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Covid 19 Pandemic in Romania and the Impact on the Lives of Young People

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Abstract: This article and case study looks at the current effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people and youth workers in Romania as well as on the youth policy responses. It is based on field research in Romanian Youth NGOs in July 2021 and on semi-structured interviews realized online in November and December 2021, because of the Covid-19 restrictions. The target group was composed of young people aged between 18-35 and youth workers with no age limit.
A very important aspect of the case study is the fact that, within the youth field in Romania, although the Covid-19 negative effects, youth engagement and youth activism continued to have positive effects in the communities and in young people's lives.

Keywords: *Covid19 Pandemic; Romania; Impact; Young People*

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Introduction

Background, context and literature: The background of this subject started when the effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic began to be felt in Romania too. The most recent context, proved that, after some field research carried out so far, in a few Romanian NGO-s working with youth, the main areas that have been most affected in young people's life were the emotional health and the social skills, because they were deprived of human interaction as they were used before, and most of the activities were taking place online. The youngsters with the fewest opportunities were the group which was the most affected. The specific risks that they are facing are social exclusion, school dropout, health and wellbeing issues, mental health issues, even anxiety or depression.

Regarding the literature, the research "Beyond lockdown. The pandemic scar on young people", is a very important starting point in the youth field and in the case of this case study, because it showed that the effects of the pandemic on young people will last well beyond that and a youth inclusive recovery is now crucial. (Moxon et al., 2021)

Methodology: The methodology that was used for this case study consisted of semi-structured interviews, focus groups discussions and observations during meetings, discussions with youth workers, young people, NGOs representatives and people working in the youth field during the Covid19 pandemic in Romania. The target group of respondents was identified with the snowball research sampling method (Dragan et al., 2012). The target group was composed of young people in Romania aged between 18 to 35 years old, of youth workers, people working with and for youth in education field, youth field or European programmes addressed to young people. Last, but not least, the case study contains the perspectives of visually impaired young people about the Covid19 Pandemic and what changes and challenges it brought with it.

Findings: Regarding the effects of the Covid19 Pandemic in Romania, there were some changes noticed in the lives of young people and youth workers**.** For instance, for the young people in Romania who are blind or visually impaired who took part in the research most of the changes due to the Covid19 pandemic were related to the independent life, social life and work or studies. For one of the interviewed students who is studying at the music University in Bucharest, the conclusion was that the theory can be studied online, but practical music skills need to be studied face to face with the

teacher and other students, because the acoustic on zoom or other platforms is not as it should be for the music study.

Also, other interesting answers came from a very independent blind young person noticing that, after mastering so many independent life skills, an independent blind person could not use them because they usually go around with a guide dog, so the guide dog did not have any work to do and had to retrain the dog after the Lockdown and it was quite hard. There was also an impossibility to travel. The pandemic changed the way young people lived and worked, in the sense that they had to switch online, and it was pretty hard because not all the platforms are accessible for the blind and they had to handle, in a very short period of time, platforms that they did not know anything about. Another aspect that changed was the social life. Before the lock down, some were quite outgoing, meaning, for example, when going around with the guide dog, and got lost, did not have any problem to ask people around for help. But now they feel the aftereffects of the pandemic, because when getting lost they became quite shy to go around and ask. On the other hand, an aspect of the pandemic is getting in contact again with people with whom they have not talk to in a while, learned a new language, so there were quite drastic changes

In terms of what areas of life have been most affected, the interviews showed that the most affected were the social life, work, and mobility, especially for the disabled young people. The groups that have been most affected and the specific risks that young people in Romania are facing were multiple. Concerning the groups, the most affected were the disabled young people, because when disabled people live on their own this is challenging in normal times and even more during lockdown and the Covid19 pandemic times.

Regarding the challenges faced as the young people tried to negotiate and navigate various transitions due to COVID19 Pandemic there were a few findings. It was hard to organize the time, it was hard to know whether they had to work from home or from the office. There was the impression that if a young person with disabilities worked from home was excluded socially, but also there was the risk to work more than necessary and stay more in front of the computer and finish quite late. Sometimes, if they went in the office nobody was there, everybody was on work from home. Another challenge was getting used to a hybrid lifestyle.

The strategies developed to deal with the new circumstances, in particular, with new uncertainties in relation to the labor market, within education and in relation to learning mobility across both formal and non-

formal sectors were different from respondent to respondent. Some, subscribed to many clubs online in order to have a hybrid social life. Another strategy was to make a lot of activities outdoor as much as those were allowed. Also, activities that make people smile that contribute to the personal development, learning a new language, or improving the ones already known. Reading a lot was also a strategy to escape the reality of the pandemic, so everything that young people did not have the time for before. In few words, a strategy was to do things that they did not have time before, in order to look at the positive side, meaning that during the lockdown they had more time at home and did not want to waste it.

In order to show resilience and motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic, some of the interviewed young people were looking for a stable job and to build up a profession. Also, an option for young people was doing an internship, even though an internship is not a job. Not letting the exterior factors influence the decisions of the young people trying to get integrated on the work market represented a strong motivation and proof of resilience.

Regarding the specific needs of young people in Romania that need to be addressed by the Youth Policies in the current situation, there were several identified needs. For young people in general, there is a need for a social life, they need to feel that they are belonging to a group, to a social group, to a community. For disabled young people there is a need for mobility, training, and independent life skills and also there is a need for the policies to address that. The youth policies can adapt after the pandemic, according to the interviews. Firstly, in order to improve the existing youth policies one suggestion is to identify the needs, concerning every category like sending out surveys to see what people need and then publish regularly projects and content that young people can have access to, like social projects or community, such as Erasmus+ , European Solidarity Corps or other European programmes for young people.

Discussion and conclusion – including implications for youth policy in Europe and linking in with COVID-19

In conclusion, after analysing all the findings from the semi-structured interviews, there were similar aspects identified and, in the same time different and unique perspectives. The semi-structured interviews gathered answers from 10 young people and youth workers from Romania about the implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic on young people's lives and on youth policies. For example, from the answers, the areas which were the most affected were the relationships and the social life. Also, the work and personal

life balance was affected, as well as all the health aspects, physical and psychological. In the same time, for some cases, the professional area was the one most affected because of the lack of opportunities on the labour market.

Regarding the effects of the Covid-19 on young people in Romania, from the point of view of youth workers it was noticed that, on a personal level, the pandemic affected the physical and mental health. On the social side, the most affected aspects were the meetings with family (meetings take place less often) and friends. On young people, an effect was that many of them are tired of online meetings and courses. From the perspective of young people, this pandemic made them more shy, less eager to experience new things. Also, the pandemic experience led to the emergence of the fear of being in a crowded place, developing a somewhat social phobia.

The specific risks that young people in Romania are facing because of the Covid-19 Pandemic are, according to the answers received: the risk to become more introverted, more captured by technology (not necessarily in a good way), to be cyberbullied and to not be able to have proper access to information/education - in the rural area especially. From the perspective of a youth worker and young person: there are various risks, for example related to the quality of education services during the pandemic, or their mental health due to restrictions and spending so much time indoors. For young people in precarious financial situations, it has been even more difficult.

Regarding the challenges, for some young respondents the biggest challenge is keeping the hopes high, finding motivation to work and still keep in touch with people around. Because this pandemic is making them less sociable. Also, a challenge is finding a job or a new job more suitable to the profile studies. In the same time, for the ones who are working, keeping the life work balance during the pandemic is a big challenge.

The strategies developed to deal with the new circumstances were in the most cases connected with how to prioritise properly and to not bury oneself into technology and forget to socialise completely. To efficiently use the online time and leave some offline time for the hobbies/passions/extra work, in order to have a healthy life.

The way in which the young people showed resilience was through the optimism that the pandemic will soon be over. Also, keeping in contact with family and friends, doing sports and thinking that overall, people just need to adapt. An important motivation was taken also from doing good for other people or from the discussions about experiences during the pandemic. What motivates some young respondents is that society has been through worse periods (wars for example) and lived through.

The specific needs identified from young people in Romania that need to be addressed by the Youth Policies in the current situation were the fact that such policies need to be connected to improving the educational services and their quality. Also, right now young people need support, they need to feel empowered and they need access to education, wherever they are. In the same time, the main focus should be on providing access to quality, inclusive and participative education.

In few words, the policy responses that aim at supporting youth transitions, their social condition, health, well-being, as both national and European authorities seek to ensure 'recovery' and to 'build back better' should be a more comprehensive and community-oriented work and projects that put good ideas at work in order to restore harmony and focus more on that unity in diversity, as well as vice-versa. Also, very important is that young people think there should be open sessions in which different people could send their opinions, suggestions about how we can recover ourselves after the pandemic.

There are many ways for youth work and youth policies to adapt, but the main suggestion was mostly to adapt to the hybrid way of doing the work, because this pandemic proved the fact that a lot of activities can be adapted to an online or hybrid way of work if needed, and the methods can be adapted and improved. In conclusion, where there is a will there is a way and, as Viktor Frankl wrote in Man's search for meaning "Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'" (Frankl, 1985). So, we need to find a way to adapt in Romania an integrated system of youth policies, youth centres and youth services after the pandemic that can also address the economic, educational, personal, professional, and mental health issues among young people due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

BIO: My name is Irimia Anca Cristina. My PhD thesis topic is "European Youth Policies addressed to NEETs. How the European Youth Policies are conducted in Romania at a national level". I work in the Romanian National Agency in the European Solidarity Corps Team as a project officer. My introduction to the youth field started in 2013 with Erasmus+ Youth projects, expanded with volunteering as a community organizer with high school students and has continued as a passion in my formal and informal education.

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