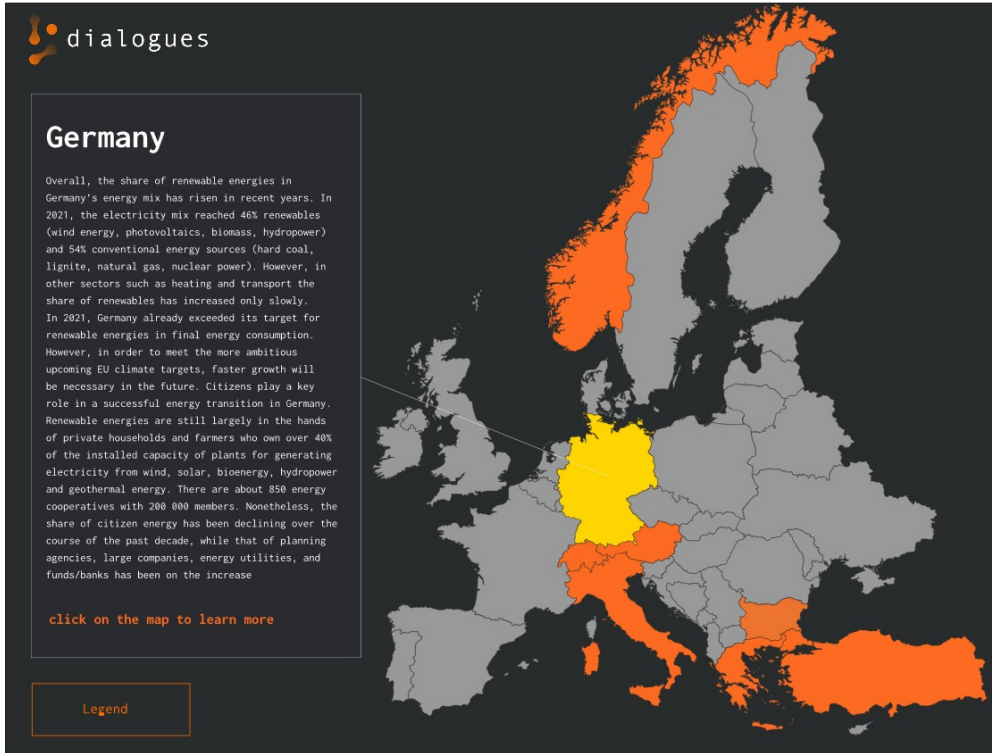
The escalation of global climate concerns and energy security issues in Europe implies an urgent need for socio-economic innovations in energy governance. Attaining climate and sustainable energy transition goals calls for reimagining the role of citizens in energy systems. CSD has continued to support European endeavors to empower and assign citizens a key role in the transition processes

and foster public engagement in energy communities, energy efficiency initiatives and decision-making on energy issues.

In January, CSD held the [workshop](#) “Innovative Solutions for Energy Citizenship in Bulgaria” to amplify the impact of the Citizen Action Lab implemented by the Center in the Northern Bulgarian town of Belene in 2022. The workshop involved experts from national institutions, regional and local authorities from the Northwestern and Northern Central regions, civil society and the business sector in a conversation about policy challenges and opportunities for public participation in the country’s energy transition. Participants put forward recommendations for enabling different forms of citizen engagement through the removal of administrative and regulatory barriers and the liberalisation of the energy market.

The policy pathways identified at the event were further developed at a meeting of the international interdisciplinary Policy Advisory Group on energy citizenship organised in February 2023. The discussion focused on bridging the gap between cutting-edge analyses on energy democracy and policy practice. The outcome of the exchange has helped increase the practical applicability of international studies in policy-making.

To further assist policy-makers, citizens, civil society experts, and sustainable businesses in tackling barriers to public involvement in energy-related matters, the Center devised an Energy Citizenship Atlas. The interactive map offers overviews of national energy systems, governance frameworks, and progress towards energy transition goals, showcasing public engagement practices, factors affecting energy citizenship, and inclusivity issues in national ener-



gy transitions. By providing analytical and data-based evidence, the Atlas aids informed policy-making and wider societal efforts in the area of energy democracy and energy justice.

#### IV. Migration, integration and prediction of migrant flows

The policy conference "Challenges and Opportunities in the Field of EU Migration



*Policy conference "Challenges and Opportunities in the Field of EU Migration. Forecasting, Governance and Policy" Brussels, September 2023*

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tion. Forecasting, Governance and Policy” co-organised by CSD took place in September 2023 in Brussels.

During the event, policy-makers at the national and EU level, civil society representatives, journalists, and researchers were engaged in discussing the most pressing issues related to migration and refugee reception in the EU.

The main goal of the conference was to align EU policies to the drivers of migration, to outline the root causes and factors contributing to possible tensions within the native population in their attitudes towards immigrants/refugees across European countries and to discuss the feasibility of EU-wide initiatives for the relocation of asylum seekers and refugees. CSD, together with partner or-

ganisations, proposed effective policies for the socio-economic integration of immigrants to the EU and good practices and asylum policy commitments in compliance with human rights.

In line with its continuous active engagement in the area of migration, CSD took part in the 8<sup>th</sup> European Migration Forum organised by DG Migration and Home Affairs of the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee, where over 250 participants, mainly from civil society organisations, but also from the EESC, local and regional authorities, EU Member States and the Commission Expert Group on the views of migrants in the field of migration, asylum and integration sought to address the most pressing issues related to migration today.