**Romania’s contribution**

to the HCHR study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights of young people

1. Several studies and analyses performed in 2021[[1]](#footnote-1) showed that children - and adults connected with them through profession or parenthood - experienced anxiety (48% of respondents, both children and parents, with 10% invoking school anxiety given the necessary readjustment to the pandemic context), depression (64.4% of participants in a research dedicated to effects of pandemic on students mentioned that they had experienced depressive episodes in the last year, and 75% identified episodes of anxiety).

The pandemic had effects both emotionally and in terms of food, substance use or internet abuse[[2]](#footnote-2): - emotionally, 47% of young respondents felt unhappy, 32.8% considered themselves anxious (5.6% have been taking medication since the crisis started), 34.6% got angry more easily, 30% worried more than usual and only 36% stayed calm in tense situations. Nearly 40% could not sleep at night, 41% felt more tired than usual and 23% cried more than usual. 80.2% admitted to using the internet excessively, 8.8% said that since the COVID-19 crisis began they have been consuming more alcohol than usual.

On the family level - there was a lot more stress (44.4%), more quarrels and misunderstandings (21.7%), almost 10% said that a parent has lost their job and 33% were worried about family income. For 33% of young people, education suffered during this period, 49.5% being worried about their educational future.

Another aspect mentioned by the respondents was that of parental difficulties; while 55.3% of parents feared about students' level of knowledge, 74% were afraid of psychological (anxiety, depression, etc.) and physiological effects (eating disorders, effects on children's vision due to exposure to screens, etc.)[[3]](#footnote-3).

The teachers mentioned most frequently as negative effects: immense fear, uncertainty, unpredictability, confusion, lack of stability.

Official data and statistics show that, during 2020, in the field of domestic violence were reported crimes with 8,122 child victims (17.78% of the total), and in the first 7 months of 2021 were reported criminal acts with 5,111 victims children (17.9% of the total). Bullying and cyberbullying have been at the forefront of the general public over the past year. They were also aggravated by the distribution of footage of violent episodes on social platforms. This has been a factor in the ongoing revictimization, as is the case with all episodes of online violence, as their nature is repetitive through review and redistribution. The crisis situation generated by COVID-19 has led to an increase in cases of sexual exploitation of minors online and diversification of modes of operation, an increase due in part to the pandemic, during which online activity of internet users has increased significantly.

**2.**

* Right to work and social security

Since September 2021, the maximum age for young NEETs rose from 25y to 29y.

Several measures, already in place at the beginning of the pandemic, address the social security and access to labour market:

- the employers are stimulated to conclude an apprenticeship contract (with a duration varying from 6 months to 3 years) or traineeship contracts (for 6 months), as they benefit, upon request, from an amount of 2,250 lei /month;

- Graduates of educational institutions and graduates of special schools, aged at least 16 years, who within 60 days from graduation are employed full time for more than 12 months benefit from an insertion allowance equal to three times the value of the reference social indicator in force on the date of employment, amount granted in two instalments; if they did not get a job according to their training they benefit from unemployment benefits for a period of 6 months and is a fixed, monthly amount, representing 50% of the value of the reference social indicator in force;

- unemployed people registered with the employment agencies for at least 30 days, who do not receive unemployment benefits, if they are employed full time, for a period longer than 3 months, after the date of registration with the employment agencies, benefit from an activation premium of 1,000 lei, non-taxable;

- employers who hire graduates of educational institutions or young NEETs receive monthly, for a period of 12 months, for each person in these categories, an amount of 2,250 lei, under the obligation to maintain employment or service relations for at least 18 months. Also, the employers who employ indefinitely graduates from disabled people receive monthly, for each graduate, an amount of 2,250 lei for a period of 18 months;

- the insertion employers benefit monthly from an amount equal to the basic salary established at the date of hiring the young people at risk of social marginalization, but not more than four times the value of the reference social indicator (4 \* 500 = 2,000 lei).

At the same time, given the current pandemic context, in addition to these subsidies provided by the legal framework on the unemployment insurance system and the stimulation of employment, the employers who, until September 1, 2021 employed, for an indefinite period, full time, persons aged between 16 and 29 registered as unemployed in the records of the territorial employment agencies, as well as young Romanian citizens, of the same age category, whose employment relations with foreign employers in the third-country territory ceased in 2020, for reasons not attributable to them, receive monthly, for a period of 12 months, for each employed person in this category, the equivalent to 50% of the employee's salary, but not more than 2,500 lei.

In 2021 a number of 42,215 young people under 25y old (out of which 28,425 NEETs) were employed, as a result of the implementation of the above measures.

As of December 31st, 2021, the registered unemployment rate in Romania was 2.69% as compared to 3.38% at the end of December 2020. The number of registered unemployed was of 234.757, down from the levels registered due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which points to the fact that the interventions/support measures were impactful.

Other measures adopted to address the effect of the pandemic contributed, indirectly, to support young people:

- Granting days off for parents to supervise children, in case of limitation or suspension of teaching activities. The indemnity for each day is paid by the employer, in the amount of 75% of the basic wage corresponding to a working day, and may be reimbursed out of the Guarantee Fund for Wage Arrears;

- During reduced-time work, the employees affected by the measure receive a subsidy of 75% of the difference between the gross base wage provided for in their individual labour contract and the gross base wage for the hours of work actually performed due to reduced working time;

- Granting to employers, out of the Unemployment Insurance Fund (paid by PES), 75% of the base wage for each of their workers who are temporarily in technical unemployment, or for which they are no longer able to pay the full salaries, due to the COVID-19 emergency;

- Wage support of up to 41.5% of the base wage for employees or self-employed who have benefited from technical unemployment measures, or who had their individual labour contracts suspended;

- Employers who hire with fixed-term labour contracts of up to 3 months may be reimbursed part of the wages, out of the Unemployment Insurance Fund, representing 41.5% of the wages for the days worked in these jobs for 8 hours/day.

- Employers are granted, once for each teleworker, a financial support of 2,500 RON for purchasing packages of goods and technology services needed to conduct teleworking activities.

* right to education (including in the context of the closure of educational institutions and transition to online learning);

As one of the main challenges young people faced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic was the closure of educational institutions and the shift to online learning, sustained efforts were undertaken on the one hand to keep schools open as long as possible, under strict sanitary and safety measures, and on the other hand to organize the national exams and the admission to higher education and graduation exams, in order to limit any further negative impact on youth’s access to further education and labour market, respectively.

The central authorities’ measures have been supported by the synergic and complementary measures taken at local and grassroots level by NGOs, private actors and local public authorities.

In order to ensure that learning is not discontinued, in addition to shifting to online teaching and learning, a TV programme with lessons was broadcasted soon after the closure of schools. Continued in the current school years as well, the program broadcasts lessons for final-year pupils in order to prepare them for the national exams. Lessons are also provided in Hungarian for the pupils belonging to Hungarian national minority.

The Pilot National Program “School after School”*,* launched during the second semester of the 2020-2021 school year, aims at the recovery of the educational losses accumulated during the online education periods, and at preventing the school failure and early school leaving of pupils belonging to vulnerable groups (such as Roma children, children from rural areas, children with SEN), in particular those that had little or no access to online learning, through remedial learning activities. The Programme supported around 168,000 primary and secondary school students and benefitted from a budget of 30 million euros from non-reimbursable European funds (including national co-financing). An additional 20 million euros were allocated to remedial learning activities for high school students through the ROSE project.

Measures were taken to ensure teachers’ free access to educational platforms, digital resources, and instruments, as well as to technical support and guidance on how to use them. An online portal (https://digital.educred.ro/) was launched by the Ministry of Education (MoE) soon after shifting to online education. The portal reunites all e-learning programs and online learning resources provided, validated and recommended by MoE, in order to support teachers with the design, implementation, assessment and management of the educational activities delivered online. The portal also provides open educational resources and tools for organizing distance learning and was recognized by UNESCO as a model of good practice.

In parallel, the infrastructure of another major project implemented at national level[[4]](#footnote-4) was capitalized to provide training sessions to help teachers develop and enhance their digital competences, and elaborate guidance documents covering all disciplines. Through the support of regional e-learning experts from the CRED Project, teachers benefitted from technical support, educational content and online trainings, including webinars on the use of educational platforms with free access granted by major companies in the field.

In view of preparing pupils’ return to school, at the beginning of the school year 2020-2021, the network of County Centres for Educational Resources and Assistance (CCERAs), subordinated to MoE, carried out activities for pre-schoolers and pupils, under the initiative “Together again!”. The activities aimed at developing positive attitudes towards school, in view of facilitating children’s familiarization and accommodation to school, including compliance with the sanitary measures and protocols.

Funds have been allocated from the State budget and from other sources, including European funds, for the purchase of electronic devices (such as tablets and laptops) and for covering Internet connectivity costs in order to ensure the access to education of pupils from vulnerable backgrounds. Thus, in 2020, the national program “School from Home” was implemented which allowed the acquisition of 250,000 electronic devices with internet connection for equipping state pre-university education units in view of ensuring vulnerable children’s access to online education.

Additional non-reimbursable external funds amounting to 150 million euros were allocated so that public pre-university schools may purchase tablets / laptops for school use and cover the expenses with Internet access subscription, as well as purchase other equipment / electronic devices necessary for carrying out online teaching activities.

To support high schools, funds amounting to approx. 35 million euros were mobilized in 2020 through a large – scale national project[[5]](#footnote-5), in view of purchasing laptops and interactive whiteboards for the benefit of 1,093 high schools.

The National Program Euro 200, with annual implementation, proved to be even more relevant in the context of the pandemic, as the Programme supports economically disadvantaged pupils and students in purchasing a personal computer by means of a financial support.

In 2020, MoE initiated the *Memorandum on ensuring the internet connection for 2,800 State pre-university education units in Romania through the voluntary support program*, through which the Romanian Government, with the contribution of electronic communications operators and industry in Romania, has provided the necessary conditions for the emergency connection to the Internet of state pre-university education units.

Another national program implemented in 2020 was the “*Education in a safe environment”* Program, financed from the State budget, through which health protection materials and electronic devices were purchased and allocated to schools lacking the necessary financial means.

In order to ensure the post pandemic recovery of the educational system and to also foster its resilience, strategic measures will be implemented in the framework of Romania’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), targeting the digitalization of both the pre-university and higher education systems, the development of teachers’ digital competences, combating and preventing early school leaving, alongside measures targeting the development and quality enhancement of TVET education, the development of quality ECEC system, the governance reform of the pre-university education and the professionalization of school management.

* right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (including with the increase in domestic violence and abuse, anxiety and depression, stress caused by social isolation, etc.);

Early into the pandemic a helpline for the psychological counselling of pupils, teachers and parents in relation to the challenges generated by COVID-19 was launched within a partnership between MoE and a non-governmental organization.

Currently, the CCERAs provide daily psychological counselling to pupils and parents in order to better manage the changes and challenges brought about by the pandemic. Distance and face-to-face activities have also been provided to pre-schoolers, pupils, parents and teachers on specific topics, such as: knowledge / inter-knowledge / self-knowledge, emotion management, emotional and communication skills development, learning management, cognitive and creativity development, career orientation, education for a healthy lifestyle.

In addition, the network of school counselling teachers of the CCERAs has been very active in organizing online psychological and pedagogical support activities, making use of online educational applications and platforms and by adapting different teaching methods to the online format.

To further address the mental health, psychological and physical wellbeing and safety of children in the context on the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, in 2021 the Romanian Government initiated the most extensive programme dedicated to such issues – *Caring for Children*.

The Programme’s priorities consist in fostering the psycho-emotional wellbeing of children by means of evaluation and intervention mechanisms which would ensure children’s mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, alongside multidisciplinary prevention and intervention mechanism for physical, sexual and emotional violence against children within the family, the community, at institutional level, as well as online. The duration of the Program is 2 years and has a budget of over 6 million euros.

Within this programme, children identified with COVID-19 related psycho-emotional distress will receive psychological guidance and psychotherapy, while specialists in the field (at least 7,000) will be provided with training sessions on relevant topics, such as identification and intervention methods in case of psycho-emotional disruptive situations. 70,000 hours of psychological counseling and psychotherapy for children will be provided through the Programme.

Further measures are also planned at curricular level, both in regard to the school curriculum (the introduction of topics on emotional education and management, online safety etc.) as well as to teacher training curriculum (the introduction of a module on psycho-emotional competences development for teachers in master study programmes dedicated to teachers). Other measures include the setting up of a national phone helpline for all child emergencies, which has already been put in place (119 national toll free number), the development of a resource platform (<https://dingrijapentrucopii.gov.ro/>), dedicated to children, parents and specialists providing guidelines, procedures, professional resources, etc.

To boost child protection against criminal offences, such as the child pornography, exploitation and online child abuse, an integrated image and video intuitive analysis and sorting informatics system will be developed targeting child abuse content. The Programme also provides for the eestablishment of hearing rooms for child victims of crime in each county, and the implementation a real-time alert mechanism for missing children – Amber Alert.

3. During the pandemic, the lines of action relating to major issues such as the school calendar, the organization of simulated exams and national examinations, the assessment of pupils and other issues (including vaccination and COVID-19 testing) have been discussed and agreed in consultation with the relevant actors, including the students’ organizations and the national and local pupils’ associations. In particular, the National Council of Pupils has been very active in making their voice heard and taking a stand to deliver their points of view and expectations.

4. According to the National Committee for Coordinating Vaccination Activities against SARS-CoV-2, young people (mainly Medicine students) were voluntarily involved in activities of:

- supporting vaccination centers by ensuring vaccination circuit, triage of the patients and their monitoring.

- supporting call centers to answer various requests/questions population had on vaccination theme

- promoting messages and pro-vaccination campaign on social media

- volunteering in the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations (IGSU)’ programme “Saviors out of Passion” („Salvatori din Pasiune”), for gaining and applying basic notions on qualified first aid, humanitarian aid, mainstreaming prevention measures.

- supporting the IGSU’s campaign on mobile vaccination in areas with low vaccination rate.

A national campaign entitled “Vaccination and testing for learning” was launched in 2021 by MoE within a partnership that included the National Council of Rectors, teachers’ unions, university student organizations, the National Council of Pupils, parents’ organizations and the “Save the children” NGO. The Campaign’s main aim is to inform pupils, teachers and parents on the importance and necessity of mitigating the COVID-19 effects through voluntary vaccination and testing. The Campaign will also constitute a dialogue platform for the analysis and discussion of all aspects of concern on the education system, including aspects that contribute to the recovery of the education system, such as the development of digital skills and the digitalization of education, the recovery of learning losses in education and the continuous training of teachers. In addition, pupils’, students’ and teachers’ relevant problems, pointed out by schools, high education institutions and school inspectorates, will be addressed and analysed.

1. The organization Save the Children Romania published an analysis of the cases of the Coordination Counseling Centers; the National Council of Students conducted in 2021 a study on the effects of the pandemic on students; Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca also conducted a study on the pandemic’s effects on educational staff [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A study conducted with the help of 1,130 young people, mentioned by Mihai Copăceanu, *Guide to survive during pandemic: 500 advices from teenagers to teenagers and parents*, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. National Federation of Parents' Associations - Secondary education, Survey on the parents’ perception on educational activities carried out during the pandemic, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Relevant Curriculum. Open Education for All* Project / CRED Project, implemented between 2017 and 2021 and having a 42 million euros budget (through non-reimbursable European funds). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Romanian Secondary Education Project* / ROSE Project, implemented between 2015-2022, having a budget of 200 million euros, secured through a loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)