

SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION. EU AND EMPLOYMENT RATES OF RECENT GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT: Sustainable Education. EU and Employment Rates of Recent Graduates.

The concept of sustainable development gradually assumed at a global level and enshrined in 2015 through the adoption of the 2030 Agenda comes as an extension of an optimistic paradigm, which integrates within its borders the aspiration to build a safer and freer world for the entire population of humanity. With the approval in New York, in September 2015, of the 2030 Agenda, the transition from the 8 Millennium Development Goals to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was achieved, thus underlining the redefinition of humanity's development objectives for the next 15 years. The project is ambitious, and to mark its importance and involvement in international development, the European Commission designated 2015 as the European Year for Development. Each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals is very important, with a total of 169 sub-targets and 232 indicators for monitoring progress in achieving the targets. But Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure access to quality education, seems essential for the proper functioning of a sustainable society as a whole. It is a key factor and facilitator contributing to the achievement of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. And this is because to navigate today's complex world and make informed decisions, we need to develop critical thinking, a skill that helps us evaluate information, make valid arguments, and solve problems effectively. And critical thinking must be trained and educated. Correct thinking on which we can base good decisions.

Keywords: *critical thinking, Education for Sustainable Development, employment rate, International Standard Classification of Education system, Sustainable Development Goals, tertiary educational attainment*

1. Sustainable education

Approaches to education for sustainability or education for sustainable development have diversified, especially since the normative concepts of sustainability and sustainable development have entered the international political discourse.¹ According Council of the European Union (2010), “Education for Sustainable Development” (ESD) is essential for the achievement of a sustainable society and is therefore desirable at all levels of formal education and training, as well as in non-formal and informal learning”. According to UNESCO’s definition (2014) ESD allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future”. Also, ESD:

- “Means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption”;
- “Requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development. ESD consequently promotes competencies like critical thinking, imagining future scenarios and making decisions in a collaborative way”;
- “Requires far-reaching changes in the way education is often practised today”.²

Practically “is about the learning needed to maintain and improve our quality of life and the quality of life of generations to come ... ESD enables people to develop the knowledge, values and skills to participate in decisions about the way we do things individually and collectively, both locally and globally, that will improve the quality of life now without damaging the planet for the future”.³

There are four pillars of education in the view of UNESCO: **learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be** – essential for success in such a complex world.

1 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Current Values of Education and Culture”, In *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, edited by Nicoleta Elena Heghes, 87-92, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, 2021. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5507021 ; See also: Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Valences of Education”, in *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, August 15-16, 2021, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, pp. 190-196. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5507180.

2 See <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/students-and-family/sustainability/>

3 *Ibidem*.

Learning how to learn means understanding and using knowledge. Related skills are critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, which are fundamental to informed/knowledgeable actions.

Learning to be refers to the concept of active factor. Related skills include coping skills, self-awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence, the desire to build an identity, self-worth, goal setting, etc.

Learning to live together involves a sense of belonging to a group, a category, a society and a culture, and understanding and respecting differences. Related interpersonal life skills are the skills of communication, negotiation, refusal, etc., essential for defining a person as a social being, in constant interaction with the world..

Learning to do is related to the acquisition of cultural tools, i.e. objects or behavioral models. Proximate skills are related to the practical application of what is learned and must be associated with life skills in a teaching-learning situation..

2. Employment rates of recent graduates

One of the 2030 targets for achieving quality education is to substantially increase the number of young people and adults who possess relevant skills, including vocational skills, that facilitate employment, decent job creation and entrepreneurship. The main indicator for measuring the implementation of this target is employment rate of young people in the 20-34 age group, 1-3 years after graduation. Three additional indicators are also taken into account in measuring progress:

- Share of high school graduates (among current year graduates), in the total number of students enrolled at the beginning of the school year in the final grades,
- Participation rate in the educational or training process of people aged between 25 and 64, by gender,
- Rate of unemployed young people not in any form of education or training, by gender.

According to the Eurostat data in 2024 the employment rate for recent graduates aged 20-34 years (levels 3-8) in the EU was 82.3 %. The employment rate ranged from 69.6 % in Italy to 91.6 % in The Netherlands.

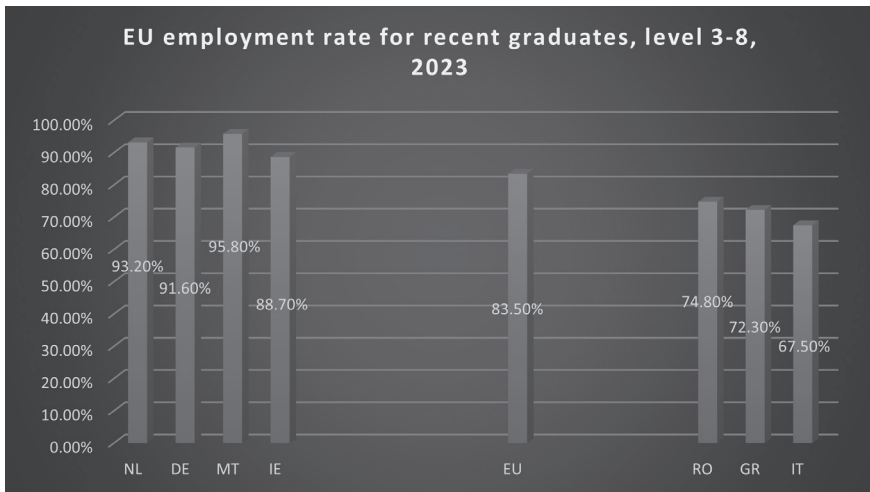
In 2024 recent male graduates in the EU (20-34 years, levels 3-8) were more likely to find work than their female counterparts (males – 87,8%, females: 79,1%). The same situation was noticed and for the others levels:

- Levels 0-4: Males – 81,1%, Females – 65,4%;

- Levels 3-4: Males – 85,9%, Females: 72,7%;
- Levels 0-2: Males: 67,9%. Females: 43,5%.

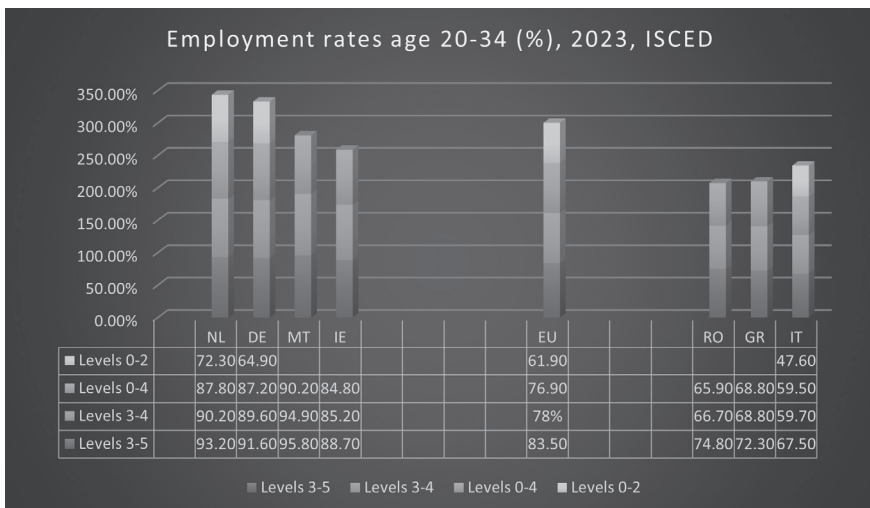
Also, there are big differences between the countries. For example, the highest employment rates were found in Malta (95,8%), The Netherlands (93.2 %), Germany (91.6 %) and Ireland (88,7%). The lowest employment rates were found in Italy (67.5 %), Greece (72.3 %) and Romania (74.8 %).

Figure 1: EU employment rate for recent graduates, level 3-8, 2023



Source: Author

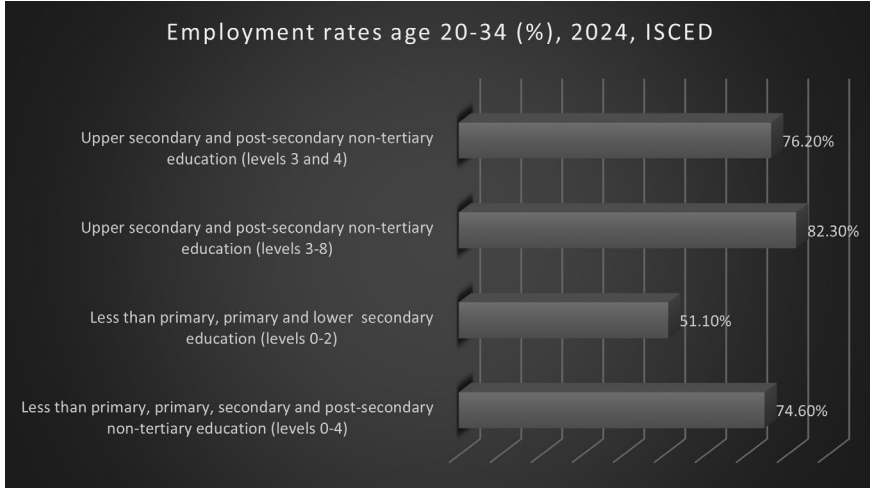
Figure 2: Employment rates age 20-34 (%), 2024 (highest and lowest rates)



Source: Author

According to the Eurostat data as expected the level of educational attainment plays a key role when recent graduates seek employment.

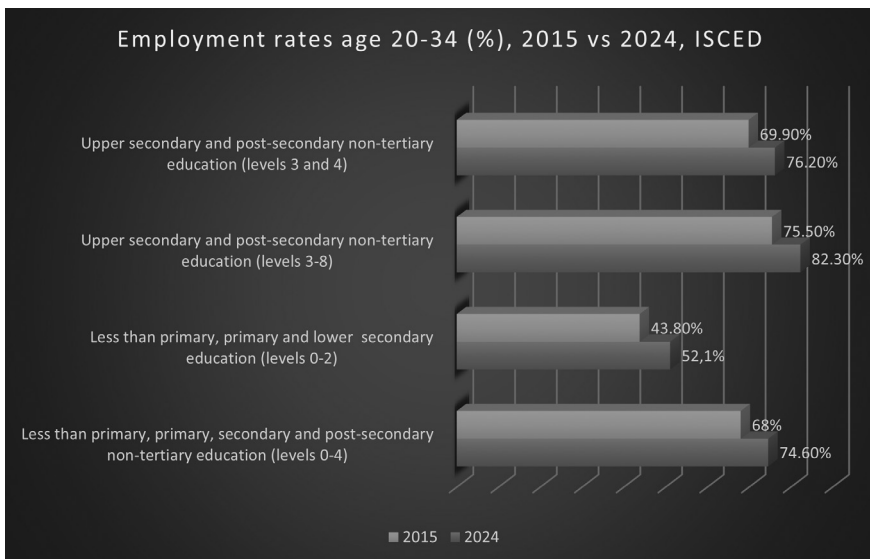
Figure 3: *Employment rates of young people (%)*, 2024



Source: Author

There is also a favorable dynamic as we approach 2024, in the sense that the youth employment rate is higher now than in previous years, for each level of education according to the International Standard Classification of Education system:

Figure 4: *Employment rates of young people (%)*, 2015 vs 2024



Source: Author

2.1. Employment rates of recent graduates: 2015-2024

Looking at the data, recent tertiary graduates level 3-8 (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education) had their lowest employment rate in 2014 (75.5 %). The share rose to 81 % in 2019, before going down in 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (78,7%). After that, the share rose again and, at 83.5 % in 2023 and going down in 2024 (82,3%). (In Romania the rate varied from 68,1% in 2015 to 75% in 2024)

Turning to 3 and 4 level (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education), the EU employment rate was at its lowest in 2015 (69.9 %) and the first peak for this subpopulation was recorded at 78 % in 2023. After 2019 (76%) in 2020 there was a considerable decrease due to the COVID-19 pandemic (72,1%), but the share rose again from 2021 (72,7%) to its highest level of 78.1 % in 2023 (in 2024 the value was at 76,2%). (In Romania the rate varied from 59,8% in 2015 to 65% in 2024).

In 2024, the gap in employment rates between recent tertiary graduates and recent graduates from medium education was 6,1%. Also:

- For 0-4 levels (less than primary, primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education) EU employment rate was at lowest in 2015 (68%) and the first peak for this subpopulation was recorded at 76,9% in 2023 (in 2024 the value was 74,6%). (In Romania the rate varied from 59,7% in 2015 to 64,9% in 2024);
- For 0-2 levels (less than primary, primary and lower secondary education) EU employment rate was at lowest in 2015 (43,8%) and the first peak for this subpopulation was recorded at 61,9% in 2023 (in 2024 the value was 52,1%).

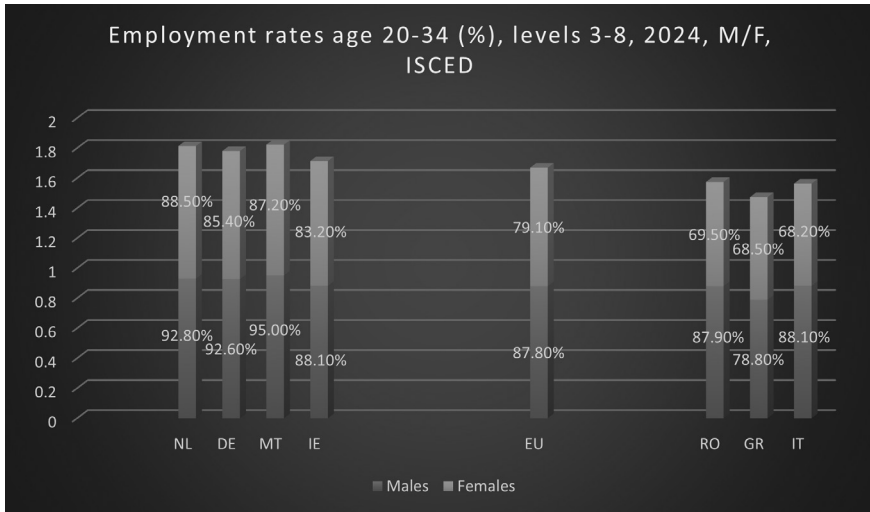
Looking at the data, **employment rates of recent graduates are highest for those with a tertiary educational attainment** (Figure 3). For example, the highest employment rates in 2023 were recorded for level 3-8 (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education) – 83,5%, while lower employment rates were recorded for levels 0-4 (76,9%) and 0-2 levels (61,9%) those with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (i.e. with a medium level of education).

When looking into the details we notice that there were big differences between the countries. For example, if the highest rates of employment for recent graduates were founded in Malta (95,8%), The Netherlands (93,2%) and Germany (91,6%), the lowest rates of employment for recent graduates were in Italy (67,5%), Greece (72,3%) and Romania (74,8%).

Also, we noticed a large differences between the sexes both in magnitude and which sex has the higher employment rate.

For example, in 2024, for the levels 3-8 between the two sexes it was a difference of 8,7% in the EU.

Fig. 5: Employment rates age 20-34 (%), levels 3-8, 2024, Males vs Females, ISCED



Source: Author

But if we advance to the others levels the differences are higher. For example, in 2024, for the levels 0-2 between the two sexes it was a difference of 24,4% in the EU (Males -67,9%, Females - 43,5%).

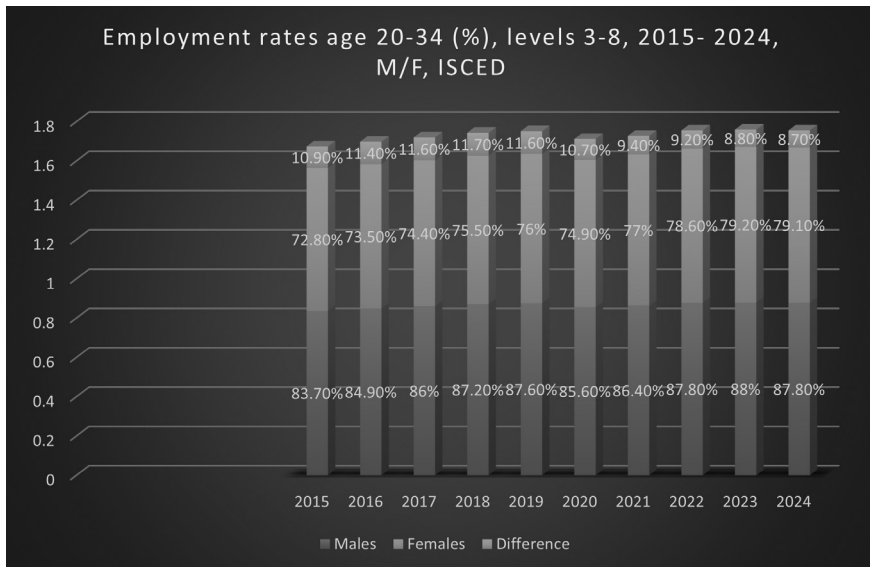
Fig. 6: Employment rates age 20-34 (%), levels 0-2, 2024, Males vs Females, ISCED



Source: Author

Also, the gender gap has varied in magnitude in the EU. For example, for the levels 3-8 (20-34 years) the higher was in 2018 (11,7%), while the lowest was in 2024 (8,7%).

Figure 7: Employment rates age 20-34 (%), levels 3-8, 2015-2024, Males vs Females, ISCED



Source: Author

Figure 7 reveals very interesting informations:

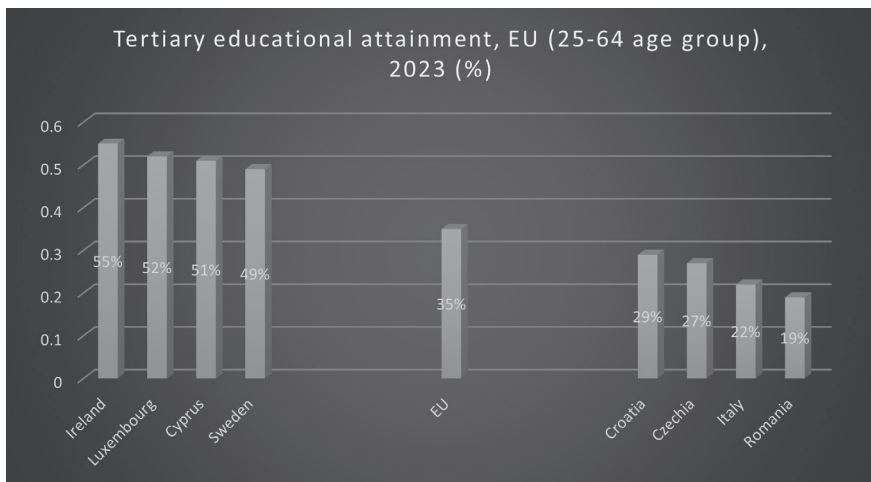
- In the EU men in general had a higher employment rate than women for recent graduates of levels 3-8 (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education);
- The employment rates have been higher for men over time but the general pattern of the evolution is similar for both women and men;
- The gender gap has varied in magnitude and was at its lowest in 2024 at 8.7 pp, while the largest difference was observed in 2018 and amounted to 11,7 pp in favour of men;
- In the same time, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, we noticed that the rates fell sharply both for women and men (Males: 85,6%, Females: 74,9%).

The tertiary education rate, or the proportion of the population that has completed a form of higher education, is considered to be one of the most important indicators of the socio-economic potential of any state. It

is generally appreciated that the tertiary education rate is a criterion often used to determine the level of economic investment and development in the region in question in the medium and long term.

According to Eurostat data, in 2023, in the European Union about 35% of the population aged 25-64 had higher education (Romania ranks last in the EU in terms of the proportion of higher education graduates in the total population aged 25-64 (19%).

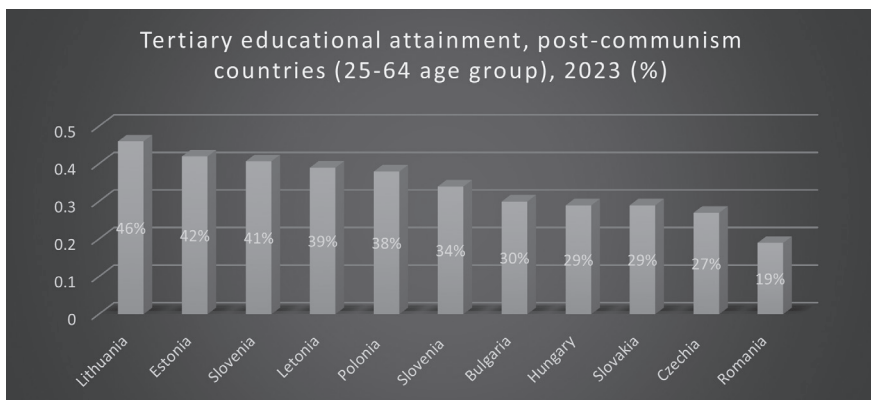
Figure 8: Tertiary educational attainment, EU (25-64 age group), 2023 (%)



Sources: Author

The proportion of the population with higher education in other post-communist states is significantly higher.

Figure 9: Tertiary educational attainment, post-communism countries (25-64 age group), 2023



Sources: Author

Conclusions

- To navigate today's complex world making informed decisions, we need to develop critical thinking, a skill that helps us evaluating information, making valid arguments and solving problems effectively.
- To do that critical thinking must be trained and educated - correct thinking on which we can base good decisions.
- One of the 2030 targets for achieving quality education is to substantially increase the number of young people and adults who possess relevant skills, including vocational skills, that facilitate employment, decent job creation and entrepreneurship.
- According to the Eurostat data in 2024 the employment rate for recent graduates aged 20-34 years (levels 3-8) in the EU was 82.3 %.
- In 2024 recent male graduates in the EU (20-34 years, levels 3-8) were more likely to find work than their female counterparts (males – 87,8%, females: 79,1%).
- There are big differences between the countries.
 - o The highest employment rates were found in Malta (95,8%), The Netherlands (93.2 %), Germany (91.6 %) and Ireland (88,7%).
 - o The lowest employment rates were found in Italy (67.5 %), Greece (72.3 %) and Romania (74.8 %).
- The youth employment rate is higher now than in previous years, for each level of education according to the International Standard Classification of Education system.
 - o Recent tertiary graduates level 3-8 (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education) had their lowest employment rate in 2014 (75.5 %). The share rose to 81 % in 2019, before going down in 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (78,7%). After that, the share rose again and, at 83.5 % in 2023 and going down in 2024 (82,3%)
- Employment rates of recent graduates are highest for those with a tertiary educational attainment.
 - o The highest employment rates in 2023 were recorded for level 3-8 (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education) – 83,5%, while lower employment rates were recorded for levels 0-4 (76,9%) and 0-2 levels (61,9%) those with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (i.e. with a medium level of education).

- There is a large difference between the sexes both in magnitude and which sex has the higher employment rate.
 - o In 2024, for the levels 3-8 between the two sexes it was a difference of 8,7% in the EU.
- The gender gap has varied in magnitude in the EU. For example, for the levels 3-8 (20-34 years) the higher was in 2018 (11,7%), while the lowest was in 2024 (8,7%).
- According to Eurostat data, in 2023, in the European Union about 35% of the population aged 25-64 had higher education.
- The tertiary education rate, or the proportion of the population that has completed a form of higher education, is considered to be one of the most important indicators of the socio-economic potential of any state.
 - o It is generally appreciated that the tertiary education rate is a criterion often used to determine the level of economic investment and development in the region in question in the medium and long term.

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