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Adolescents between Pandemic and War. Sociological Perspective on Emotional Vulnerabilities Reflected from a Specialists' View

Oana-Andreea NEAGU [1,*]
Petronela Polixenia NISTOR [2]

[1] Teaching Assistant, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University; PhD Candidate Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Romania; https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3082-3722; neagu_oa@yahoo.com
[2] Lecturer, PhD, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iași, Romania; https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5899-3399; polixenianistor@yahoo.com
*corresponding author: neagu_oa@yahoo.com

Abstract: *This study aimed to provide as complete as possible a picture of adolescents' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic period marked by the outbreak of the war in Ukranie, highlighting the cumulative impact of these crises on their psychological balance. The study used an exploratory qualitative methodology that allowed us to create an overall perspective on the experiences and the impact of these crises on adolescents, as well as the medium and long-term effects at a psychological and social level. The qualitative approach used the interview technique to outline the perspective of some specialists who interacted with young people experiencing various types of anxiety-depressive disorders from the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic to now. The data analysis revealed an increase in symptoms of anxiety, stress, social isolation, and identity disorientation among adolescents, particularly among those with little access to family or community support.*
The findings of the study highlight the need for multidisciplinary interventions and the strengthening of psychosocial support networks in school, family and community, in order to protect the mental health of adolescents in crisis contexts.

Keywords: *adolescence, vulnerabilities, Covid-19, war, mental health, anxiety, depression.*

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Brief history of the Covid-19 pandemic and Ukranian war in Romania

There was a time when all the eyes of humanity were focused on the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic. In January 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of a new coronavirus disease - Covid-19, which was a public health emergency of international concern (WHO, 2020a). In Romania, the first case of coronavirus infection was reported on February 26, 2020 (a 25-year-old male from Gorj County). The situation evolved rapidly and the number of people isolating at home was increasing by approximately 3,000 cases per day. A week after the first reported case, there were already 11 infected people in Romania, of whom 3 had already recovered. At that time, Romania was considered one of the least affected countries. Public or private events with a number of participants greater than 1,000 people were gradually prohibited, and events with a small number of people required approval from the local Public Health Directorate (MC, 2020).

As of March 9, 2020, the decisions of the *National Committee for Special Emergency Situations* regarding traffic restrictions from countries affected by Covid-19 (e.g. Italy, China, Iran and South Korea) came into force. Upon arrival at the border checkpoints, people travelling from these countries were required to quarantine in the border towns or self-isolate at home, depending on certain criteria (MAI, 2020).

Classes in preschool, middle school, high school, post-secondary and vocational education units were suspended on March 11 (ME, 2020); at that time there 47 recorded cases of coronavirus infection. The online education measure remained valid until the end of the school year, which was on June 12, except for the senior students, who returned to school for the last 2 weeks for national exam preparations.

On March 11, 2020 due to the unexpected evolution of the epidemiological situation, the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic, and by Decree No. 195 of March 16, 2020, the President of Romania established the State of Emergency for 30 days, which would be extended for successive periods of 30 days. The measures taken during the state of emergency were exceptional and mandatory, targeting political, economic and public order issues (Decree 195/2020).

On March 22, 2020, the first two confirmed deaths from the SARS COV-2 were recorded and both victims were elderly people with serious pre-existing conditions. On this date, in Romania, the number of infected people was 433, 4,803 people were in institutional quarantine and 65,799 people were in home isolation (SCG, 2020). By the end of March 2020,

reports showed 2,245 infected persons and 69 deaths and at the end of April, there were 12,240 infected people and 695 deaths (CNSCBT, 2020).

The emergency period ended on May 15, 2020, but in order to keep the disease under control, a national *state of alert* was declared. On this date, the number of infections from Covid-19 was 16,439 and 1,056 deaths (CNSCBT, 2020).By end of 2020 the number of daily new infections ranged between 3,000 and 5,000 and around 100-150 recorded deaths. In the beginning of 2021, the main pharmaceutical companies launched several types of vaccines and they helped control, to a certain extent, the symptoms of the disease.

On March 8, 2022 the state of alert ended and life returned to normal. All measures that had been mandatory until that date, became simple recommendations: the mask was no longer mandatory, the opening times of businesses were no longer limited, no limits on number of people during events, and the electronic certificate was no longer required to enter the country (Costiță, 2022).

By the end of 2023, Romania was hit by several major waves of infections, where periods with large number of infections (which meant a large number of inpatient stays and a large number of deaths) alternated with periods of relative calm. The last wave was in the last quarter of 2023. The number of recorded infections per week was under 15,000 and it was characterized by milder forms of the disease, with most patients experiencing symptoms similar to a viral disease (Alexandru, 2023).

One of the worst geopolitical and humanitarian crises in Europe after The Second World War began on February 24, 2022, when the Russian Federation launched a military attack on Ukraine. Romania and other nearby nations, like Poland, the Republic of Moldova, and Slovakia were immediately affected by the invasion (UNHCR, 2024).

From 2022 to 2023, Romania, which borders Ukraine to the south, has developed into a key transit hub and refugee destination for refugees from conflict-affected areas, registering over 107,000 people under temporary protection, in 2022 (WHO, 2023), of whom almost half were children.

More than 300 non-governmental organizations, local authorities and religious institutions, including the Romanian Orthodox Church, have provided material, housing, and psychosocial support, demonstrating the great solidarity of the Romanian population. The Romanian Orthodox Church, in particular, has played a significant role in offering shelter, food, and emotional support to refugees, especially in the early stages of the crisis. In 2022, the Church allocated over 8.7 million euros to support Ukranian

refugees, mobilizing 7,600 people, staff and volunteers, providing mode than 18,500 accommodation places, and organizing hundreds of humanitarian transports (Totorcea, 2023).

However, the long-term integration of refugees has created significant obstacles in the areas of education, health, and labor market access (WHO, 2023). According to data centralized by the United Nations Refugee Agency, the number of Ukrainian refugees registered in Romania in February 2023 was 112,967 and registered a significant decrease to the end of 2023, when, in December, were 83,765 (UNHCR, 2024).

Direct security risks occure upon Romania's geographic territories in proximity to the heavily bombed areas of Ukraine. For example, in July 2023, drones targeted the Reni port, which is close to the Romanian border of Isaccea and as a result, some drone fragments fell onto Romanian territory (Necsutu, 2023).

Vulnerabilities in adolescents

In the social context of recent years, adolescents face several vulnerabilities amplified by recent global crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the military conflict in Ukraine. These events have exerted a convergent psychological and social impact on young people, generating a prolonged climate of uncertainty, stress and emotional imbalance, which affects the quality of life. Adolescence, as a critical period in identity and socio-emotional development, is naturally characterized by instability and the search for autonomy; however, the overlap of these crises has significantly accentuated the psycho-social risks specific to this age (Lass-Hennemann et al., 2024).

Adolescents and young people weren't safe from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; approximately one-fifth of children aged 15 to 24 globally reported that they had feelings of depressions or having little interest in engaging in any kind of activity. One in seven children was directly affected by lockdown measures, and concerns about health, living standards, and educational losses generated worries, fears, and even anger (UNICEF, 2021).

Although adolescents and young people are in their best physical shape in terms of health, stamina, endurance, immunity, and are less prone, from a medical point of view, to severe COVID-19 symptoms (Cortés et. al., 2023), they are more prone to the occurrence of some psychological or social issues, a fact accounted for by the special attention they pay to aspects such as social connection, the intensity of emotional experiences, exploration of the unknown.

According to Charlson et al. (2019), people experiencing a generalized state of crisis have a high prevalence of mental health problems (22.1%), and this explains why the main psychological impact of the pandemic was represented by increased levels of stress and anxiety (Salari et al., 2020; Taquet et al., 2020), followed by an increase in feelings of loneliness, depression, alcohol and substance abuse, self-harm attempts and suicidal behaviors (WHO, 2020b).

The literature highlights an alarming increase in symptoms of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress among adolescents directly or indirectly exposed to war. For example, a study conducted among adolescents in Poland showed that the combined impact of the pandemic and conflict in Ukraine caused a significant deterioration in mental status, especially in those with an increased level of neuroticism (Wójtowicz-Szefler et al., 2023). Also, recent research conducted on large samples of Ukrainian teenagers or from a number of neighboring countries shows that against the background of pre-existing mental health problems, the war contributed to the emergence of severe emotional disorders, including sleep disorders, eating disorders and self-harm behaviors (McElroy et al., 2024; Goto et al., 2024).

Adolescents are experiencing a critical moment in their development, and their judgment, decision-making or reaction is constantly in relation to their peer group, which caused an increase in anxiety levels (Smirni et al. 2020), mainly due to the measures taken to limit the spread of COVID-19, such as social distancing and the stopping of various daily activities, with a massive impact on them (Guessoum al., 2020; Wagner, 2020; Wiedemann et al., 2022). Also, the closure of schools and the reduction of all types of social and human interactions impacted the daily routine of learning, socialization, healthcare, etc., attenuating or even completely eliminating the sense of safety or security (O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

Adolescents and young people with pre-existing mental health problems, either anxiety or depression, showed an increased vulnerability to psychological suffering in the context of home isolation during the pandemic (Kwong et al., 2020), and the parental mental health, as the parents were also overwhelmed by the situation, the pressure of online education and economic uncertainty in some cases (Spinelli et al., 2020) were factors causing vulnerabilities for the mental health of children and adolescents.

In addition to individual effects on young people, these crises have significantly affected the family and community environment, reducing adolescents' access to essential resources such as education, psychological

support and social support networks (Branje, 2023). By acknowledging the societal crises and fears associated with the pandemic and conflict in Ukraine, we can say that macro-social instability amplifies the state of personal insecurity and can be considered important predictors of individual mental health, especially in times of crisis (Mutz, 2024).

At European level, Eurofound specifies that young Europeans reported low levels of mental status during the pandemic period. This condition had been associated with school closures, social isolation and economic uncertainty. Young people were also more likely to face job loss and financial uncertainty, which contributed to a decreased mental health state and reduced life satisfaction level (Eurofound, 2021).

In Romania, the Covid-19 pandemic was accompanied by a mental health crisis (WHO, 2022), the effects of which have been particularly pronounced among young people. Social isolation, disruption of the school routine and lack of significant interactions have destabilized the psychosocial cues of young romanians, which led to a significant increase in anxiety and depression disorders (Silişteanu et al., 2022).

The perceptions and emotional states of young people in Romania in the context of the pandemic crisis and socioeconomic transition are the subject of a 2021 study by Smark Research, which paints a nuanced picture of their vulnerability. The findings indicate that young people exhibit high levels of emotional instability, mental exhaustion, and heightened uncertainty regarding their personal and professional futures. Additionally, respondents highlight structural flaws in Romanian society that have gotten worse during the crisis, such as lack of access to career counseling services, financial hardships, and a bureaucratic system that is seen as demoralizing and ineffective (Smark, 2021).

Research into the impact on adolescents' mental health focused on aspects with a negative impact or on specialized intervention methods. In this study, we felt it might be useful to approach the issue from a different perspective, analyzing the ways in which some adolescents managed the pandemic period. Thus, this study aimed to identify the predisposing factors and the presence of anxiety-depressive symptoms, seeking to obtain data from specialists who were in direct contact with adolescents and young people, in order to better understand the impact of the pandemic and the war and the consequences of associated events among them.

Methodological aspects regarding research into adolescent vulnerabilities caused by the Covid-19 pandemic

The study aims to assess the predisposing factors, the pre-existence or development of symptoms related to depression or anxiety, and forms of resilience in adolescents without a pre-existing diagnosis of mental disorders. The study is intended to collect and summarize information obtained from five specialists who interacted with adolescents and young people from Iaşi City, Romania, with various types of disorders during the pandemic.

Stressful life events, like the pandemic or armed conflicts, are unpredictable and often find us unprepared. Changing the biological or environmental factors in the lives of young people and adolescents to provide them with a better life is impossible. However, by studying the predisposing and protective factors, and how they interact, we can facilitate the subsequent implementation of interventions for developing resilience in adolescents and young people based on concrete and specialised findings.

This study reflects an exploratory paradigm that emphasizes the identification of subjective meanings ascribed to adolescent experiences as seen and understood by experts who work closely with this age group. The idea of a single, objectively measurable social reality is rejected by this point of view, which instead emphasizes the diversity of viewpoints, the social construction of vulnerability. Through the use of semi-structured interviews with professionals such as a psychotherapist, a clinical psychologist, a psychiatrist, a school counselor, and an Orthodox priest, the study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of adolescents in crisis situations rather than merely quantifying symptoms. Thus, the method enables the formulation of action plans that consider the complexity of the lived reality in addition to understanding psychosocial processes. By examining and challenging the institutional and cultural boundaries of the Romanian educational system in connection to the psychoemotional needs of teenagers, the study also adopts a critical perspective.

The research started with the supposition that adolescents in Iasi County exhibited heightened levels of anxiety and emotional instability during the pandemic period. However, as the war in Ukraine broke out, the working hypothesis was expanded to examine the combined effects of several crises on emotional equilibrium, future perception, and identity development to this age group. From this perspective, three primary objectives have been established in order to offer a consistent theoretical and methodological foundation, which guides the analysis and enhances the scientific significance of the investigative strategy: 1) Evaluation of how the

global crises—the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine—have generated emotional, psychological, and behavioral vulnerabilities of teenagers in Iasi County (psychological stress, anxiety, depression, social isolation, and changes in daily behaviors to determine and analyze how Iasi's teenagers dealt with the world's crises); 2) Identification of the key distinctions between the anxieties and emotional dysregulation that are normal for adolescence and those that are exacerbated by crisis situations; 3) Study of professional interventions and social support systems intended to help adolescents who are more vulnerable as a result of recent emergency situations. The study will examine how these interventions can be successfully applied in the aftermath of the pandemic and during times of conflict, with an emphasis on creating prevention and early intervention plans for teenagers.

The sample interviewed

The target population within this research was represented by specialists from multiple areas of activity who interact with young people. The sample was defined ”a priori” considering five categories of specialists: a couple and family psychotherapist (woman, about 40 years old), a clinical psychiatrist (woman, 45 years old) and a psychologist (woman, about 40) from the "Socola" Institute of Psychiatry from Iaşi, a school counselor (woman, 60 years old) at a gymnasium school in Iaşi, and a priest-professor in the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Iaşi (man, about 40 years old). These specialists were selected to reflect an interdisciplinary perspective on the emotional state of adolescents, bringing together medical, psychological, educational and spiritual expertise, essential for a more complex understanding of the impact of recent crises on the mental health of adolescents.

The sample was identified in accordance with the expert recommendations specific to the chosen type of research (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The sampling strategy is part of the segment containing typical cases, selected to highlight what is common in the targeted category, that of adolescents and young people.

Research methods, techniques and tools

This is a qualitative study and we chose the phenomenological research method (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012) to describe the essence of an experienced phenomenon, as the most appropriate way to examine the proposed research objectives. The research used the semi-directive and

semi-structured individual interview, structured around the topics to be addressed in the discussion for each individual theme.

The field data collection took place in two distinct stages. The first stage took place between March 21 and April 22, 2022, and consisted of conducting face-to-face interviews with the mentioned specialists (psychologist, psychiatrist, psychotherapist, school counselor, priest). The direct meetings allowed to obtain detailed information and authentic perspectives. The interview was conducted individually, within the work environment, and the location was chosen by the interviewee in order to be as comfortable as possible, and away from any disturbing external factors.

The tool used to steer the discussion was the *Interview Guide*.The interview used the conversation channeling technique, where the way in which questions are built and formulated allows you to pass through certain stages, from general to specific themes (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). The questions for the specialists cover the same general themes, but due to the variety of specialty areas, the guide was adapted and completed according to each specialty. The interviewer also asked clarifying questions related to the presented ideas, based on how the accounts developed. In the beginning of the meeting, the interviewee was reminded about the main topic of the interview, the purpose of research and also that he/she may refuse to provide answers at any time. Each interview was conducted separately, in settings selected by the interviewees based on their comfort level.

In order to update and complete the previously collected data, three specialists—a psychologist, psychiatrist, and school counselor—were contacted during the second phase, which took place on April 28–30, 2025. Following the accumulation of crises in recent years (pandemic, regional conflict, economic instability), this subsequent approach sought to capture potential changes in the socio-emotional plane of adolescents in addition to verifying the continuity of some phenomena observed in 2022.

At the start of every discussion, the interviewee was reminded of the general subject discussed, some information about the interviewer, and that they could leave at any moment without facing any repercussions. Additionally, they were assured that the information they provided would be kept private and that only their profession, gender and age would be disclosed, with their identities concealed. Permission was sought so that the conversation could be recorded for a more accurate release. In order to participate in the study, each participant provided their informed consent.

Research results regarding the anxious-depressive phenomenon in adolescents. Specialists' perspective on the pandemic impact

The opinion of specialists, who interacted with adolescents experiencing various disorders during the pandemic, on the occurence of the depressive phenomenon in interactions with people in the target age group is enlightening for outlining the types of intervention on the phenomenon, from a multidisciplinary perspective.

The experts' approach was accomplished through a semi-structured interview, which allowed a flexible and in-depth exploration of their perspectives on the effects of recent crises on adolescents while preserving key discussion points, including the manifestations of anxiety in adolescents, the underlying causes of these emotional states in the context of overlapping crises (war and pandemic), differences from the normative anxieties of age, the types of severe psychological distress observed among young people, and the interventions required to support their mental and spiritual health.

Anxiety disorders developed in adolescents amid measures to prevent the pandemic spread

When considering the pandemic as a trigger for depression, the generally accepted idea among specialists revolved around the perception that the pandemic was rather a generator of anxiety, and the existence of certain emotional sensitivities or personal predispositions could be a source for the development of certain types of depression.

> "I don't know if the pandemic triggered depression to such a high extent so we can talk about the pandemic as a triggering factor in young people or, in general, in people of all ages, but I think it played a role in exacerbating such situations in people with emotional sensitivities." (Priest)
>
> "I can't say that I encountered that many cases of depression, maybe anxiety rather than depression."(Psychologist)
>
> "Anxiety was one of the reasons why they sought therapy during the pandemic." (Psychotherapist)
>
> "...during this period, young people who were alone and had a predisposition to internalization were the ones that suffered."(Priest)

Adolescents/young people are also mentioned among the population categories impacted by the pandemic, and they are described as people "without experience in stressful conditions", assuming that they did not have the necessary skills to manage new information and situations, but also the intense emotions felt in relation to them.The fast-paced life that

adolescents are prone to was suddenly interrupted, and this had a destabilizing effect on their emotional balance.

> "... I think that, during the pandemic, young people and single elderly people were the ones that were vulnerable, in general. Young people have no experience in critical situations and the elderly are alone and helpless, both from a human, emotional or spiritual point of view." (Priest)
>
> "There were young people ... who presented with certain addictions and who came to us for these reasons - addictions, anxiety." (Psychologist)
>
> "Young people, teenagers or young adults."They might have been affected the most, as they have a different life rhythm: clubs, outings, meeting other peers, interacting with their peers...".(Psychiatrist)
>
> "They were using their student status to fill out their days, but without too much thought about each step... how do I fill my time with if I don't go to school, those were the ones with the highest predisposition."(School counsellor)

Although boys and girls were equally affected, girls are the ones who show a high willingness to admit that they are emotionally affected. Unlike girls, boys tend to inhibit these feelings at first, considering them inappropriate for a man.

> "girls admitted much more easily, because they can cry and complain more easily, but I think boys were equally affected."It seems to me that maybe they refused to admit within themselves that they were so strongly affected."(School counsellor)

The types of people, among adolescents and young people affected by the pandemic, included pessimistic, insecure people etc., and these criteria outlined a mental predisposition for anxious states.

> "...the case of a little girl who spent a lot of time inside during the pandemic and began to feel insecure about herself" (Psychotherapist)
>
> "I think those who didn't know how to fill their spare time, those who didn't know how to see the good around them, were affected."(School counsellor)
>
> "Those who had a tendency to feel uncomfortable with themselves, with those around them."(School counsellor)
>
> "People with a more anxious personality structure were more affected." (Psychologist)

> "Most teenagers come with this social anxiety:"I don't feel good in my own skin", "I feel like I don't blend in", "I lose relationships quite easily"...(Psychotherapist)

While adults developed anxieties related to health and control over their own lives, adolescents, an age group that requires therapy even when there are no such extreme conditions, have a different perception of life, their primary concern being related to socialization, acceptance, and group integration.The repositioning of priorities caused uncertainty among adolescents, the new organization becoming a generator of anxious states.The attitude of insecurity towards oneself and distrust in others were concrete situations of emotional destabilization, which contributed to the creation of an erroneous image of oneself.

> "Adolescents ... have different ideas about life and death, but adults developed clear anxieties about health and control over their own lives."(Psychotherapist)
>
> "...the challenge during the pandemic was the impossibility and inability to interact with other people." (Priest)
>
> "...the case of a young lady, who was experiencing a deepening state of distrust while online, because avoidance was occuring, and avoidance increases anxiety."(Psychotherapist)

Adolescents and young people were affected in different ways, but the various types of anxiety were caused mainly by the measures taken by the authorities to prevent the effects of the pandemic, and less by the disease itself.Thus, for some of them, the period in which they had no direct interaction with their friends and peers is basically non-existent; emotionally, they remained at the same level they were when the pandemic broke out, which validates the statements of some adolescents interviewed in the first stage of the study (Neagu, 2023).

> "the lockdown measures are the ones that caused problems."(Psychiatrist)
>
> "The main reason for the onset of soul turmoil was isolation." (Priest)
>
> "a little girl who told me:"When the pandemic occured I was in 6th grade, now I'm in 8th grade. Psychologically and emotionally, I feel like I'm in the 6th grade, for me those 2 years didn't matter."(Psychotherapist)

Anxious disorders on the background of global crises

The impact of the effects of the pandemic crisis overlaid with the onset of the war in Ukraine has generated a wave of disturbing emotions. Adolescents in Iasi County, resembling to those in many other Eastern European countries, exhibited an increasing range of anxiety disorders. Anxiety is changing from contextual, age-specific forms to existential and collective anxieties, according to the analysis of experts' declarations (psychotherapist, clinical psychologist, psychiatrist, school counselor, and orthodox priest).

> "deep emotional insecurity, fears related to abandonment and instability in attachments" (Psychologist)
>
> "hypervigilance, and recurrent apocalyptic" (Psychologist)
>
> "Silent anxieties, with insomnia, social withdrawal, and unexplained crying episodes" (School counsellor).
>
> "Adolescents exposed to global crises developed persistent anxiety symptoms" (Psychiatrist)

The experts interviewed all make a distinction between anxieties that are a result of recent crises and those that are thought to be typical of teenage development. If we consider natural anxieties in the first instance, they are temporary and age-appropriate, whereas the present traits are persistent, widespread, and intrusive.

> "A transformation of adolescent anxiety occurs: if first the fears were related to school performance, social integration or personal validation, now they have spread to collective themes – fear of war, social collapse or an unstable future". (Psychologist)
>
> "There have been a lot of cases of anxiety, but it's deep anxiety that occurs from insecurity rather than exam or relationship anxiety like we had previously. Some cry uncontrollably, and many worry about the future". (School counsellor)
>
> "I have more than 30 years experience with children but I can swear on my heart that I have never seen them so emotionally fragile" (School counsellor).

The pandemic crisis combined with the outbreak of war in Ukraine has unleashed waves of disturbing emotions. The effects include anxiety, but also reactions such as irritability, fear, acute fatigue, and avoidance behaviors, which directly affect attention and learning ability, similar to what Lass-Hennemann and his colleagues found in 2024.

Factors that contributed to the occurence of anxieties

In order to establish their own identities, adolescents must separate from their families as they find their own way in life. In their pursuit for group integration, they look for understanding, support, and others with whom they can share their experiences. Isolation from their peer group caused feelings of self-devaluation, self-blame, and a lack of group belonging in teenagers.

> "The main reason for the onset of soul turmoil was isolation." (Priest)
>
> "Lack of social interaction ... and there was a feeling of lack of belonging that appeared and then they turned to themselves and believed that they had a problem of guilt, of lack of value..."(Psychiatrist)

The emotional changes that adolescents are going through in crises period cause a certain vulnerability in relation to the social environment which they are part of, their peer groups, classroom peers, the school environment. The conflicting messages coming from their living environment may cause a form of skepticism about the principles and societal values, which they should adopt.

> "they are `pumped up` with negative messages, parents are scared, teachers are scared, authorities that say we should wear a mask or not, get vaccinated or not... these things are confusing for them, as they don't have a value system" (Psychotherapist)
>
> "a teenage girl is confused by the messages from her teachers, such as:"What's going on in our country it's terrible, there's no control!", "The pandemic is terrible, they're manipulating you, don't get vaccinated!"(Psychiatrist)

On the other hand, online school was a stress factor as it made students vulnerable due to the video cameras that were "invading" their personal spaces. For teenagers, overwhelmed by the desire to be "something they are not," the camera that was on just a few centimeters from their faces gave the impression of exposing their true identity or highlighting various imperfections, which is, exactly what they were trying to hide.

> "...(adolescents) were reluctant to turn on their videocameras as they didn't feel ready to welcome everyone into their homes and the online learning was about that, too... it was like their private space was being invaded and they weren't ready for that."(School counsellor)
>
> "Particularly at this age, children are trying to be something they are not and they place an emphasis on their extraordinary material

wealth. But, mainly, I think it was the fear of becoming vulnerable, of exposing themselves too much to the world, and this is anxiety."(School counsellor)

"At first, online school was disturbing from this perspective: only my face was seen, only my voice was heard...Then, I think it was also the confusion, that they no longer had any activities."(Psychiatrist)

The genetic component was brought into discussion, stating that the prevalence of anxiety disorders in childhood may be a vulnerability for the onset of anxiety disorders throughout life. In the same direction, specialty studies show (Last et al., 1987) that the presence of anxiety disorders in children is associated, most often (83%), with a diagnosis of anxiety disorders in their mothers.

"I believe that, in this life, each of us has a vulnerability to a mental disorder, either we are teenagers, young people, adults, or elderly, or in the prime of life."It depends a lot on the genetics, on several triggering factors: stress, our diseases (cancer, obesity, diabetes)."(Psychiatrist)

To a moderate extent, anxiety may be considered a natural component of life, perhaps even constructive in the development process in children.The natural discovery of life and new things, personally, brings with it emotional challenges, especially in children, such as fear or anxiety.The family role, particularly the parental role, is crucial in the efforts to overcome such obstacles felt by children and adolescents during times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.The lack of support, validation, and explanations necessary to restore an adolescent's safety and comfort are real vulnerabilities in triggering the anxious states.

"... the fear of disease, in the sense that the parent that developed anxiety impacted the adolescent, too. This is why, when looking into the system, I may say that if an event is managed well by the family, then the child will be less impacted."(Psychiatrist)

"Even if the child presented with anxiety and this wasn't directly related to the illness, most of the time anxieties are related to your own person and your social image... I'm still placing them in a family context. How do your parents view you? How do they support you? What does your mother say? What does your father say? What helps you? What doesn't help you?... because if an adolescent receives family validation for his/her behaviour, then he/she will be better equipped for crisis situations."(Psychiatrist)

"It also depends on the social support. There were young people who, for example, were living far from their parents and they were

> forced to stay at home for two months, either with a host family or in a bording school, or in all sorts of places, young people who came to my office and who, at that time, were abroad for their studies, alone and far from their families."All these factors had a contribution."(Psychiatrist)

The excessive amount of negative information from mass-media caused a climate of fear, concern and uncertainty among the population, and this was fueled by the avalanche of daily press releases from the authorities related to the pandemic and its worrying evolution, the constantly increasing number of infections and deaths, in particular.

> "I think mass-media had a negative role, too... Think about it, we, humans are extremely suggestible and influenced by what we see on TV.And not everyone is able to understand that what is reported on television is not always real or correct, or that the information is not always 100% real.(Psychiatrist)
>
> "mass-media ... was able and, I think, it did influence the state of mind of people in general, and of young people in particular." (Priest)
>
> "Negative aspects have been constantly made public all these years. I think mass-media doesn't have a mental hygiene education for the population."(Psychiatrist)

If anxiety mainly impacted people with a mental predisposition in this area, during the pandemic, in the case of depression and mental disorders, in general, people who had already been diagnosed with various disorders were the least affected by isolation, as they have a natural tendency towards self-isolation. For these people and in normal living conditions, the efforts of specialists are directed towards socialization, group reintegration, external orientation; in conditions of isolation and "social distancing" these efforts could no longer be encouraged.

> "Typically, pacients with a mental disorder have some symptoms that make them isolate."So for the vast majority of patients, this tendency to isolate did not bother them too much. They felt in their element". (Psychiatrist)
>
> "...when a disease becomes chronic, the treatment awareness also decreases."(Psychiatrist)

Experts suggest that a mix of social, psychological, and spiritual elements cause the anxiety in teenagers. Theoreticaly, these results lend substance to the theory of human development that inequalities in microsocial systems, like family and school, have a significant impact on adolescents' internal equilibrium, particularly in situations characterized by

risk and uncertainty. Teenagers who are not directly exposed to a war zone can still experience emotional effects, according to a major finding of the study. The psychologist and school counselor highlighted the role of media, especially social media in this process. Experiencing trauma indirectly through war imagery, discussions about illness, and conversations surrounding the certainty of death is identified as a risk factor that is comparable to facing direct trauma, particularly when emotional support structures are lacking. Similar results came from studies that conclude that children who are refugees or who learn about war indirectly exhibit emotional symptoms similar to those experienced by direct victims and, also, stress reactions are higher in refugee children whose mothers struggle to cope with the stress of displacement (Ajduković & Ajduković, 1993), resulting a need for assisting parents in fostering their mental health during stressful situations (Zivcić, 1993).

> "the constant exposure to crisis and fear speeches, coupled with the disruption of social routine and the absence of emotional support in the family."(Psychotherapist)
>
> "The overexposure to traumatic images"(Psychologist)
>
> "the educational system's incapacity to offer emotional support (Psychologist)
>
> "the lack of authentic communication in the family and the absence of safe spaces for expressing emotions."(School counsellor)
>
> "although they are quite far from the conflict zone, their inner thoughts and feelings contradict them"(School counsellor)

A multitude of preexisting factors, such as gender and socioeconomic status, in conjunction with pandemic-related elements, including perceived stress and restrictive measures, have been identified as contributors to the observed interindividual variations in the pandemic's impact on adolescents. This finding aligns with the conclusions drawn by Branje (2023) concerning the global implications of the pandemic on adolescent mental health.

Suicide attempts during the pandemic and post pandemic period

Disruption in an individual's life by suddenly stopping their activities, pastimes, and social interactions, without prior psychological preparation, caused strong imbalances. Where there was an overlapping between these imbalances and some pre-existing emotional disorders, they could lead to suicide attempts among adolescents. Moreover, interaction on social media platforms may lead to aggressive behavior, with adolescents considering themselves safe behind screens. Without any restrictions or boundaries, and

without seeing and feeling directly the impact they have on others, teenagers may use inappropriate language that can cause significant emotional harm on targeted peers.

> "During the state of emergency... they presented with suicide attempts and depressive episodes, with paroxysmal anxiety disorders, because they no longer had the same habits they had before the state of emergency."(Psychiatrist)

Although social platforms and smartphones had been around long before the pandemic, they may be considered a powerful driver of violence, but not its cause. Social networks are present and intricately intermingled with people's lives. When access to schools or recreation centers was prohibited due to the pandemic, the young population, in particular, was pushed even further into the virtual space, and the reality of daily life was transferred there, including violent tendencies, which may explain the large number of young people that fall victim to online violence.

The findings made by specialists confirm the specialty studies (Balt et al., 2023) that highlight the correlation between the use of social media and the increased time spent on media with self-harm tendencies, suicidal ideation or suicide attempts.

> "There was a female student who took some age-inappropriate pictures... she let her boyfriend take pictures of her and they had a small fight and he shared the pictures online. "The pictures were shared very quickly on social media groups, I was worried about her as I didn't know how she would react. She missed school for about week, then she got COVID, and I didn't know whether she was really sick or just running away from the world. The girl suffered terribly, had all kinds of thoughts, but in the end she regained her balance and found the strength to raise her head again.... I was afraid for her, from a student with outstanding school performance to end up in this sin... I was thinking about how she would find the strength to get over it and I was afraid she would do something bad, especially since she was missing school."(School counsellor)

In families living by the Christian moral principles and values, suicidal thoughts have no place. The thought of religious people is directed primarily towards God and the order given to creation according to His will, thus understanding that life is a precious gift, over which people have no right. Also, the parental role model, understood through the values they hold, the principles they follow, the mental patterns, etc., becomes a landmark for how an adolescent perceives, understands and values life.

"...for a religious person, such gloomy thoughts are difficult to occur as you know that the power belongs to someone else, it's not yours, and they are certainly more anchored in reality, more prepared to overcome obstacles."(School counsellor)

"In a family where there's faith, in parents I mean, or the conviction that fasting and prayer will help, the child, even if he refuses for the moment...They are influenced by their faith, by the tendency to seek the good and the beautiful around us. I'm saying that children who, consciously or not, willingly or not, grow up in a religious environment are less vulnerable."(School counsellor)

While the term "suicide attempts" was used with caution, all experts acknowledged the growing prevalence of depressive symptoms, such as existential apathy, extreme social disengagement, or thoughts of renunciation.

"some students no longer find meaning in going forward – do not talk about death explicitly, but about the absence of any hope "(School counsellor)

Consequences of the pandemic in population

In the context of the increasing number of people diagnosed with depression in recent years, the pandemic has accentuated this trend, and depression is deemed to soon become the condition with the highest incidence in the world.

"...(depression) will be the pathology with the highest incidence and prevalence in the world" (Psychiatrist)

"We are much more cautious, we tend to isolate ourselves, to stay at home, not hope for a better tomorrow, and this only leads to depression or at least to some depressive episodes."(School counsellor)

The pandemic period caused physical and mental exhaustion in people, in general, and in adolescents, in particular, which generated irritability, causing inter- and intragroup conflicts, but also the use of inappropriate language in groups of individuals, in some cases.

"...during this time of exhaustion, people are getting into conflicts more often than before."(Psychiatrist)

"Cases of violence and inappropriate language appeared among children on social media."(School counsellor)

Likewise, the economic consequences of the pandemic, resulting in job losses or a significant reduction in family income, represented in some cases sources of anxiety which triggered abuse, with the aim of reducing anxiety. Specialists demonstrated that the connection between alcoholism

and anxiety disorders goes both ways. Excessive alcohol consumption and its comorbidity with various anxiety disorders cause changes in the neural networks involved in controlling emotions, and the psychological recovery becomes more difficult than normal (Holmes, 2012). For this reason, alcohol consumption to relieve anxiety states causes a prolonged state and a difficult recovery, which directs behavior towards additional alcohol consumption.

> „...But if I were to analyze this, the situation (alcohol consumption) may be secondary to anxiety. The fact that some patients lost their jobs, or maybe they are not doing so well financially, and then anxiety occurs secondary to this reason. Which meant that the pandemic led to the occurence of anxiety, and to calm down the anxiety, alcohol consumption emerged."(Psychologist)

The need to find alternative education options during the lockdown period changed the general perspective of the population on the appropriate amount of screen time. Online classes created the context for an excessive amount of screen time, which led to an addiction to technology, especially among children and adolescents, but not only. Without a strict control over the time and content viewed, and often unsupervised, teenagers had access to inappropriate content, which caused a distorted perception of reality and a misunderstanding of the possibilities for solving problems.

> "...by spending a lot of time in front of screens, they get exposed to content they cannot understand and they develop all kinds of fears and anxieties, which affect them, perhaps even in this area of depression."(Psychotherapist)
>
> "gaming addiction increased."(Psychotherapist)
>
> "...they used technology to perfect aggressive and threatening behavior: «If you upset me, I've got some pictures of you»" (School counsellor)
>
> "I think they will be more fearful, making friends will be more difficult, in relation to sharing secrets, disappointments... Online friendships are not like real life friendships, they don't stand the test of time..."(School counsellor)

As social beings, humans need fellow persons to define and fulfill themselves during their lives, and isolation is contrary to the natural tendency of humans to develop psycho-emotionally in close relationship with the social environment to which they belong.

> "the way the pandemic was approached, through isolation, is against the psycho-physical, emotional and behavioral development of young people." (Priest)

The isolation during the pandemic was both a trigger for anxiety-depressive states and an inhibitory factor for the social, psychological and emotional development, as well as a consequence of them, through an individual's choice for self-imposed isolation, as a result of the condition they developed.

> "There were some of them who experienced depressive episodes, had suicidal thoughts, caused by isolation from their social group. Basically, it was the factor that triggered the isolation, but it also led to it, at the same time."(Psychiatrist)

Suggested interventions and solutions

Multilateral interventions focused on adolescents' psycho-emotional support are essential, according to all experts. Introducing ongoing psychological support programs in schools, such as individual and group counseling, workshops on emotional literacy, and activities to normalize emotional expression, was one of the most frequent ideas. Since they can play a significant role in early vulnerability identification, teachers' training in adolescent mental health is also crucial. Involving the family in a collaborative and compassionate manner through parenting campaigns and assistance for parents who are also dealing with their own post-crisis challenges can be another essential component. Thus, open communication between adults and teenagers becomes a crucial protective factor.

> "teachers training in trauma aspects and the implementation of public policies dedicated to adolescent mental health" (Psychologist)
> "early interventions in schools and campaigns to normalize the expression of emotions." (Psychiatrist).
> "the role of spiritual reconnection, volunteering, and the presence of authentic adult models," (School counsellor)

Limitations

Qualitative research offers an extensive perspective on the researched category, but it also comes with a number of limitations: it requires a long time and a large amount of data, which could be difficult to collect and process into coherent results, but even more importantly, it is limited to a small group of people.

Due to the interpretation of a large data volume, we can state that the degree of objectivity is relative. It should be mentioned that, due to the small number of respondents, the research results cannot be extended to the entire population. Also, the study results may not be sufficiently relevant, as the study involved interviewing a small number of people and did not lead

to an objective understanding of the phenomenon during adolescence or the causality of anxiety-depressive symptoms. Another impediment could be the fact that the researcher may channel the data analysis from a personal perspective, making it difficult to objectively interpret the results.

Conclusions

Through the analysis of information from the specialists, the aimed objectives have been met and the working hypothesis confirmed, that overlapping crises (the war in Ukraine and the pandemic) increase adolescents' emotional vulnerabilities and turn them into a collective phenomenon. The interviews' content offered important information that supported specific action plans for the community, at psychological, and educational levels.

Data has been triangulated with other sources to ensure their sustainability. The results were obtained with the help of content analysis, a process that was carried out using a content analysis methodology (Creswell, 2009). In this case, the analysis is based on data obtained from semi-structured interviews with specialists (psychotherapist for couples and families, clinical psychologist, psychiatrist, school counsellor and priest), correlated with relevant scientific studies from international literature and with our own research conducted directly on the targeted population (Neagu, 2023). The generally accepted idea among specialists is that the pandemic was rather a generator of anxiety disorders, which on a background of emotional sensitivities or spiritual predispositions were a source for the development of some types of depression among adolescents, that confirms the conclusion of the study conducted on the psychosocial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on adolescents.

As the Covid-19 pandemic spread globally, it generated various experiences and feelings among people of all ages. During the coronavirus pandemic, although isolation was used as a strategy to reduce disease transmission, beneficial to people's health, it was also associated with unexpected psychological challenges that caused vulnerabilities, with long-term social and psychological consequences. Waves of disturbing feelings have been caused by the combination of the pandemic crisis and the start of the war in Ukraine. The effects included anxiety, but also, reactions such as irritability, fear, acute fatigue and avoidance behaviors, with a direct impact on the ability to concentrate and study.

Numerous preexisting factors, including gender and socioeconomic background, as well as pandemic-related factors, like perceived stress and restrictive measures, were found to contribute to interindividual differences

in the pandemic's effects on adolescents, wich confirms the conclusion on pandemic's effects on adolescents' mental health across the world.

The study came to the important conclusion that teenagers can still experience emotional effects even if they are not physically present in a conflict zone. Anxious parental speech, social media, and media can create latent stress disorder, that children who are refugees or who only hear about war events through the media experience emotional symptoms that are similar to those of actual victims. Indirect exposure to traumatic events (war images, illness, discourses about the inevitability of death) turns out to be a risk factor comparable to direct trauma, especially in the absence of emotional support structures.

The stress factors caused by the crises had a decisive impact on adolescents, who are at an age with multiple physical, emotional, and social changes, especially due to the fact that their primary concern is related to socialization and group integration. While adolescents and young people were affected in different ways, the various types of anxiety were caused mainly by the measures taken by the authorities to prevent the effects of the pandemic, and less by the disease itself. Isolation from their groups caused feelings of own devaluation and lack of belonging, which, amplified by the negative information in the mass-media and the exaggerated reactions of adults nearby, cultivated a climate of permanent tension.

As specialists, we think that public health system and educational system undervalue the psycho-social vulnerabilities of this age group. Even though the need for emotional support in schools is well-known, the mesures are often just reactive, lacking institutional coherence. Thus, the pandemic period and the war in Ukraine have only made preexisting vulnerabilities worse, especially for young people with insecure backgrounds.

The combined effects of two global crises upon the adolescents - the Covid-19 pandemic and the start of the military conflict in Ukraine - make of this article a part of a framework of significant international interest. However, there are few studies contextualizing this phenomenon from the experts' viewpoint. The study's main contribution to the field of education is the identification of a complex set of emotional and social vulnerabilities that adolescents face in situations of widespread crisis. The work brings value by enabling a deeper understanding of teenagers' educational needs that go beyond academic achievement by integrating a range of interdisciplinary perspectives. The study can support national initiatives like: implementing socio-emotional education programs in secondary and high school; educating teachers on how to identify mental health issues in students; or developing collaboration protocols for schools, families, and specialized mental health services.

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