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Flavius CABA-MARIA · Răzvan MUNTEANU · Julia AKHUNOVA

Digitalisation and Civil Society. Evolutions Post-Coronavirus.



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Bucharest, Romania



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List of Abbreviations

CEE = the Central and Eastern Europe

CSOs = Civil Society Organizations

EU = the European Union

IT = Information Technology

NATO = the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO = the Non-Governmental Organization

UK = the United Kingdom

USA / US = the United States of America

WFH = Work-From-Home

I. INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is producing not only an unprecedented human and health crisis, but it is expected to become one of the most economically costly pandemics in recent history. The study highlights the need for intervention of the civil society in finding an equilibrium at the social level, the provocations generated by the virus being numerous. The COVID-19¹ brought systemic changes and challenges. But for change to be effective, all sectors of society must be involved – especially civil society.

For the purpose of the study, we chose a comprehensive understanding of the civil society organizations (CSOs). The World Bank defines civil society as **“the wide array of non-governmental and not for profit organizations that have a presence in public life, express the interests and values of their members and others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations”** (www.worldbank.org). This includes the non-governmental organizations, labor unions, indigenous groups, religious groups, and any other groups rallying for a social cause.

Civil society is an essential stakeholder, of the essence of a democratic state, thus civil society must not be left aside in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, despite the numerous challenges. The world is facing a widening inequality, on the background of economic strains generated by the pandemic. Additionally, to health care provocations, the digital norms are under-regulated, while the pandemic pushed for an accelerated digitalization. For example, a privileged minority of the global population has been able to Work-From-Home, while the majority of workers have risked their own health and the health of their families to keep monthly pay. These socio-economic impacts are felt mostly in the vulnerable and marginalized categories. Rural communities and countries in transition were hit hardest. Moreover, the most marginalised and poorest populations are affected not only by the virus, but also by the economic deterioration and recess.

The current crisis presents challenges for civil society; however, there are also new opportunities for it to embrace digital civic engagement. With so much government involvement, there is a need for accountability. Civil society has an important role to play in

¹ COVID-19 is an acute contagious respiratory and vascular illness in humans caused by a coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), capable of producing severe symptoms and in some cases death, especially in older people and those with underlying health conditions. It was originally identified in China in 2019 and became pandemic in 2020. “CO” stands for corona, “VI” for virus, and “D” for disease. Formerly, this disease was referred to as “2019 novel coronavirus” or “2019-nCoV.” (“COVID-19 and vascular disease”. EBioMedicine. 58: 102966. 2020. doi: 10.1016/j.ebiom.2020.102966, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7438984/> [Accessed on 30 October 2020]).

ensuring funds to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic reach their destination. However, civil society is facing several constraints on its ability to carry out its work, as a result of lockdown, distancing, and quarantine measures. Despite these challenges, there is a need for civil society to address accountability and to act as a balancing power when newly created trends trespass the boundaries of human rights. Normally, there would not be problems for CSOs to monitor and report on governments and private companies, and tackle accountability. However, during COVID-19 pandemic advocacy and citizens' participation was cut back, together with monitoring and reporting activities. In spite of the obstacles, CSOs have still managed to raise awareness about the series of endemic problems the society is facing. COVID-19 has exposed vulnerabilities to the extent of the systemic impasse in front of economic networks, trans-border relations, globalization, and resilience in front of future health disasters.

To increase global resilience, we need the implications civil society organizations, and even businesses that would fit in a humane approach, less inclined to profit only. For this purpose, civil society's networks and know-how are essential to a successful transition to the post-coronavirus world. The analysis underlines that in the age of coronavirus, tech companies are now a vital part of how governments worldwide are responding to the crisis. Moreover, their role is even more far-reaching. The Tech has become a public utility, the *de facto* highway of 21st-century life. Overall, the proposed research will mainly consider the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, including the Balkan area and how the digitalization interferes with the life here - including the results of a survey realized within the project and the manner in which people connect, share information, and work in an accelerated pace of tech.

The importance of such an analysis lies, first of all, in the fact that there are few analyzes of the pandemic at this level (especially comprising the regional aspects). Our project therefore responds both to a scientific need, to provide a Southeast European and Balkans perspective, as well as to a practical need, to elaborate possible solutions in the direction of more efficient management of the crisis generated by COVID-19 pandemic in the East-European area and the Balkans. The project therefore addresses simultaneously, the scientific and academic environment, the political and administrative factors, as well as civil society and public opinion. Its objective is also an informative one - to offer a detailed knowledge of the situation analyzed and a normative one - to suggest possible more efficient management solutions and the perspectives of the unfolding crisis.

This is perhaps especially true for technology. There is, after all, something profoundly contemporary about this pandemic: the way it has revealed the connectedness of our

globalized, digital world and vulnerabilities. It represents an ambivalence acutely reflected in the tech so many are now relying on. All the various competing vectors of the digital era - the way it opened so much up and then created so many problems - seem to be manifesting in this current crisis. The paper highlights both the provocations and opportunities engendered by the COVID-19 global outbreak, underlining specific factors for the Balkans, and concludes by issuing several viewpoints for the future.

All in all, the paper notes its limits, as it does not address the governmental decision-making process and security dilemmas - borders, transatlantic partnerships, the origin country of the virus, etc., that were also at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis.

II. DIGITALISATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY: PERSPECTIVES ON THE SITUATION POST-CORONAVIRUS

It has become almost a cliché to argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated existing trends within numerous, sometimes unrelated fields. And yet, it is true that the unrelenting push towards the digitalisation and digitisation of almost all aspects of life has exponentially increased due to the pandemic. We have seen a 47% growth in average the United States of America (USA/US) and European broadband consumption, from 273.5 GB to 402.5 GB in the first quarter of 2020 alone.² This extraordinary increase, with regions experiencing 100% or even 200% growth is owed to the changing nature of social and economic relations in the socially-distant world. Especially in advanced countries, the Work-From-Home (WFH) phenomenon has taken new heights, as entire professions have made the online transition. Lockdown restrictions have largely been accepted by most people, but only as temporary, one-time measures, with some national leaders even experiencing surges in approval-ratings that one would expect only in a time of war (like French President Emmanuel Macron, whose rating jumped from the mid-20s to 33%, or Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, whose approval ratings increased from 33% to 62%.³ Yet the promise made by national governments was respected exactly because it was understood and marketed as a one-time national effort that was undertaken in the March, April, and May lockdowns.

At the time of writing – early October 2020 – governments have recognised that we are experiencing a second wave of the pandemic which will be as dangerous as and perhaps larger than the first one.⁴ France, Spain, and the United Kingdom (UK) are experiencing record-breaking numbers of new cases and deaths, actually larger numbers than in March and April. Discontent is rising, not only at the level of the general populace but also in the scientific community (see the Great Barrington Declaration⁵). Even so, pandemics will become more frequent in the 21st century, because of the increasing world population and decreasing

² Open Vault (2020). *Open Vault Broadband Industry Report (OVBI): Q1 Quarterly Advisory*. (online) Available at: <https://openvault.com/complimentary-report-Q120/> [Accessed on 10 October 2020].

³ Armstrong, M. (2020). *COVID-19 and Leader Approval Ratings*. (online) Available at: <https://www.statista.com/chart/21437/coronavirus-and-leader-approval-ratings/> [Accessed 10 October 2020].

⁴ BBC News (2020). *Covid: UK seeing second wave, says Boris Johnson*. (online) Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-54212654> [Accessed on 10 October 2020].

⁵ Gbd declaration (2020). *The Great Barrington Declaration* (online) Available at: <https://gbdeclaration.org/> [Accessed on 10 October 2020].

wildlife habitats throughout the world.⁶ Pandemics are – most likely – here to stay. The question thus arises: have people had sufficient time to adapt to a predominantly online working and educational environment? How will those dissatisfied with the enormous shift happening in their lives deal with a semi-permanent (not temporary) digital transition?

In this chapter, we will analyze how COVID-19 pandemic has intersected with and accelerated the ongoing process of digitalisation, by examining phenomena such as Work-From-Home (WFH); online teaching in primary, secondary and tertiary education; digital stress and technostress; workplace monitoring; internet access, and the digital divide and e-governance.

II. 1. Definitions and Terminology

When discussing the Digital Revolution, a first step is to differentiate between the processes of **digitisation** and that of **digitalisation**. Digitisation refers simply to the act of going digital: it is the process of turning analog information into digital information (numbers, images, sounds, etc.). For instance, a hospital scanning medical records so that it can access them through computers, or an office, which stores information such as online customer data. **Digitalisation describes “the socio-technical processes surrounding the use of digital technologies that have an impact on social and institutional contexts”.**⁷ Returning to our previous example, digitalisation would involve using data analysis to monitor health or statistically calculate patients’ risk of contracting diseases, based on their digital medical records. Therefore, digitisation is a crucial part of digitalisation, whereas the latter term refers to the manners in which one can take advantage of and use digital information.

Another term we have to define is “**technostress**”, a syndrome which “occurs when the person, subjected to information overload and continuous contact with most digital devices develops a state of stress or an abnormal response characterized by specific symptoms at the cardiocirculatory, mental, and neurological levels”.⁸ These symptoms include, among others, anxiety, mental fatigue, depression, and nightmares. If technostress refers to stress caused by computers and digital devices generally, “**digital stress**” refers to the permanent and strong

⁶ Tollefson, J. (2020). *Why Deforestation and Extinctions Make Pandemics More Likely*. Nature 584, pp. 175-176.

⁷ Rijswijk, K. (2020). *Digital Transformation: Ongoing digitalisation and digitalisation processes*. Desira, Wageningen University & Research.

⁸ Chiappetta, M. (2017). *The Technostress: definition, symptoms and risk prevention*. Senses Sciences 4(1), pp. 358-361.

interaction with digital platforms, like social media, emails, etc., which can sometimes result in psychological arousal, and a permanent state of stress.⁹

Big Data refers to massive quantities of data that companies and large corporations gain about their users/clients that “could not be perceived, acquired, managed, and processed by traditional Information Technology (IT) and software/hardware tools within a tolerable time”¹⁰. Data analysts are employed to make sense of the data and to make recommendations to their employers about how to best use this data in order to increase profit margins or win elections (for example, which voters/clients to target with ads, what kind of ads to run, etc.).

II.2. The Winners and Losers of Work-From-Home

As medical experts have advised that the virus spreads both through the air and can live up to days on several surfaces, policymakers and politicians have been forced to impose strict social-distancing policies in order to curb its spread. In practical terms, this has meant that in almost all countries, those workers who can accomplish their tasks remotely should do so, on a work from home basis [throughout in this paper the terms Work-From-Home (WFH) and telework are used interchangeably]. Of course, not all jobs can be done from home, but recent research suggests a worrying, though predictable trend: those who can transition to online work are more educated, have more material resources, thus will likely be less affected by the pandemic.

There are several requirements one’s activity must meet in order for her to be able to completely transition online. Using data from the Skills Toward Employability and Productivity (STEP) world survey, which asks workers in different countries what their job tasks involve, we can rule out WFH for those workers who do not “use a computer at work”, and for those whose jobs description includes “lifting heavy objects, repairing electronic equipment, operating heavy machinery” or those workers who report that “customer interaction is very important”¹¹. Thus, some industries have a much higher “telework capacity”¹² than others. Some countries might have a higher telework capacity for some industries rather than others, but the trend remains the same: more jobs in educational services, management, and finance can be done from home when compared to jobs in the

⁹ Steele, R.G.; Hall, J.A. and Christofferson, J.L. (2019). *Conceptualizing Digital Stress in Adolescents and Young Adults: Toward the Development of an Empirically Based Model*. Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review 23, p. 17.

¹⁰ Chen, M.; Mao, S. and Liu, Y. (2014). *Big Data: A Survey*. Mobile Networks and Applications 19, p. 173.

¹¹ Saltiel, F. (2020). *Who Can Work From Home in Developing Countries?* Working Paper, Duke University.

¹² Deng, Z.; Morissette, R. and Messecar, D. (2020). *Running the economy remotely: Potential for working from home during and after COVID-19*. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no.45280001.

food, agriculture, or retail industries. For example, in the US, 83% of Educational Services jobs can be done from home; 80% of Professional, Scientific and Technical Services; 79% of Management jobs and 76% of Finance and Insurance jobs. By comparison, the same is true for only 4% of Accommodation and Food Services (hotels and restaurants); 8% of Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting; 14% of Retail Trade, and 19% of Construction jobs.¹³

The pandemic has pushed the telework potential of all these industries to the maximum: all jobs that could be done at home started to be done from home. The percentage of laborers involved in WFH slightly differs when considering advanced economies: from 37% in the US to over 40% in European countries like Sweden or the UK.¹⁴ When compared to developing countries this percentage varies enormously, with numbers ranging from 6% in Ghana to 23% in Yunnan Province in China.¹⁵ Saltiel has taken 10 low and middle-income countries and compared both their average telework capabilities and across specific industries, according to STEP survey data. He has found that among these lower-developed nations, the telework capabilities of high-paying occupations varies significantly from country to country, due to exogenous factors like the level of development of a particular industry in a particular country. For example, only 23% of Chinese managers can work from home, compared to 60% of Vietnamese managers.¹⁶ Even so, these numbers pale in comparison to any advanced nation: the share of US managers who can work from home stands at 84%, which indeed suggests “that the economic costs from the pandemic in developing countries may far exceed those in the developed world”¹⁷. These figures indicate how difficult is for economies in transition to ensure wage protection in times of pandemic. Therefore, in the Balkans and Eastern Europe where the percentage of low-skilled laborers is higher than the highly educated society was rendered vulnerable.

COVID-19 will not only increase inequality between countries, but it will also accentuate wealth and income disparities within countries. This is valid when reported to the Western and Eastern European countries. As mentioned previously, the National governments need to be able to target recovery programs and welfare spending to those who will need them the most. One way to do this is to work with local authorities in assessing

¹³ Dingel, J.I., and B. Neiman (2020). *How many jobs can be done at home?* BFI White Paper, Becker Friedman Institute, p. 8.

¹⁴ Deng, Z.; Morissette, R. and Messecar, D. (2020). *Running the economy remotely: Potential for working from home during and after COVID-19*. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no.45280001.

¹⁵ Saltiel, F. (2020). *Who Can Work From Home in Developing Countries?* Working Paper, Duke University, p.13.

¹⁶ Idem.

¹⁷ Idem.

regional risks to the economy in light of the Coronavirus epidemic. Predictably, there will be significant local differences in the effects of the pandemic: industrial areas and cities where tourism holds an important share of income will be severely affected, as jobs in these industries cannot be moved online.

In the US, such places include Las Vegas, with its large service industry, Baton Rouge or the industrial city of Grand Rapids.¹⁸ The same is true for whole regions: the urban areas of less developed East German Länder have fewer jobs with WFH opportunities. COVID-19 pandemic could put significant challenges on the “catching-up” with the historical inequalities process between Eastern and Western Germany more specific¹⁹ but also for regional inequalities more general. These micro examples depict the reality of Europe nowadays (divide between East and West/new members of the European Union and the founding members). Alternatively, the virus could present opportunities to underdeveloped, less-populated rural regions, which would not be hit as hard as more populated areas: the example of the North-South divide in Italy comes to mind.

Those who work at home typically earn more, as their jobs do not involve high levels of physical effort or actual presence in the workplace, characteristics we would normally associate with lower-paid jobs. By analyzing existing data, we can also construct a profile of individuals who cannot Work-From-Home. According to Dingel and Neiman, in the US, these individuals very likely have a lower-income than national averages, do not have a college degree, they rent their dwellings are usually non-white and they have no employer-provided health insurance (2020, 4-5). Excluding factors specific to the US only (the significance of race, the particularities of the American health system, etc.), we can easily see that the independent variable with the most potential of explaining the variance in the dependent variable (telework capacity) is a person’s education level. As the level of education increases, the trend clearly indicates that so does the telework capacity: 25% for those with a high-school diploma, 28.1% for those with some kind of post-secondary education below university level, then it drops to 19.5% for people with Trades certificate or diploma, before jumping back up and reaching a percentage of 60% among those with a Bachelor’s degree or higher.²⁰

¹⁸ Dingel, J.I., and B. Neiman (2020). *How many jobs can be done at home?* BFI White Paper, Becker Friedman Institute, p. 8.

¹⁹ Irlacher, M. and Koch, M. (2020). *Working from Home, Wages, and Regional Inequality in the Light of COVID-19*. CESifo Working Paper, Munich Society for the Promotion of Economic Research.

²⁰ Deng, Z.; Morissette, R. and Messecar, D. (2020). *Running the economy remotely: Potential for working from home during and after COVID-19*. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no.45280001, p.3.

II.3. The Changing Educational Landscape

a) Primary and Secondary Education

In opposition to university-level education, the overwhelming majority of primary and secondary education (schools and high-schools) is public, free, and mandatory and crucially when it comes to the response to the pandemic, government-managed. Even in economically advanced nations, let alone developing countries, the first step was for governments to purchase equipment that would enable online teaching, such as tablets, computers, lecture-capture technology, and distribute them to all children. The effects of the digital divide were very severe in this area, as many pupils in rural areas received tablets and other electronic equipment, but they proved to be unusable because of the lack of wi-fi integration of those areas: “those not connected to the internet are facing total exclusion”, not just in education, but in all other fields.²¹ Additionally, teachers unfamiliar with online technology are also at a disadvantage, given that governments have not offered training sessions for the new technologies. Some teachers have simply resigned their positions because they felt overwhelmed by the pressures of online teaching, while many others are in danger of losing their jobs if they cannot quickly adapt, especially in rural regions where there are already shortages of teachers.

In the Balkans and Eastern Europe, wherein some countries, like Romania and Bulgaria where roughly half of the population resides in the rural areas the effects of the pandemic are harshly felt in the educational sector. For the 2020-21 school year, most national governments left the decision to reopen schools to local authorities, based on the epidemiological situation there. The topic of school, re-openings quickly became politicized, especially in the US and other countries. In the US, President Donald Trump urged state authorities to “put American children and families first”, after coming at odds with Democratic governors who did want to follow the Administration’s advice to reopen schools (Fox News).

b) Tertiary or Higher Education

Colleges and universities usually enjoy a much higher degree of autonomy from the state than schools and high-schools do, at least in Europe and North America. As a result, they have been allowed more freedom when developing their new educational strategies in light of COVID-19 pandemic. They have, however, had to comply with national rules designed to prevent the spread of the virus, like social-distancing.

²¹ De, R.; Pandey, N. and Pal, A. (2020). *Impact of digital surge during Covid-19 pandemic: A viewpoint on research and practice*. International Journal of Information Management, p.2.

The first thing we must point out is that, on average, higher education institutions were no more prepared for the digital transition than any other institution or field. A 2019 study of the digitalization process in higher education institutions showed that colleges and universities lacked “overall strategies that address digitalization for teaching and learning purposes”²². In some Western countries, there are *some* remote teaching tools in place, like lecture capture (a live recording of the lecture, which can be accessed at any time, if for some reason a student cannot attend the lecture in person), but even where digital technology is used when teaching, this is due not because of conscious planning made by the department or faculty heads. It is instead driven by students who want to ease their access to educational resources, or by “enthusiasts among academic staff within disciplines”.²³ In addition to online access to libraries and lectures, when the pandemic hit Europe, there was almost no other established capacity for remote learning, universities and their IT departments were very quickly overwhelmed by the sanitary crisis and many simply suspended classes until further notice. Universities and colleges with high percentages of international students, located mainly in the United Kingdom, but also in the Netherlands and France were the ones that most required online infrastructure capabilities in order to provide educational services to students located thousands of kilometers away. In exchange, universities in Eastern Europe and the Balkans rely on local students and government subsidies are the means through which they put infrastructure in place.

As we have mentioned before, universities in North America and Europe were mostly allowed to determine on their own how they will tackle teaching for 2020-21 academic year, provided they respected the national or regional public health norms and regulations. What happened next was that instead of investing all their resources in making the online transition as smooth as possible, many universities put their own economic interests above those of their students. In the Anglo-Saxon world, universities have a more limited and strictly confined relationship with the state: in the US most universities are private and rely on donations and tuition fees that maintain a steady supply of income, and in the UK, universities are also private and depend on tuition fees and rents to survive, but they also receive substantial grants and other type of funding from the government. Since they are much in need of funds, many large universities also, rely on rent fees from university-owned accommodation for their tens of thousands of students.

²² Tomte, C.E.; Fosslund, T.; Aamodt, P.E. and Degn, L. (2019). *Digitalisation in higher education: mapping institutional approaches for teaching and learning*. *Quality in Higher Education* 25(1), p. 100.

²³ Idem.

The Guardian documented the case of Boston University which, upon finding that its teaching rooms were too small and lacked ventilation – essentials in the COVID world – decided to purchase large air ventilators, only to discover that the noise they produced made teaching impossible. Boston University then ordered Bluetooth headsets to enable students and teachers to communicate even in these circumstances.²⁴ Another unhealthy way university have used to keep their revenues constant has been “alluring” students with the promise of face-to-face seminars, even lectures. Once they got to the university-provided accommodation and they had paid their rent, students would soon be notified that teaching had moved entirely online.²⁵ Other higher education institutions, whose tuition fees are not fixed by the state, outright decided to increase tuition fees, taking advantage of the fact that due to the pandemic restrictions, most students and student representatives could not voice their objections or protest these measures (the case of the Law Faculty of the University of Bucharest). The predatory practices that universities have resorted to allowing us to draw three conclusions:

- a) These practices have damaged and will continue to damage their institutional standing.
- b) Universities will depend more and more on government subsidies and grants: unable to support themselves.
- c) They will become vulnerable - especially in countries that have an authoritarian system – to government interventions in the curricula, the recruitment of academic staff, and the very existence of universities.

If social-distancing norms are maintained even after the pandemic: as higher education institutions receive fewer funds, the encroachment of academic freedom from governments will increase to the detriment of the quality of studies. In sum, the meager the funds, more uncertainty for education.

²⁴ Finlayson, L. (2020). How universities tricked students into returning to campus. The Guardian (online) Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/02/universities-students-campus-teaching-fees> [Accessed on 13 October 2020].

²⁵ Idem.

II.4. Internet Governance

Because the pandemic has increased broadband usage and overall interconnectedness of people, temporary government shutdowns of the Internet in autocratic states will become rarer, simply because the political costs of shutting it down will grow exponentially.²⁶ Many people's livelihoods now depend on access to the Internet, and this could result in a worldwide concentrated effort to enshrine a "right to internet access" in state's constitutions or the UN Charter. The stepping stone is already there, with a 2016 non-binding UN Human Rights Council resolution condemning the disruption of internet access as a "human rights violation" (A/HRC/32/L.20).²⁷ Issues such as the planned repeal of Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act of 1996, supported by both Donald Trump (whitehouse.gov) and Joe Biden (the Verge) could take up new dimensions, as questions regarding freedom of expression on the internet will become even more salient.

Alternatively, we might be closer than ever to what Yuval Noah Harari calls the "digital dictatorship". The acceleration of the digital transition precipitated by the pandemic has raised issues of privacy and internet surveillance to the forefront. Using Big Data algorithms, new surveillance technologies, and taking advantage of the fact that many of us have been forced to do our activities online, the 21st-century governments might achieve what the totalitarian states of the 20th could not: constant and complete surveillance of all their citizens.²⁸ Alternatively, the digital dictatorship might mean the domination of large corporations and banks: the discrimination of the future might take place not because of the colour of your skin or your religious background, but rather because of the way you are, as assessed by specially designed algorithms: because of the things you buy and when you buy them, you might be deemed unreliable and not given a loan from a bank, for example. Or you might be rejected from a job without even had interviewed for it: it was simply because the algorithm decided to. The perspectives of surveillance are among the downturns of accelerated digitalization.

²⁶ De, R.; Pandey, N. and Pal, A. (2020). *Impact of digital surge during Covid-19 pandemic: A viewpoint on research and practice*. International Journal of Information Management p.3.

²⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council (2016). The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet (online) Available at: https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf [Accessed 12 October 2020].

²⁸ Harari, Y.N. (2018). *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. Penguin Random House: London, p.66.

II.5. Digital Stress and Workplace Monitoring

Digital stress, as defined in Section 1, used to be associated with adolescents and young adults, as most studies showcase the adverse effects of the constant use of social media on younger people, as they are the most engaged with new media (see Weinstein and Selman 2016; Lutz et al. 2014; Ives, 2013). However, due to the pandemic, stress associated with technology and social media platforms have spilled over too many other age groups. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the psychological and physical boundary between the office (work) and the home has disappeared, which has led to feelings of loss of control. Some researchers²⁹ have warned about the negative consequences of being on the job continuously, with bosses or hierarchical superiors knowing they can reach employees at any time precisely because they are at home. Issues such as presenteeism - remaining on the job even though you are sick out of the fear you will lose your job - will become an even greater problem in the economically unstable post-COVID world. One solution to this would be greater government intervention to protect online workers, by instituting new social and economic rights, such as digital-free hours, in which employees cannot, by law, be contacted via email or any other platform by their employers. The dilution of borders between personal space and workspace might generate a lot of what was previously known as work-related stress, but instead is generated at home, during what represented leisure time.

II.6. Conclusions

The negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will undoubtedly linger on, any prospect of a very quick return to full normalcy (resumption of air travel at pre-pandemic levels, removal of bans on large public gatherings, etc.), perhaps in spring 2021, seems far-fetched now. The new horizon – by which viable vaccines will have been developed and distributed throughout the world – now appears to be the summer of 2021. But restrictions likely live on afterward also, with social changes becoming permanent. The airline and tourism industries probably continue to be affected as people, even in the absence of restrictions, probably become more reluctant to expose themselves to the risk of becoming infected. A plethora of jobs likely remains on a work-from-basis, with the only important meeting taking place face-to-face, as companies will become more aware of the reduced costs of WFH (no more rent for office space, no more company cars, etc.) after the initial costs of transitioning online. Most likely,

²⁹ De, R.; Pandey, N. and Pal, A. (2020). *Impact of digital surge during Covid-19 pandemic: A viewpoint on research and practice*. International Journal of Information Management, p.2.

the adjustments regarding the work schedule will be found in the contract between the employer and the employee, thus leading to the permanence of the work from home (according to the limitations already mentioned).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns changed behavior not only for the civil society but also for the business model and growth. Zakaria Fareed raises awareness in his latest book “Ten Lessons for a post-Pandemic World” that because of the Covid-19 outbreak three times more small stores in the US will close compared to the recession of 2007-9.³⁰

Currently, the digital economy overcomes and replaces the traditional economy. For every business, it is software that is likely to bring incentives to the activity. This can become the new normal, as we are not returning to life before the pandemic, since the traditional way of living was overturned by digitalization. Life can be lived digitally in a service-oriented economy and in the most developed countries. However, it is not the case for the developing world where it can take more time to run the system differently.³¹

³⁰ Fareed, Z. (2020). Ten Lessons for a post-Pandemic World. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.: New York, pp. 98 - 101.

³¹ Idem.

III. INFORMATION AND LABOUR MARKET PROBLEMS. THE SITUATION IN THE BALKANS

III.1. The Pandemic's Impact on the Fake News Concept

The global COVID-19 pandemic has a strong impact on social dynamics at the local, state, and global levels. A very important feature identified in both recent academic papers and media analysis is how the pandemic has become a tool for some state or non-state actors in the desire to achieve certain strategic interests.

By the beginning of September 2020 alone, experts from the European EuvsDisinfo Center have identified more than 600 cases of misinformation against the European Union (EU)³². Thus, the position of Tedor A. Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization, who affirmed in February 2020 that “fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous, is becoming more and more current”.³³

III.2. The Rise of Infodemia

Understood as a deliberate instrument of a foreign power to manipulate the collective mind, the phenomenon of fake news was, and continues to be exploited, during the pandemic. Beyond competition and geopolitical interests, the spread of fake news about the pandemic has been favored by other elements such as internal social tensions of states and distrust of governments, poor strategic communication of institutions, or the use of social platforms, which along with channels like YouTube or Vimeo they have become real engines of transmitting misinformation. In Romania, the group “*Fără Botniță. Jos Dictatura Medicală*”/ (“*Without Muzzle. Down with the Medical Dictatorship*”), on Facebook had gathered over 43,000 members by the beginning of September 2020. The group, where conspiracy theories were distributed while its members were encouraged to take pictures in public spaces without wearing a medical mask on their faces, was reported by Facebook users as a direct attack on public health, being finally deleted from the social networking platform as a result of the interventions of the Romanian authorities. However, they organized themselves on other social media entities.

³² Joscha Weber, Mikhail Bushuev, *Fake news Coronavirus: Cine profita?*, Deutsche Welle Romania, available at <https://www.dw.com/ro/fake-news-coronavirus-cine-profit%C4%83/a-54434287> [Accessed on 20 October 2020].

³³ Siddharth Venkataramakrishnan, *The real fake news about Covid-19*, Financial Times, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/e5954181-220b-4de5-886c-ef02ee432260> [Accessed on 20 October 2020].

Some misinformation was harmless, but other endangered people's lives. Thus, a fake news in the British press, which claimed that alcohol can sanitize the digestive system, led the Iranians to buy counterfeit alcoholic beverages, even if their sale was banned by the authorities. Unfortunately, the methanol used in the preparation of those drinks was lethal to some consumers.³⁴ Also because of the methanol use, 300 people died in Turkey, while in Saudi Arabia the idea that camel urine can be used as a treatment was promoted. In South Korea, church priests sprayed contaminated water, infecting more than 100 people, and examples can continue, on a larger or smaller scale, globally.³⁵

III.3. Balkans, a Sensitive Region

The spring of 2020 was seen as a historic opportunity to expand the Euro-Atlantic area in the Western Balkans (Serbia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia), after the EU opened accession negotiations with Albania and northern Macedonia, so that in a few days Skopje will become the 30th North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member. However, the pandemic has created a politically, socially and economically tense environment for countries in the region, with border closures, lockdown policies or emergencies becoming a real challenge to the relationship between citizens, institutions, and the state.³⁶

As the pandemic has become a breeding ground for fake news, the Western Balkan states have seen this phenomenon on its scale. The lack of cohesive policies of the EU was seen, at least in the first part of the pandemic, as a challenge for its soft power capacity in the Western Balkan countries.³⁷ Surprisingly or not, the pandemic favored populist and nationalist discourse, closing the borders being an unexpected dream for supporters of extremist movements. These patterns could also be identified in the Western Balkans.

Serbia's position vis-à-vis China is also the result of the way, Beijing has related to the Western Balkan states. For instance, as a result of the fake news promoted in January-

³⁴ Razvan Munteanu, *Fake News Ucide: Cum au ajuns metanolul utilizat de iranieni impotriva COVID*, Check Media, 13.04.2020, available at <https://checkmedia.ro/fake-news-ucide-cum-a-ajuns-metanolul-utilizat-de-iranieni-impotriva-covid/> [Accessed on 20 October 2020].

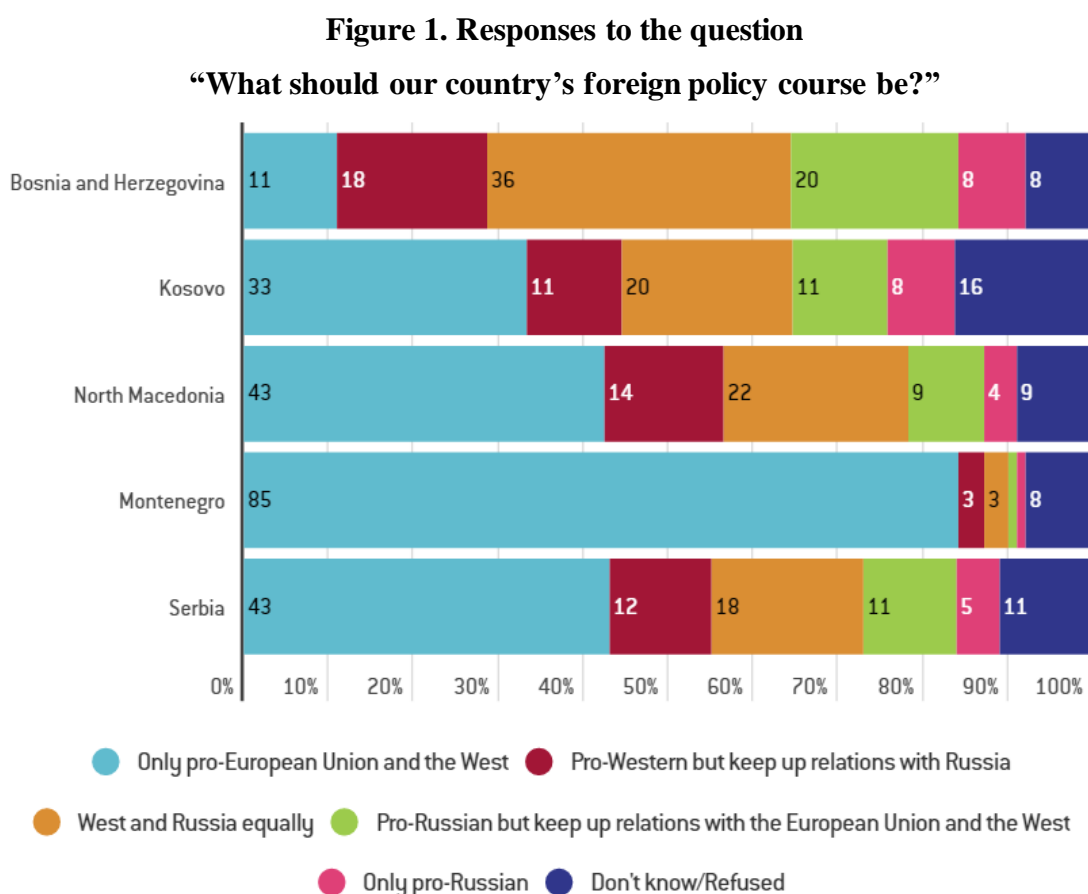
³⁵ Andreea Pora, *Dezinformarea, zvonurile și fake-news-urile despre Covid au provocat moartea a sute de oameni și spitalizarea altor mii*, Europa Libera, available at <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/dezinformarea-zvonurile-%C8%99i-fake-news-urile-despre-covid-au-provocat-moartea-a-sute-de-oameni-%C8%99i-spitalizarea-altor-mii/30779316.html> [Accessed on 20 October 2020].

³⁶ Florian Bieber, et al, *The Western Balkans in Times of the Global Pandemic*, BiEPAG, Policy Brief, Aprilie 2020, available at <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BiEPAG-Policy-Brief-The-Western-Balkans-in-Times-of-the-Global-Pandemic.pdf>, p.4. [Accessed on 20 October 2020].

³⁷ Aliénor Cameron, MICHAEL Leigh, *Has COVID-19 dented the EU's credibility in the Balkans?*, Bruegel Center, available at <https://www.bruegel.org/2020/06/has-covid-19-dented-the-eus-credibility-in-the-balkans/> [Accessed on 20 October 2020].

February, in a country like Montenegro or Croatia, a series of hostile reactions were identified towards Chinese tourists, several Asians even carrying placards with the message “I’m not from China”, the perception of China in the region has gradually changed. The way in which Beijing has managed the crisis internally, adding the aid offered to the Western Balkan States has been heavily publicized, leading to a paradigm shift (turned to favorable).³⁸

United States brought its own waves of misinformation, including for the Western Balkans, where narratives such as President Trump’s campaign for the use of chloroquine have been picked up, together with the QAnon movement continuing to gain more and more followers.³⁹



Reading the image above, which is part of a study conducted by the International Republican Institute’s Center for Insights on Survey Research, between February and March 2020, we notice that, except for Bosnia-Herzegovina, the rest of the countries in the analyzed states have a dominant position for - Western lenience, compared to the Russian Federation,

³⁸ Milica Kovacevic, *Balkan Infodemic – How the Virus Became a Geopolitical Weapon*, Balkan Insight, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/06/balkan-infodemic-how-the-virus-became-a-geopolitical-weapon/> [Accessed on 19 October 2020].

³⁹ Milica Kovacevic, *op. Cit.*

which shows us that, beyond historical considerations, Western soft power policy has been much more effective than that of the Russian Federation.

III.4. The Romanian Experience

Taking into account the geographical proximity but also the common cultural elements, in 2020 a series of similar narratives were identified in Romania. Numerous fake news were promoted on alternative media sites where either actions of non-compliance with public order (wearing a mask in public, or in closed spaces, keeping social distance, etc.) were encouraged or conspiratorial messages were sent linking COVID-19 to masons, Illuminati, the Gates family, or 5 G antennas.

These were doubled by a series of narratives supported by ultranationalist sites where ideas are promoted such as the lack of support and empathy of the Union towards Romania; the pandemic is a divine punishment of a world ruled by a decadent Western world, the real decisions being made in Brussels behind closed doors.

At the same time, many alternative sites take messages from doctors who either have scientifically questionable positions or do not specialize in issues such as pandemics. For example, a portal in Romania published on September 2, 2020, material regarding the book “Corona Fehllalarm”, published in Germany by Sucharit Bhakdi and Karina Reiss. The two claims that vaccines against COVID will be extremely dangerous, herd immunity being the only viable solution. Unfortunately, the position of the two is harshly criticized by the international scientific community, but the news went viral very quickly on social networks in Romania.⁴⁰

On the other hand, another questionable news was regarding the success of the Sputnik V vaccine, which is being tested in the Russian Federation. The news came in after Hans Kluge, Director of the European Regional Office of the World Health Organization, paid a visit to the Russian Federation on September 21, 2020, where he met with Mikhail Murashko, the Russian Minister of Health. The distorted message in Russian was taken over by a series of pro-Kremlin publications from the Republic of Moldova, such as Ntv.md, Mejdurecie.md, or Cenzura.md and the Romanian version of these sites was shared in the virtual environment from Romania. The Russian government has not provided information to the national or international media on the results of scientific research, other than the fact that the vaccine developed is in the third phase of testing. We do not know how effective Sputnik V is, but for

⁴⁰ Dan Nicu, *Pandemie, stiri false, ocultism*, Check Media, available at <https://checkmedia.ro/pandemie-stiri-false-si-ocultism/> [Accessed on 19 October 2020].

now, we know that its name refers to the famous Russian satellite, Moscow thus trying to portray itself as a global power in the field of health.

Also, in the context of the current pandemic, the QAnon Movement has become more present in Romania. Dozens of people, supporters of the movement, organized a protest on August 10, 2020, where they displayed T-shirts and banners with the messages “QArmy”, “Trust the Plan”, “We are digital soldiers”, expressing their support for the American president, considered the only person who can fight the world occult. Q supporters in Romania are also very active, which is why 35 Facebook accounts and 88 Instagram accounts spreading fake news pro-Trump, operating in Romania, were closed in early August.⁴¹

III.5. Labour Market

In what work is concerned in the current context, technology has become a solution to defeat the virus and programs such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, Team Viewer, etc., have been used systematically to help work from home.

Currently, Twitter employees work almost entirely from home, while other international giants such as Google or Facebook have only 30% of the staff working from offices. At the same time, a study by the University of Chicago shows that 37% of American jobs could be done from home before the pandemic.⁴² Regarding the European Union, the average number of employees who work-from-home is 36.8%, and in Romania, at the end of August 2020, a percentage of 18.4% of all employees chose to work from home.⁴³

In Romania, Banca Transilvania (BT)/Bank of Transylvania announced that between 10 - 50% of the working time of its employees is done monthly in teleconferencing system, while 90% of the employees in the headquarters of Banca Comercială Română (BCR)/Romanian Commercial Bank works in the same system. Both BT and BCR, the largest banks in Romania, but also other large companies operating on the labor market in this country such as

⁴¹ Joseph Menn, *Facebook removes small pro-Trump network based in Romania*, Reuters, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-takedowns-politics/facebook-removes-small-pro-trump-network-based-in-romania-idUSKCN2522RM> [Accessed on 19 October 2020].

⁴² Jonathan I. Dingel, Brent Neiman, *How Many Jobs Can be Done at Home?*, Becker Friedman Institute, White Paper, available at https://bfi.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/BFI_White-Paper_Dingel_Neiman_3.2020.pdf [Accessed on 29 October 2020].

⁴³ Ramona Cornea, Iulian Anghel, *Cum a schimbat pandemia de COVID-19 piața muncii: Circa 33,6% dintre români spun că și-au pierdut temporar locul de muncă, iar aproape 39% dintre ei arată că le-a scăzut numărul de ore lucrate*, Ziarul Financiar, available at <https://www.zfcorporat.ro/profesii/cum-a-schimbat-pandemia-de-covid-19-piata-muncii-circa-33-6-dintre-19514144> [Accessed on 29 October 2020].

BOSCH, Wipro Technologies, Michellin, and others have announced that they are willing to continue the remote system even after the end of the pandemic.⁴⁴

Such policies also represent a long-term financial solution, the companies being forced to resort to budget reductions, including by slashing the costs of renting open space offices. However, against this background, the office market is directly affected by the new changes produced, estimating that only in Romania approximately 20-30% of the total offices occupied at the beginning of 2020 will be vacated by December. And as a challenge never comes alone, the need for proper maintenance of spaces to reduce the effects of the virus and salary increases in the field have made the maintenance of office buildings increase by about 50%.

Of course, there is the reverse side when it comes to Working-From-Home. Even though employees continue to adapt to the new situation, studies show that some people who work from home have faced new challenges such as increased stress caused by tripling household chores. In addition, there is a new type of managerial supervision that in some cases involves strict control of the employee's activity or parenting problems, especially for employees whose children are under 12 years old. Then, the question arises whether, in the end, an atomized system is preferable, in which employees do not interact with each other, or if they do so it happens rarely?

Companies are forced to find new sustainable economic models; thus, the structuring of the workforce remains a challenge in the first years after fighting the virus. The trend of global conversion of office buildings into homes or spaces for colliding is increasing, but most likely the new post-pandemic reality will usher in a hybrid era, in which large companies will combine office work with working at home.

III.6. Conclusions

- Even though the pandemic has created a unique context of inter-state collaboration, it also highlights a geopolitical competition between the great powers, providing fertile ground for the fake information/news.
- The fear produced among the collective mind can create the impression that only strict leadership will be able to manage the current crisis. Such narratives are supported

⁴⁴ Ramona Cornea, *Pandemia schimbă piața muncii din temelii. Munca de acasă va deveni noua normalitate pentru companii și după ce pandemia de COVID-19 se va fi încheiat*, Ziarul Financiar, available at <https://www.zfcorporate.ro/profesii/analiza-zf-pandemia-schimba-piata-muncii-din-temelii-munca-de-acasa-19538216> [Accessed on 29 October 2020].

through fake news, which can weaken the civil society and the democratic features within the society.

- Adherents of conspiracy theories are more willing to support centralized regimes, seen as the best solution to reset a chaotic world.
- COVID-19 can be transformed into ideology and used for political purposes.
- The new generation is perceived as easily detached from historical events and memorials, and may fall prey to populist narratives.
- Fake news, propaganda and misinformation will remain long-term challenges and will become much more complex with technological development, which is why States must think about creating their own antibodies through policies to develop critical thinking among societies, with the help of civil society.
- Companies are forced to find new sustainable economic models; thus, the structuring of the workforce remains a challenge in the first years after fighting the virus.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE BIG TECH IN DIGITALIZATION OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY

Partnerships within civil society already implemented means and format of online cooperation, but the Coronavirus pandemic has moved cooperation and communication online forward. Many of the priorities tackled by the civil society among which the growing influence of the state, violation of human rights and role of the civil society are worsened due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Adding to this the vulnerability related to the IT and digital security, the presence of fake news, as well as the privacy issues of digital communication tools render the activity of the civil society more challenging.

The tech companies gained their role as an important and almost indispensable place even before the pandemic some users calling the offered tools as “utilities” or essentials, as the founders of the tech companies, did view their creations. The COVID-19 crisis offered an opportunity for the tech companies to affirm their purpose and sometimes to become “critical infrastructure”. The political, economic, social, and even personal dialogue of the planet moved into virtual rooms: Google Meet, Webex Meet, and Zoom became the delivery mechanism for international meetings, communication and education platforms, while Amazon and Alibaba, as well as the delivery services made social distancing a functional measure.

While governments struggle to face the health and economic crisis, the Big Tech presented itself as an indispensable supporter of society. The cooperation between the tech providers and the governments becomes a precondition for ensuring continuity of everyday life. As Microsoft’s chief executive, Satya Nadella, wrote in April, “the challenges we face demand an unprecedented alliance between business and government.”⁴⁵

“There are really two Americas right now,” said Scott Galloway, a marketing professor at the New York University Stern School of Business and author of “The Four: The Hidden DNA of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google”. There is Big Tech and there is everyone else. They can do what very few companies can do, which is play offense in the middle of a pandemic.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Franklin Foer, “*What Big Tech Wants Out of the Pandemic*”, The Atlantic, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/07/big-tech-pandemic-power-grab/612238/> [Accessed on 10 October 2020].

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Dwoskin, “*Tech giants are profiting — and getting more powerful — even as the global economy tanks*”, Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/04/27/big-tech-coronavirus-winners/> [Accessed in September 2020].

The financial figures of companies such as Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Google also confirm the trend of strengthening the dominance amid the pandemic. Facebook announced that it had more than 3 billion monthly active users in the June quarter across its apps, including Instagram and WhatsApp. The company said that number reflected “increased engagement as people around the world sheltered in place.”

Amazon (AMZN) posted quarterly revenue of \$88.9 billion, a 40% increase from the prior year and a staggering \$8 billion more than analysts had expected as the online retail giant saw surging demand around the world.

Apple (AAPL), which has dealt with flat or even declining revenue in recent years, reported an 11% increase in sales for the quarter, with growth across its various hardware products and digital services. Apple CEO Tim Cook called the results a “testament to the important role our products play in our customers’ lives” even “in uncertain times.”⁴⁷

The strong growth in revenue for the group stands out at a time when the rest of the economies are on the decline. The US economy contracted at a 32.9% annual rate from April through June, its worst drop on record.

During the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009, large technology companies were hit along with the global economy. Facebook was still privately held. The combined value of the five richest companies - ExxonMobil, General Electric, Microsoft, AT&T, and Procter & Gamble - was \$1.6 trillion. Today, tech giants occupy those top spots. Microsoft, currently the most valuable company in the world, is worth \$1.3 trillion alone.⁴⁸

The shock of the virus has overwhelmed the government at every level. In states facing an unmanageable deluge of unemployment claims, Amazon and Google have stepped in to revamp outdated systems so that money can flow with less bureaucratic friction.

⁴⁷ Clare Duffy, Kaya Yurieff, Brian Fung and Rishi Iyengar “*The coronavirus has only made Big Tech more dominant*”, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/30/tech/big-tech-earnings-antitrust-coronavirus/index.html> [Accessed in September 2020].

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Dwoskin, “*Tech giants are profiting — and getting more powerful — even as the global economy tanks*”, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/04/27/big-tech-coronavirus-winners/> [Accessed in September 2020].

IV.1. Common challenges need common solutions

For every field of a functioning society, the need for the robust technical infrastructure and end-to-end digital processes (“paper-less”) are key elements to safeguard productivity during the present crisis. First-response actions such as implementing continuity plans and stabilization of operations should be accompanied by proactive measures: organizations should rethink and accelerate their digitization strategy to increase resilience and optimize business processes at the same time.

Contractual arrangements with IT service providers should be revisited, data privacy and security topics as well as industry-specific regulations must be kept in mind. Although companies are now busy responding to the COVID-19 challenges, we will soon face a recovery phase that will once again show the importance of a holistic and sustainable digitization strategy. Using “lessons learned” is key to prepare for and thrive in the future.

IV.2. Digital Technologies as Innovative Solutions during Coronavirus in the EU

At the EU level, to seize the opportunities offered by digital technologies, the European Commission adopted its Digital Strategy⁴⁹ on 19 February 2020. In the face of the coronavirus crisis, this strategy gains renewed importance as the Commission deploys digital tools to monitor the spread of the virus, research and develop vaccines and treatments and ensure that Europeans can stay connected and safe online.

While movement restrictions apply and as social and economic activities have temporarily been moved to the digital realm, citizens, and businesses rely on the internet for access to information. Thanks to broadband networks and digital infrastructure, we can keep on learning, socializing, and working. Services such as e-Signatures, e-Seals and electronic authentication services for businesses, e-Government, and e-Health ensure continuity and the availability of public services while trusted security systems protect our identities online and make sure that our activities remain private.

Health data are considered sensitive data under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Article 9) and the processing thereof can therefore only take place under strict requirements. The GDPR however provides that one of the legal grounds for processing personal data is the public interest in the area of public health. Data processing may be necessary for humanitarian purposes, including for the monitoring of epidemics. In this case,

⁴⁹ “*Shaping Europe’s Digital Future*”, European Commission, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-shaping-europes-digital-future-feb2020_en_4.pdf [Accessed in September 2020].

the European Union law or Member State law shall provide suitably and specific measures to safeguard the rights and freedoms of the individual.

To prevent network congestion and to allow everyone the enjoyment of digital entertainment, the European Commission and met with the CEOs of streaming platforms, telecom operators, and users to take action. Streaming platforms are encouraged to offer standards rather than high definition content, telecom operators should take mitigating measures to allow for continued traffic, and users should apply settings that reduce data consumption, including the use of Wi-Fi.⁵⁰

The big platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Microsoft have been also contributing and using all the tools at their disposal to remove disinformation relating to the coronavirus. They take down illegal content or content that could cause physical harm (for example, fake and harmful virus remedies) or affect public order (for example disinformation around the 5G deployment allegedly being the cause of the coronavirus).

In this context, the civil society is struggling while facing a double problem. The first one is to ensure continuity and the second one is to tackle the risks related to the present crisis such as the more predominant state intervention, lack of transparency, increased abuse of human rights, etc. In the first type of problems regarding continuity, in order to tackle the long-term implications of the crisis, organizations must rethink their digitization strategy and put measures in place that establish sustainability for future challenges to come. The second type of problems are much more difficult to address, as the resilience of the civil society is extremely fragile, especially in CEE and Balkan countries. This is why, cooperation, collaboration, and communication must be enhanced and promoted even during lockdown periods. Moreover, as the shift to remote working and e-learning will likely extend beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, mechanisms of collaboration with governments, donor institutions, regulatory bodies and any other stakeholders and beneficiaries will be necessary to build the right mechanisms to serve society.

According to Deloitte, there is huge potential for digitization and innovation to add value to society and to contribute to public health, the environment, and biodiversity. At the same time, a successful digital transformation will involve empowering people to work in new ways, including reskilling and up-skilling. Cross-sector collaboration will play a pivotal role in allowing us to “build-back better” from the current crisis.

⁵⁰ “*Digital technologies – innovative solutions during the coronavirus crisis*”, European Commission, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/digital-solutions_en [Accessed in September 2020].

COVID-19 has presented one of the most formidable challenges in recent history to governments, businesses, and society. Many consider it to be the ultimate tipping point for the 21st-century. The pandemic is a wake-up call to have a plan to deal with disruptions to ensure continuity. It is also a watershed moment that will signal the fast-track acceleration process for digitization throughout society.

The digital transformation is as much about transforming business processes as it is about empowering people to work in new ways. A key priority is thus to prepare the workforce for the future and enable them to adapt to the new realities of the world.

As the world tackles COVID-19 together, technology companies are already taking action to directly support the healthcare industry, preserve jobs and safeguard their own workforces and communities, among many other notable efforts.

While the private sector will need to plan how they can use technology to stay agile and resilient, companies and civil society organizations also need to work closely with governments and international agencies to develop a set of global norms and broad-based policy frameworks to support the transition to a new world.

The 2020 dynamics has served as a multiplier and accelerator - at a higher pace than any other measure or strategy in the last decade – of a previous and already widespread trend: the digital transformation of all industrial sectors, social spheres and also, obviously, of the public administration.

Not surprisingly, need and urgency are great allies of innovation. Most of the public institutions in charge of managing all levels of the response to the COVID-19 crisis have faced the urgent need to assess their current digital technological capabilities while facing sudden processes of technological adoption and implementing solutions that needed a deeper public assessment. In parallel, public authorities have met with the need to find effective ways to communicate the evolution of the pandemic, the response and its implications for citizens within a complex context of social distress and information oversaturation.

Some of the trends that emerge from the pandemic are as follows:

- The COVID-19 crisis has been an unexpected accelerator of the digitization of public services. The compulsory switch of the administration internal procedures and the formalities for citizens to the online mode marks a milestone in a tendency that is sure to be accentuated.
- The management of the pandemic has highlighted the need for much more robust and sophisticated statistical and data analysis mechanisms, especially for those sectors and

services that have reached their limit capacity. Data governance will be a priority to ensure the public value of data and the democratic control of personal information.

- There is an urgent need to develop adequate frameworks to assess the impact of technology on privacy and digital rights. The implementation of different digital responses (artificial intelligence, mobile applications, and facial recognition) is linked to a very intimate spheres of personal privacy.
- Public administration organizations have shown a large capacity for innovation in terms of digital transformation. Due to its unexpected nature, the management of the crisis has revealed the potential of innovation and intrapreneurship of the public sector to put in place agile imaginative solutions.
- Although in an accelerated and conjectural way, teleworking, online education or telemedicine have become the norm. This has revealed the existence of a large digital divide with regard to both the opportunities to access communication technologies and the skills to use them - which will need to be addressed as a priority to close the vulnerability gaps.
- Civic technologies - and particularly digital manufacturing technologies - have been made known to the general public, offering viable alternatives and showing a large capacity to involve stakeholders and enormous diversity. This will foster a more inclusive understanding of how the technology ecosystem can contribute to smart cities and to the digital society.
- The COVID-19 crisis shows that disinformation and so-called fake news is also a threat to public health. The growing power of social media in the conditioning of public opinion and political discourse – in form and content – exemplifies the gap between the political rhythms and the current trends of digital communication – in a paradigm of social communication radically different from that of ten years ago.⁵¹

Basically, greater importance to the synergy between science and technology for a better, more accurate decision making should be given. But one of the roles of civil society is to monitor that this will be performed without losing sight of the ethical implications of this process.

In short, we are on the verge of a moment where governments, industries, and companies have the challenge to move towards technological resilience. One needs to harness

⁵¹ Manu Fernandez & Sergio García i Rodríguez “*Covid-19 and the future of cities: 9 emerging trends in digital transformation*”, available at <https://www.citiestobe.com/digital-transformation-covid-19-future-of-cities/> [Accessed in September 2020].

technology and innovation not only to minimize the current risks, but also to anticipate possible future adversities and emerge stronger from the crisis.

To conclude, while the global economy faces potential unemployment and contraction not seen since the Great Depression, the tech giants - and a handful of medium-size ones - are already benefiting from new consumer habits initiated during the lockdowns that analysts believe will turn into longer-term shifts in how people shop, work and entertain themselves.

The tech giants' deep pockets will enable them to withstand the coming global economic recession, a stark contrast to what industry insiders and analysts expect to be the biggest shake-up of the tech landscape in years and the civil society have to adjust in order to get the proper skills, in order to enhance cooperation and communication with stakeholders, while remaining the watchdog of the human rights, privacy, democracy, and freedom of speech developments in our societies.

V. GENERAL DATA OVERVIEW AND QUESTIONNAIRE

Aiming to analyze the perspective of the civil society on digitalization during and after the Coronavirus pandemic, the research team conducted an extended survey within the project “*Digitalization and Civil Society. Evolutions post-Coronavirus*”.

The present survey represents the practical component of the research within the project and its results will be distributed at the national and international levels within governmental and non-governmental institutions in Romania, as well as within the main relevant international organizations.

Distinguished academic representatives, researchers, Ph.D. students, as well as the representatives of influential non-governmental organizations from the Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Russian Federation, and the Caucasus were asked to participate in the survey.

The present research questionnaire addresses the five most important elements:

A. Impact of civil society digitalization on the employment process.

B. Influence of digitalization on the employer-employee relationship.

C. Impact of civil society digitalization on the labor market.

D. Digital education methods and the attitude of young people towards e-Learning and governmental involvement.

E. The process of the digital transition of NGOs. The shift of the communication methods, dissemination of material, and donor programs for NGOs.

In order to get more detailed and comprehensive information about the above-mentioned elements, the respondents were to answer 20 questions:

- 1. Can you characterize the impact of the pandemic/lockdown in your country in regard to the digitalization of civil society as: a. Positive; b. Negative; c. No impact.*
- 2. Do you consider digital technologies that have an impact on the employment process in your organization? If yes, describe how digital technologies have influenced the employment process during this year?*
- 3. Are employees of your organization available 24/7 or are they allowed to switch off mobile devices outside of working hours? a. 24/7; b. Allowed to switch off.*
- 4. What percent of your organization's staff works remotely? a. 0%; b. Below 10%; c. 10% to 25%; d. 25% to 50%; e. Above 50%.*
- 5. Is your organization planning to increase that number?*
- 6. Does your organization monitor the working time of the remotely working staff?*

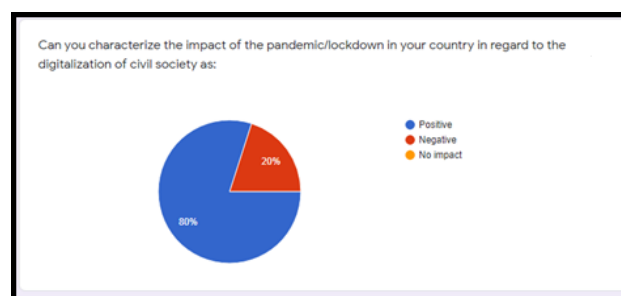
7. Does your organization use or plan to use electronic signatures and “paperless office” on a constant basis?
8. Indicate possible consequences of the digitalization of civil society for the labor market in the next three years: a. Vanishing of a range of professions; b. Emerging of new digital carriers; c. Multi-tasking of the existing key personnel combining the responsibilities of several employees; d. Training of the existing key personnel; e. Express your own ideas.
9. How do you estimate the digital teaching methods applied in your country in the period of the pandemic? a. Very efficient; b. Slightly efficient; c. Absolutely inefficient.
10. Indicate three factors that in your opinion hamper the digital education post-Coronavirus:
11. What is the attitude of the young people to e-learning? a. Prefer full transition to e-learning; b. Support combined learning (online/offline); c. e-Learning is not acceptable.
12. Do you consider that the state authorities should participate more intensively in the development of digital education? Describe the possible involvement of the state in your country in order to support the development of the digital education.
13. Do you consider the digital transition of the activity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is possible for the percentage of NGOs: a. Below 10%; b. 10% to 25%; c. 25% to 50%; d. Above 50%.
14. What steps are required in your opinion in the process of the digital transition of NGOs? Indicate three priority steps.
15. How have communication between the NGOs and local/international authorities changed since the pandemic?
16. How do you communicate with international members/partners? Has communication quality decreased since the pandemic?
17. Do you attend online conferences/forums/seminars/meetings?
18. How would you appreciate the efficiency of the online meetings compared to the offline meetings: a. Excellent; b. Good; c. Fair; d. Poor.
19. How did the coronavirus pandemic impact the process of the dissemination of studies/reports/scientific articles?
20. Do you consider that the donors have changed their priority fields for programs since the coronavirus? What are those priorities?

The following findings were emphasized as a result of the survey:

A. Impact of Civil Society Digitalization on the Employment Process

- The general impact of the pandemic in regard to the digitalization of civil society was characterized as positive by 80 % of respondents and as negative by 20 %, as seen from the Graph A. *Impact of Civil Society Digitalization on the Employment Process*.
- Digital technologies for sure have an impact on the employment process and this year 2020 the interviews were conducted mostly on-line. At the same time, the range of potential candidates is bigger, take into consideration that they can work remotely and do not have to be based in a particular place.
- Some organizations benefited from digital technologies in their recruitment process, using Zoom to schedule weekly meetings and upgraded their membership in Zoom to have limitless minutes in meetings since the meetings last more than an hour usually. Also, they benefited from Google drive, attaching their projects there and making their publications visible to certain stakeholders.
- It has been much easier to get in contact with candidates from all over the country via digital platforms. In addition, due to a rapid digital transition in both public and private sectors, new project opportunities appeared for old and newly hired employees.
- New tools for the online evaluation of the candidates have been developed.
- The usage of digital technologies has enabled contact between employer and employee who find themselves in different locations, the employer being able to hire people for specific projects and outsource the work. Mostly, even with reduced personnel, companies could potentially contact different freelancers for specific tasks, without much investment in the long term, in comparison with the already existing employees.
- Among negative aspects, the respondents highlighted the reduction of salaries in many cases. Also, the respondents indicated that it is difficult to analyze adequately the behavior and the stance of a new employee, thus this may lead to some inaccurate interpretation or assessment of the candidate.

Graph A. Impact of Civil Society Digitalization on the Employment Process



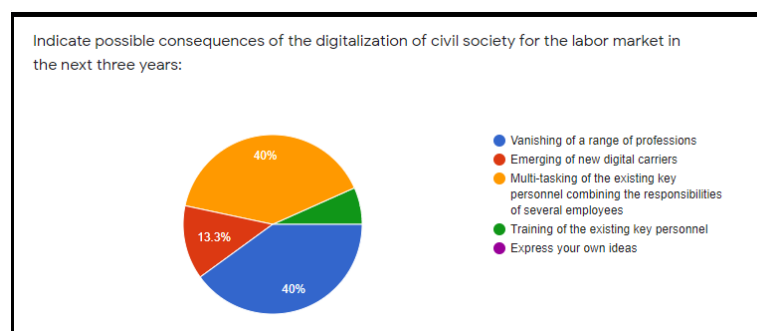
B. Influence of Digitalization on the Employer-Employee Relationship

- According to the received data, there was a lot of remote working this year. 40 % of the respondents mentioned that more than half of their organization's staff works remotely, and the majority of the respondent is going to keep this number stable or to increase it. Only 6 % of respondents answered that the number of their employees working remotely is below 10 %.
- 73.3 % of employees among the English-speaking respondents are allowed to switch off their mobile phones and only 26, 7% should be available 24/7. On the contrary, 60% of the respondents from the Russian-speaking states mentioned that their staff should be available 24/7 and the working hours of its staff are being controlled on a regular basis. But the majority of the English-speaking respondents (33.3%) declare that their organization does not control the working time of the remotely working staff, just 13.3 % monitor the working hours and the rest monitor partially or check frequently their staff.
- The majority of the survey participants, above 40%, use in their everyday activity the "paperless office" and electronic signatures in this period, others also have been using them before the pandemic or started to use during this year.

C. Impact of Civil Society Digitalization on the Labor Market

The Graph B. *Impact of Civil Society Digitalization on the Labor Market* demonstrates that vanishing of a range of professions (40 % of respondents) along with the multi-tasking of the existing key personnel (40 %) are among the most possible consequences of the digitalization of civil society for the labor market in the next three years. The possibility of emerging new digital carriers mentioned only 13.3%. The training of the existing personnel is less probable for the organizations in the process of digital transformation. An interesting fact is that the vast majority of respondents from the post-Soviet space, around 50%, consider that new digital carrier might emerge as a result of digitalization.

The Graph B. Impact of Civil Society Digitalization on the Labor Market



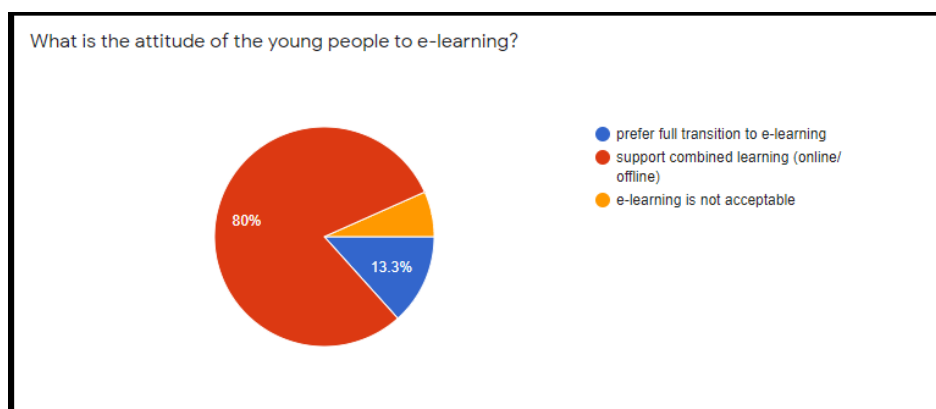
D. Digital Education Methods and the Attitude of Young People Towards e-Learning and Governmental Involvement

- The digital teaching methods generally proved to be slightly efficient in 53.3% of the cases or absolutely inefficient in 33.3 %. The situation is almost the same in the post-Soviet countries where around 80 % of the respondents consider them slightly efficient.
- It is essential to mention that young people from all the states in this survey support e-Learning methods but according to the English-speaking respondents the young people would better prefer the combined learning (online and offline), as demonstrated below in *Graph C. The Attitude of Young People Towards e-Learning*.
- At the same time, the survey emphasizes a large number of factors that might hamper the transition to digital learning:
 1. Poor access and availability of resources in rural areas, social disparities, lack of qualified personnel;
 2. Lack of interest among the employees, adjusting the mindset to the novelties and age of the employees; many young employees are on the waiting list because the teachers 68+ are still working;
 3. Especially for the children of young age, digital education is not beneficial in the long term due to the lack of proper social interaction, needed for their development;
 4. Lack of face-to-face contact undermines efficient teaching; students are subjected to many more distractions at home than in the lecture room;
 5. Inefficient communication within seminars (bad internet connection, students more unwilling to talk than in person);
 6. No possibility for students to share, discuss or debate ideas outside teaching hours, social relationships formed within school or university significantly affected;
 7. Lack of infrastructure for this kind of education and the vulnerability in terms of cybersecurity and IT security;
 8. The lack of will on behalf of public authorities to implement the IT infrastructure; the digital education less costly than traditional one, being inconvenient for the public institutions.
- Generally, the respondents, both English and Russian-speaking emphasized that there is no support for digital education on the governmental level. The state authorities should participate more intensively in the development of digital education. Firstly, they

should ensure equal access to digital tools, by providing proper devices and Internet access for the students in all the regions of the country and also by training them to use those tools. They should support the creation of national programs designed for online education, developing applications and platforms that will encourage the participation of students in activities. They should encourage financially an extensive employment process, as well as training of the academic personnel so they can further participate in the education process.

- The training of governmental officials is also required in the area of the implementation of the necessary digital reforms. The best way is the digitalization of the state services. This will force people to update their digital knowledge. The state authorities should strengthen domestic revenue mobilization and preserve the share of expenditure for education as a top priority.
- Since it is not clear yet how long the pandemic will last, the investment into digital education is necessary, mostly the investment in specialized software, government guidance for universities; investment in skill-teaching programs for teachers in order to help them adjust to the digital transition.
- Above all, state authorities must make sure teachers are familiar with online teaching tools and available platforms to adapt their methods to the digital options. They must also inform parents and tutors about the online methodology. In addition, state authorities must provide secure systems and online communication channels for students and teachers.

Graph C. The Attitude of Young People Towards e-Learning



E. The Process of the Digital Transition of NGOs. The Shift of the Communication Methods, Dissemination of Material, and Donor Programs for NGOs.

- The conducted survey demonstrates that the transition of the digital activity of NGOs is possible for over 50 % of NGOs. The opinion of the English and Russian-speaking respondents was quite similar in this regard with 40 % of them considering that more than half of the civil society organizations are ready to make a digital transition. More detailed information on this issue is described below in *Graph D. The Digital Transition of the activity of NGOs*.

- In order to perform in this direction, the following steps are required to be done:

1. Transparency of the NGOs should be provided, cooperation with the public sector, educating state officials about the work of NGO;
2. Changing the mentality of NGOs as well as public authorities;
3. It depends also on the activity of the NGOs. The digital transition should rather be focused on the administrative tasks and intellectual projects of NGO because if they are doing their work on the ground, getting involved with communities, the full digital transition is not possible;
4. Increasing online seminars and events, training, smart use of social media networks and preparing the target audience for this shift.

- According to the respondents of the survey the communication between the NGOs and local/international authorities have generally decreased due to the cancellation of many of their events. The possibility of meetings, participation in the debates of the Parliament and other public sessions is reduced. The participation of governmental stakeholders in the civil society meetings is also reduced. Online communication with local public authorities is not always possible due to the lack of infrastructure, required tools, lack of experiences, professionalism, and will of the public authorities' staff to change something.

- Communication with international organizations became completely remote: a lot of papers are submitted online, some processes have been improved, and the flow of documents is mainly paperless. The communication with international partners /members was mainly reduced to online exchanges, without the possibility of travelling for participation in events (most of which have been cancelled and transferred on online platforms). Some respondents pointed out that socialization is missing, face-to-face debates are needed. The interesting fact is that in the absence of the travel possibilities,

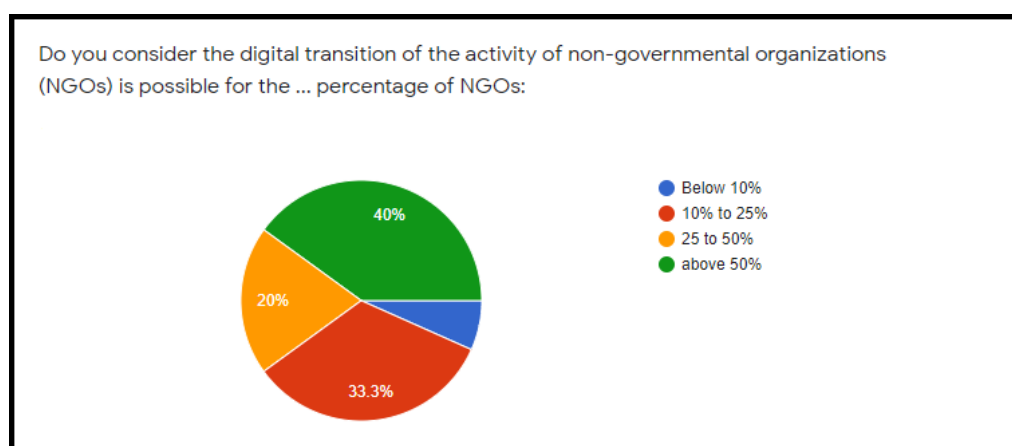
the participation in conferences or meetings is enhanced by the online presence of international speakers, travel, and accommodation costs being avoided.

- Among the participants of the survey, all the English-speaking respondents and 80 % of the Russian-speaking mentioned that they attend online conferences, forums, seminars, or meetings. The efficiency of these online events compared to the offline is defined as Fair by 46.7 % of the respondents, and 20% consider that it is Poor.

- The coronavirus pandemic has also had an impact on the process of the dissemination of studies, reports, and other scientific papers. It is generally believed that the dissemination of studies has become easier and faster now since people spend more time searching the articles especially about the pandemic and the number of people doing research about the pandemic increased. The need for printed reports decreased, the use of couriers is more solicited, and the dissemination in offline events is merely absent. Almost half of the respondents pointed out that the scientific papers were disseminated online even before the pandemic so there have been no considerable changes.

- Regarding the shifts in the priority fields for the donors, the coronavirus pandemic has caused some donors to turn toward solution of the current problems. The priority fields have shifted to health-oriented and educational programs. Some donors have experienced financial difficulties. Therefore, the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the priorities, the migration, and climate change issues are being replaced by other issues related to the COVID developments, for instance, the support of the health and education systems.

Graph D. The Digital Transition of the activity of NGOs



VI. CONCLUSION AND FINAL REMARKS

In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a great toll on economies and societies around the world while continuing to unfold its negative effects at the moment of writing. The crisis is posing systemic challenges, being alarming, in part, as it displays unwanted and unknown features. First of all, the global medical situation is caused by a virus we still do not yet fully understand and cannot be explained entirely by medical experts.

There were enabled new conditions in each place of work, business, or school in the name of safety and sanitation. Schools, offices, and other businesses that managed to reopen after the initial closure caused by COVID-19 pandemic, need to put in place procedures that reduce the risk of transmission of the virus, the social distancing and sanitation being the main norms.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, many trends already underway in the global economy are just moving forward faster. This is especially the case of digitalization. Other structural changes may also accelerate, including priority for the nationalization of industries, changes in the supply chain. The changes are noticeable especially in the working sector, challenges being multiplied, from the vulnerability of workers, gap divide of wealth retribution, dilution of personal space, and the need for workers to adapt to occupational transitions. The pandemic crisis has accelerated the pace of digital transformation which has already begun a few years earlier, expanding from medicine, e-commerce, justice and education, to name a few.

Internationally, the crisis is making globalization an outdated model. For the past decades, a neoliberal format for globalization has defined the international economic system. Market profitability and connectivity made supply chains more continuous globally. However, changing the international distribution of power, technological innovations, and social fragmentation was already disrupting this chain. The pandemic only augmented the trend and represented a tipping point. Companies with international supply chains were dealing with disrupted supplies, as the main manufacturing power is centered on Asia nowadays. This stirred the idea to relocate industries back home. Unfortunately, this trend will not create many jobs because most of the production is likely to be automated in the near future. COVID-19 pandemic gave the incentive for the implementation of new digital technologies such as artificial intelligence and robotics while causing a further socio-economic divide within societies. The world is pushing for a forced digitalization and robotics

not for a return to national interests first, as initially planned. The initial trend during the pandemic was deglobalization; the logistic difficulties and closing of borders reminded the world how easily we can switch from the world as a global connected village to national oases. It resulted in a growth of nationalization/protectionist policies as difficulties mounted. Unfortunately, paradoxically, the world is far from the “global village” paradigm, given the different interests between states and groups of states, which significantly affect the promotion of peace and cooperation for the common good. The politics and diplomacy of the states prove so many times insufficient, inadequate and outdated in the management of major issues of general interest. Bilateral relations have made progress even in the current difficult geopolitical conditions, and **non-governmental diplomacy has demonstrated its ability to function and achieve results.** Governments played higher roles in investments and as guarantors of the economic circuit. However, public debts increased with the many acquisitions in the medical departments, creating financial challenges around the world. In addition, the CSOs have to keep their role in monitoring the accountability and monitoring functions when it comes to fast-paced acquisitions.

Moreover, developing economies are the ones left aside. The economic recess hit them hard, experiencing tightening financial conditions. As the coronavirus spread to the developing countries, there were concerns about the fragile health systems in many of these countries, resulting in inadequate treatments and deaths. Also, in the Eastern part of Europe, the reported number of deaths is higher when relating to the entire population.

In order to safeguard workplaces, many European countries adopted Germany’s *Kurzarbeit* (short work) - including Romanian - a new type of subsidy during the pandemic. This policy keeps workers employed at reduced hours and pay, with the government compensating some of the shortfalls in wages. In Germany, the model was conceptualized and applied so it keeps the economy flowing. In order to be applied as a kit in the economy, it should be refined and adapted.

The pandemic indicated that remote work is here to stay, especially at the peak of the viral transmission to avoid community spreading of the virus. Since many companies found advantages in sending workers at home, it might linger, producing negative effects for the real estate and office caterers and service providers.

Public institutions will have to re-evaluate and reinforce their digital communication strategies in order to consolidate their operational leadership during crises, including pandemics. Additionally, educational entities have to adjust and adapt to the new realities, at

times at the disadvantage of students - especially in the less equipped economies, such trends being noted in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

The questionnaire implemented within the project revealed that the usage of digital technologies has enabled the contact between employer and employee, who find themselves in different locations. At the same time, among negative aspects, the reduction of the salaries appeared in many answers. Also, the respondents indicated that it is difficult to analyze adequately the behavior and the stance of a new employee, thus this may lead to some inaccurate interpretation or assessment of the candidate.

Among other conclusions of the survey is the fact that transparency of the NGOs should be provided, cooperation with the public sector, educating state officials about the work of NGOs. Digital transition should rather be focused on the administrative tasks and intellectual projects of NGOs because if they conduct their work on the ground, getting involved with communities, full digital transition is not possible.

According to the respondents of the survey the communication between the NGOs and local/international authorities have generally decreased, because of the cancellation of many of their events. The possibility of meetings, participation in the debates of the Parliament and other public sessions is reduced. The participation of governmental stakeholders in the civil society meetings is also reduced. The online communication with local public authorities is not always possible due to the lack of infrastructure, required tools, lack of experience, professionalism and will of the public authorities' staff to change something.

The communication with international organizations has become completely remote: a lot of papers are submitted online, some processes have been improved, and the flow of documents is mainly paperless. The communication with international partners /members was mainly reduced to online exchanges, without the possibility of travelling for participation in events (most of which have been cancelled and transferred on online platforms). Some respondents pointed out that socialization is missing, face to face debates are needed. The interesting fact is that in the absence of the travel possibilities, the participation in conferences or meetings is enhanced by the online presence of international speakers, the travel and accommodation costs being avoided.

In the short term, collaboration can be conducted intellectually, without the need for physical presence, through digital means, via email, and different web tools. This represents a new work model, where people carry daily activities from home, coming into the office for group meetings and board sessions that encompass more involvement. Even the routine group meetings can go online, whereas the sessions that imply deeper connections, interchanges, and

networking can continue face-to-face. Thus, we can expect hybrid models of work. In fact, it does not mean this setup devalues social inter-linkages, it holds them dearly since they happen less.

We note that the area that faced the most accelerated pace of transformation during the pandemic is medicine. One can observe obvious benefits for health care, especially when social distancing is in place, yet there are more complicated cases that need human interaction between doctor and patient. While telemedicine is set to continue to thrive, we shall not neglect the communities that are less connected to the digital world, ensuring their access to health care.

Concerning the donor's priorities, the economic impact of the COVID-19 is one of the priorities, the migration and climate change issues are being replaced by other issues related to the COVID developments, for instance the support of the health and education systems.

Additionally, we note a growing power for an under-regulated social media. Social media is active in conditioning the public opinion and political discourse - in form and content - an environment that harness disinformation and fake news spread.

There is yet to answer the dilemma of how and when countries and regions will be able to start a real recovery if the restrictions and social-distancing policies continue for long, as there is not an end in sight for the pandemic. It was argued it can linger for about two years, when countries have to adapt to new social dynamics, including threats on labour market, real estate and other services. This should be the right place and time for civil society to act as a balance check, as the governments can perform a controlling role in the future economy. There will a high need to protect educational rights and labour rights for the vulnerable groups, increasingly so in less wealthy economies. Moreover, there is an absence of multilateral and bilateral European solidarity during the crisis, once more after the Eurozone and migration challenges - likely to act to the detriment of the European Union core values, in danger of erosion. Last, but not least, the challenges are more acute for newer members of the Union, from the East, increasing the divide within Europe. Internationally speaking, China that was already an economic and technological powerhouse, gained soft power. China exerted crisis diplomacy and humanitarian activities around the world, giving the perception that Beijing has been far more effective than the rest of the world when dealing with the epidemic outbreak and this was noticeable in the Balkans. The shrinkage of the Western economies can enrage a global depression, while China can keep a steady economy. In addition, international bodies in the public health domain appeared frail and unable to manage a crisis, borders closed, and international partnerships were weakened instead of acting in

solidarity. We highlight the potential dangers in order to affirm the need to protect societies, economies, without neglecting the role of civil society actors, when the big technology patterns take over.

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VIII. ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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