

ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF UNEMPLOYED AND DISABLED PEOPLE IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATIONS

Eudochia JOMIR

PhD Candidate, Scientific Researcher
National Institute for Economic Research, AESM, MOLDOVA
mail: eudochia.jomir@ase.md
ORCID: 0000-0001-6556-6409

Oxana BARBANEAGRA

PhD, Scientific Researcher
National Institute for Economic Research, AESM, MOLDOVA
mail: oxana.barbaneagra@ase.md
ORCID: 0009-0008-2567-0170

Abstract: *In recent decades, labor markets have undergone profound transformations due to rapid digitalization, recurrent economic crises, intensified migration flows, global health emergencies, and the shift toward a green economy. These systemic changes have led to structural imbalances between labor supply and demand, with disproportionate impacts on the most vulnerable segments of the population. This study investigates the economic integration of the long-term unemployed and persons with disabilities, focusing on the Republic of Moldova while situating the analysis within broader European trends. Combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, the paper draws on official datasets and policy documents to identify structural barriers to employment, such as inadequate access to education, healthcare, and inclusive infrastructure. The findings highlight persistent disparities in employment rates, education outcomes, and exposure to poverty among persons with disabilities. The comparative analysis further reveals Moldova's relative lag in aligning with EU standards on inclusive labor market practices. The study emphasizes the need for coordinated, multisectoral policy responses, targeting both institutional and attitudinal barriers. It concludes that sustainable socio-economic reintegration requires more than employment-focused measures - it demands a systemic shift toward inclusive public policy, accessible environments, and equitable access to opportunity.*

Keywords: *unemployment, persons with disabilities, economic integration, systemic transformations*

UDC: 331.5:364-056.26(100)

Classification JEL: J11, J14.

1. Introduction

Global labor markets are experiencing a period of profound transformation, shaped by a convergence of structural shifts including digital innovation, migration, environmental transitions, demographic changes, and the cascading effects of recent global crises. These dynamics unbalanced the relationship between labor demand and supply, placing increasing pressure on vulnerable population groups - most frequent, persons facing long-term unemployment and people with disabilities. For people with disabilities, participation in economic life remains frequently limited by persistent social and institutional barriers. These include limited access to education and different trainings, insufficient healthcare services, and reduced employment opportunities. The relationship between poverty and disability is cyclical, with each reinforcing the other through constrained physical movement, inaccessible infrastructure - an obstacle for autonomy and personal development, and long-lasting social isolation. The effects are not simply personal, but systemic, affecting families, communities, and overall socio-economic resilience. In the same way, long-term unemployment continues to create difficulties, at the individual level - where it weakens professional

skills and independence, autonomy, and at the macroeconomic level, through its negative impact on productivity, public finance, and societal integration. Successful integration or reintegration into the labor market for affected individuals requires measures as harmonized and evidence-based intervention through sustainable strategies.

2. Literature Review

According to World Bank Group, „over one billion people, or 16% of the world’s population, experience some form of disability, and disability prevalence is higher for developing countries” [1]. People living with disabilities are facing social and economic disadvantages, including reduced access to quality education, health services, limited employment accession, and a significantly increased risk of poverty. Poverty itself can act as a cause and as a consequence of disability. It can arise from malnutrition, insufficient access to healthcare and education, exposure to hazardous work environments, environmental degradation, and inadequate water and sanitation services. Conversely, people with disabilities can face poverty being limited of educational achievements, restricting access to the labor market, limited earning opportunities, and increasing living costs generated by disabilities *that negatively also, affecting their mental health*. The full inclusion remains blocked by various barriers that includes: non-accessible infrastructure, and public transport not adapted to the needs of people with disabilities, reduced availability of assistive technologies because they are very expensive, deficiency of accessible communication formats, deficiencies in service delivery, and constant negative social perception and discrimination. Furthermore, families with members with disabilities often face higher levels of food insecurity according to insufficient financial resources, generated by lower employment rates and poverty. In case of humanitarian crises or armed conflict, persons with disabilities are exposed to greater risk of harm, including violence, exploitation, and abuse, with mortality rates reported to be two to four times higher than people outside vulnerable groups [1].

On the other side, a meaningful percentage of non-employed individuals remain jobless for extended duration - specifically, for more than one year, that place them in the category of long-term unemployed. This condition has significant long-term impacts, not only for those most impacted, who often face social marginalization and reduced perspectives for reintegration, but also for the entire society, that puts additional pressure on public finances. Long-term unemployment is strongly connected to the persistence of poverty and social exclusion. Confronting this problem remains a major policy priority within the European Commission’s broader agenda for employment and economic resilience, reflecting the need for sustained and coordinated efforts to reintegrate the long-term unemployed into the labor market. Addressing long-term unemployment is a key employment challenge of the Commission’s jobs and growth strategy [2]. The Council of the European Union presented some recommendations on the integration of the long-term unemployed in the labour market: „encouraging the registration of long-term unemployed with an employment service; providing each registered long-term unemployed with an individual in-depth assessment to identify their needs and potential at the very latest at 18 months of unemployment; offering a job integration agreement to all registered long-term unemployed at the very latest at 18 months” [2].

3. Methodology

This study is combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods, in order to examine the mechanisms of economic integration for the unemployed and persons with disabilities in the context of systemic transformations. The primary research methods applied include document analysis, comparative statistical analysis, inductive reasoning, and analytical

deduction. Relevant data were collected from official public sources, such as the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, Eurostat, and the International Labour Organization. The datasets include time-series data on employment, unemployment rates, and the socio-economic status of persons with disabilities between 2020 and 2025. Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyze trends and structural imbalances, while comparative analysis allowed the evaluation of Moldova's position relative to EU averages and member states. In order to interpret the underlying causes and systemic patterns, the research also relied on thematic content analysis of European and national policy frameworks, legal documents, and strategic action plans concerning the labor market and disability inclusion.

4. Results and Discussion

According to a publication issued by the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, the data as of January 1, 2024, provided by the National Office of Social Insurance, indicate that "the number of persons recognized as disabled in the Republic of Moldova was 161.9 thousand people, including 11.4 thousand children aged 0-17. Persons with disabilities represented 6.7% of the population with usual residence, and children with disabilities constituted 2.2% of the total number of children (up to 18 years old) with usual residence in the Republic of Moldova. (Figure 1). Persons recognized as disabled (beneficiaries of disability pensions and state social disability allowances) represent about 7 percent of the country's usual resident population." [3].

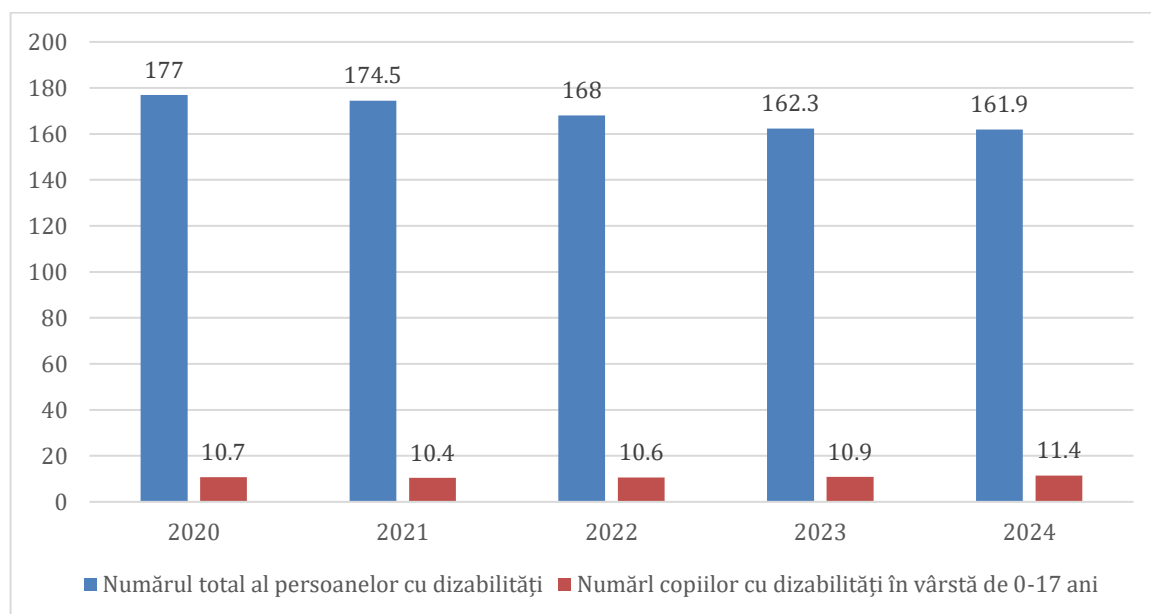


Figure 1. Number of recognized persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova, 1 January 2024 (thousands)

Source: statistica.gov.md

According to recent researches, people with disabilities continue to deal with significant barriers to full social inclusion. These challenges consist of restricted access to essential services such as healthcare, education, social assistance, career guidance, and employment opportunities. Additionally, physical accessibility remains deficient, as public infrastructure is often insufficiently adapted to the needs and requirements of persons with disabilities. Also, limited access to public information and negative social perception and discrimination intensify their exclusion.

Researches indicate that people with disabilities - specifically those living in rural areas - are at an increased risk of poverty.

”In 2023, 27% of the EU population over the age of 16 had some form of disability. According to Eurostat estimates, that equals to 101 million people or one in four people adults in the EU. [4]” A significant number of disabled still face barriers to access healthcare, education, careers, entertainment, and to participate in political life. Almost half of the EU population think that discrimination based on disability is common in their country. [4]

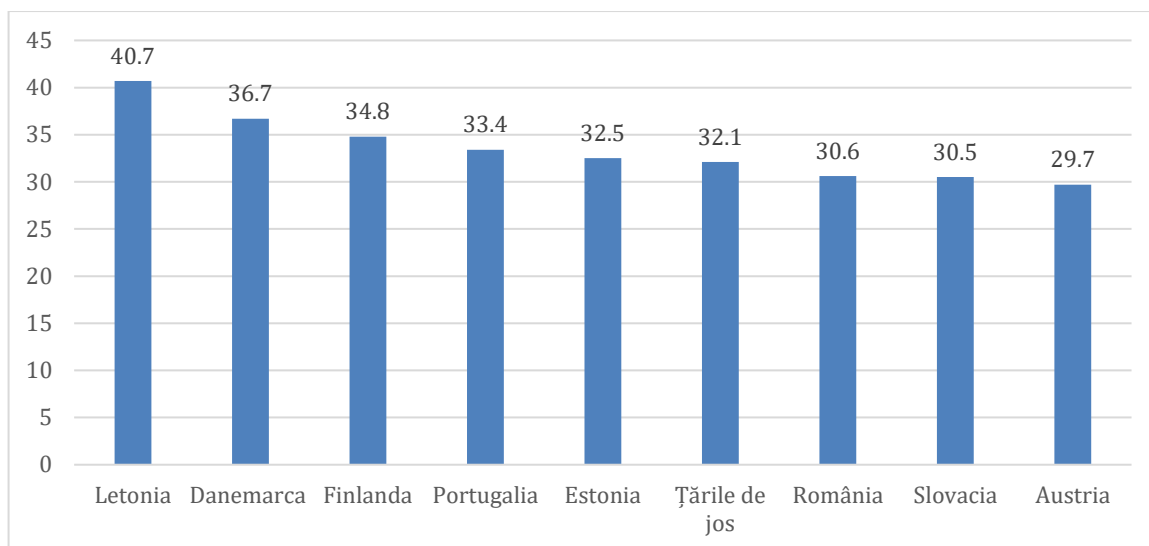


Figure 2. EU countries with the highest share of people with disabilities in 2023 (%)

Source: consilium.europa.eu

People with disabilities face a lot challenges affecting their social and economic integration:

- **1 in 2 feel discriminated against** – many people with disabilities continue to experience unfair treatment and discriminatory attitudes because of their condition. According to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2019, 52% of respondents (with disabilities) – reported having felt discriminated in a social, professional, or institutional context. This indicator suggest that the economic integration of people with disabilities cannot be realized just through employment measures but also, must be supported by cultural changes and changes in attitudes and educating the population in order to achieve a greater degree of tolerance and acceptance.
- **Almost 1 in 5 are unemployed** – ”17.7% of people with disabilities aged 20-26 were unemployed in 2020, compared with 8.6% of people without disabilities from the same age group.” [4] This difference not only reflects inequalities in access to the labor market but also contributes directly to the lowered financial autonomy of people with disabilities. The lack of stable employment opportunities restricts their capacity to achieve economic independence and reinforces a cycle of social and economic exclusion.
- **1 in 3 are at risk of poverty or social exclusion** - in 2023, disabled people faced a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion, with 28.8% affected, compared to 18% among those without disabilities. This gap represent persistent socio-economic disparities and indicates that persons with disabilities remain unfairly vulnerable to marginalization. The data underscores the necessity for targeted social protection measures and inclusive economic policies aimed at reducing inequality and fostering social participation for all.

- **1 in 5 leave school early** - the early school-leaving rate among persons with disabilities is nearly twice as high as that of their non-disablee people, reflecting barriers in accessing and completing education and training. A considerable number of young people with disabilities are enrolled in special education institutions, which often limits their transition to mainstream education. As a result, their participation in higher education remains lower: only 29% of persons with disabilities earn a higher education degree, compared to 44% among those without disabilities.
- **4 times more likely to have unmet healthcare needs** - access to medical treatment is a fundamental human right, however, individuals with disabilities frequently confront important obstacles in exercising this right. For many, healthcare services remain financially inaccessible, geographically distant, or excessively long waiting periods. These limitations not only compromise their overall well-being but also intensify health inequalities, marginalizing persons with disabilities within healthcare systems.
- **1 in 5 are victims of violence** - persons with disabilities - especially women, older adults, and children—are exposed to violence and abuse, both in domestic environments and within institutional care settings. Statistical data reveals that 17% of individuals with disabilities report being victims of violence, a rate more than double that of non-disabled people, among whom the figure stands at 8%. [4]

According to the data published by the National Bureau of Statistics, based on the findings of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) for the fourth quarter of 2024, the national unemployment rate stood at 3.9%. This represents a decrease of 1.0 percentage point compared to the same period in 2023, when the rate was recorded at 4.9%. The number of unemployed, estimated according to the definition of the International Labor Office (ILO), was 32.8 thousand persons, down by 27.1% compared to the level of the fourth quarter of 2023 (45.0 thousand persons). Unemployment affected a higher proportion of women, who accounted for 51.7% of the total unemployed, and urban - 55.0%. Unemployment rate in the population aged 15 and over (share of unemployed BIM aged 15 and over in the labor force of the same age group) was 3.9%, down by 1.0 p.p. compared to the fourth quarter of 2023 (4.9%) (SDG indicator 8.5.2) (Figure 3). The unemployment rate for men was 3.8%, for women - 3.9%, in urban areas - 4.1% and in rural areas - 3.6%. The unemployment rate for the population aged 20-64 was 3.6%, decreasing by 1.2% compared to Q4 2023. By age, the highest unemployment rate is among 15-24 year olds (17.6%) [5].

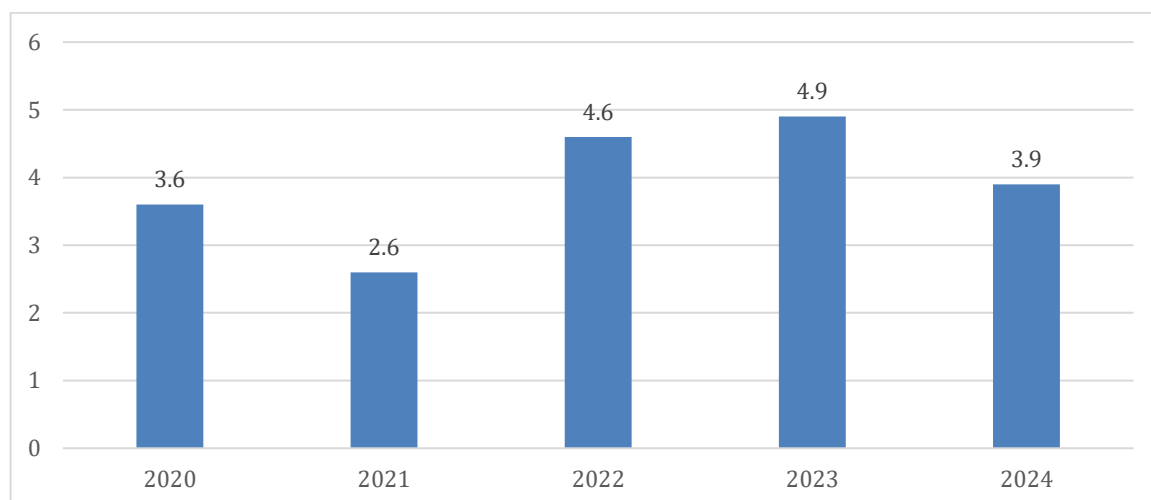


Figure 3. Unemployment rate (%), fourth quarter, 2020-2024

Source: statistica.gov.md

The EU unemployment rate was 5.9% in December 2024, up from 5.8% in November 2024 and down from 6.0% in December 2023 (Table 1). Eurostat estimates that 12.978 million persons in the EU, of whom 10.830 million in the euro area, were unemployed in December 2024. In December 2024, the unemployment rate for women was 6.1% in the EU, stable compared with the previous month, and the unemployment rate for men was 5.7%, also stable compared with November 2024. [6]

Table 1. Seasonally adjusted unemployment, totals (EU)

	Rates (%)						
	2023	2024				2025	
	Dec.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.
European Union	6,0	5,9	5,9	5,8	5,9	5,8	5,7

Source: ec.europa.eu

„Based on the ILO definition, Eurostat defines unemployed persons as persons aged 15 to 74 who:

- are without work;
- are available to start work within the next two weeks;
- and have actively sought employment at some time during the previous four weeks.” [6]

The unemployment rate represents the proportion of unemployed individuals within the total labour force, where the labour force includes all employed and unemployed persons. In the context of this news release, the unemployment rates are calculated based on data for individuals aged between 15 and 74 years. The youth unemployment rate specifically reflects the percentage of unemployed individuals aged 15 to 24 within the labour force of the same age group. It is important to note that this indicator does not represent the share of unemployed within the total youth population. According to Eurostat estimates, approximately 12.677 million people in the European Union were unemployed in February 2025. This figure marks a decrease of 131,000 compared to January 2025. When compared to February 2024, unemployment fell by 643,000 individuals, both at the EU level and within the euro area. The EU’s unemployment rate stood at 5.7% in February 2025, showing an improvement from 5.8% in January 2025 and from 6.1% recorded in February 2024. [7]

5. Conclusions

This study sheds light on the persistent and multifaceted barriers impeding the economic integration of the long-term unemployed and persons with disabilities, particularly within the context of the Republic of Moldova. While structural improvements in employment statistics have been observed in recent years, they fail to reflect the deep-rooted exclusion faced by vulnerable populations. The data reveal stark disparities in access to employment, education, healthcare, and basic services—especially for individuals with disabilities and for young people struggling to transition into the labor market. Theoretically, the findings reinforce the notion that socio-economic integration cannot be reduced to job placement alone. Instead, integration must be conceptualized as a multi-dimensional process requiring accessible infrastructure, inclusive education systems, supportive social policies, and a cultural shift in societal attitudes toward disability and long-term unemployment. Practically, this research highlights the urgency of implementing comprehensive, cross-sectoral strategies tailored to the specific challenges faced by these groups. Policymakers are encouraged to prioritize individualized support services, expand vocational training opportunities, and align national policies with EU frameworks that promote labor market inclusiveness and human rights protection.

Endnotes: *The paper was elaborated within the framework of Subprogram 030101 „Strengthening the resilience, competitiveness, and sustainability of the economy of the Republic of Moldova in the context of the accession process to the European Union”, institutional funding.*

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