

# EU EDUCATION SYSTEMS AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

## AN ANALYSIS ON THE ROMANIA'S RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLAN AND ITS MEASURES ON SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION

**Gabriela Motoi, PhD\***

**Assoc. Prof. Alexandrina Mihaela Popescu, PhD\*\***

*\*Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Craiova (Romania)*

*\*\*Department of Teacher Training, University of Craiova (Romania)*

### ***Abstract:***

*The COVID-19 pandemic brought out many changes in all subsystems of social life and highlighted the need for resilience of both individuals and communities. For sure, all over Europe, the educational systems were severely affected since March 2020. In these circumstances, investing in education become an important goal for every European society, being very important for its growth and competitiveness. The Recovery and Resilience Facility, recently adopted at EU level, represent a key instrument that will provide new opportunities for member states to invest in education to address existing educational challenges and to ensure more resilient systems. This communication is focusing on an analysis of the Romania's Recovery and Resilience Plan, in order to see how the goals that were set in this Plan will be achieved and will diminish the actual challenges of the educational system.*

**Keywords:** Recovery and Resilience; challenges in education; EU regulations; growth; COVID-19 pandemic

# **1. Background - the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on European education systems. The need for resilience in a pandemic context**

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has led education and training institutions in Europe to close their doors and move quickly to distance (on-line) teaching. In a few weeks, the educational landscape in Europe and around the world has changed fundamentally<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the educational institutions worked ceaselessly to ensure continuity of the teaching-learning process despite the deadlock<sup>2</sup>.

The global health crisis triggered at the start of 2020 by the coronavirus pandemic and the containment measures that it brought about have created an unprecedented education crisis. Almost overnight, 190 countries were closing their educational institutions, depriving 91% of the global students of face-to-face education. Moreover, this necessitated educational institutions to shutdown thus affecting 1.57 billion students globally<sup>3</sup>.

While the closure of educational establishments inaugurated the general shift from traditional education to distance education provided through various means of communication (Moodle platform, G Suite for Education, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp etc.), companies have once again become fully aware of the central role of public education, in a world that was in the process of rapid changing<sup>4</sup>.

Education systems in developed countries saw the current situation not only as a challenge<sup>5</sup>, but also as an opportunity to place a stronger emphasis on reducing existing educational gaps, including before the pandemic, by implementing initiatives to promote equality and inclusion. What in some states, such as Romania, was only a risk, in the sense of accentuating inequalities, in other states the risk was turned into an opportunity. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a crisis for the whole world, but also a challenge for the education system<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO (2020a), *COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response* [online]. available at: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

<sup>2</sup> Babbar, M., Gupta, T. (2021), Response of educational institutions to COVID-19 pandemic: An inter-country comparison. *Policy Futures in Education*, June 4, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103211021937>

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO (2020b), *COVID-19 and higher education: Today and tomorrow* [online]. available at: <http://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-EN-090420-2.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Doucet, A., Netolicky, D., Timmers, K., Tuscano, F. J. (2020), *Thinking about pedagogy in an unfolding pandemic* (An Independent Report on Approaches to Distance Learning during COVID-19 School Closure). Work of Education International and UNESCO [online], available at: [https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020\\_research\\_covid-19\\_eng](https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020_research_covid-19_eng)

<sup>5</sup> Amemado, D. (2020), COVID-19: An unexpected and unusual driver to online education. *International Higher Education* 102: 12-14.

<sup>6</sup> Edelhauser E, Lupu-Dima L. (2020), Is Romania Prepared for eLearning during the COVID-19 Pandemic?. *Sustainability*. 12(13): 5438. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12135438>

In Romania, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to awareness of significant gaps and deficiencies in digital skills, connectivity, and the use of technology in education. In addition, according to the latest Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), 42% of Europeans do not have basic digital skills and the European labour market faces a significant shortage of digital experts<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis has drawn attention both to the opportunities and risks of online life and to the need for a better and safer digital environment for all, especially for young people under 18.

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Romanian Ministry of National Education conducted a rapid survey in primary and secondary schools. This helped to identify the students who lacked electronic devices and internet connection, especially in rural areas. The Ministry of National Education took the initiative to support online learning and invited sponsors, mobile and internet providers<sup>8</sup>, various private companies and NGOs to get involved. The survey revealed that 250,000 pupils (9% of the total population of pupils in state pre-university education) did not have devices and internet connection to implement e-learning at national level. While the Euro 200 programme provides financial support (200 EUR) for pupils to buy a computer, only those from very poor families were able to benefit, the eligibility criteria being particularly restrictive. During the lockdown months, when education was conducted exclusively online, students' access to technology was neither uniform nor universal, which contradicts the universal nature of the right to education.

Based on these sudden and brutal changes, the European Agenda for 2020 included numerous public policy documents (focused on the health, social, educational component, etc.) that aimed to advance integrated measures and intervention tools so it could help the European communities become more and more resilient. From an educational point of view, the European Commission has launched numerous programmes and action plans, such as the *Digital Education Action Plan*, called „Resetting education and training for the digital age (2021-2027)“<sup>9</sup>. Also, on 30 September 2020, the European Commission launched the *Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025*, an initiative aimed at strengthening education and training systems following the coronavirus crisis, along with the EU's recovery efforts, based on the transition to a green and digital Europe.

In this essence, the creation of the European Education Area falls within the scope of the objectives set by the new *European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience*, and complements the panorama

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<sup>7</sup> For more informations, see *Digital Economy and Society Index 2020 - Key Findings*. [online] available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/digital-economy-and-society-index-desi-2020>

<sup>8</sup> In fact, some mobile phone companies (such as, for example, Orange Romania), have had piloted since 2016 support programs (*Digitaliada*) for rural pupils, through which they made available tablets with access to open-source applications, which could be used for educational purposes.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission (2020), *The Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)*. [online] available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en)

of actions following the strategic priorities of the new *Digital Education Action Plan*: training of fundamental (including digital core) and transversal skills, gender inclusion and equality, teacher training, higher education, strengthening international cooperation in education and training, including by unlocking the potential for cooperation in vocational and technical education.

## **2. The challenges of the Romanian education system at the beginning of the pandemic context (March-June 2020)**

The forced transition to exclusively digital education, under the imperative of the pandemic, has only amplified pre-existing inequalities, especially when it comes to vulnerable students. In this context, the quality of education, not only in Romania, was negatively affected by the closure of schools and the relocation of online activities. Educational institutions and their actors (teachers, students, research staff, administrative staff, management structures), have felt the negative impact of this crisis, through significant alterations at all levels of operation<sup>10</sup>.

In addition to the fact that access to distance education is limited for some students, the pandemic has accentuated, through its consequences, issues of equality and equity in education. The neglect of students is doubled by other problems that many families faced during this period - prolonged quarantine, job loss, reduced income, etc. In this context, the family becomes an institution incapable of fulfilling its functions, just like the educational institution<sup>11</sup>.

The context in which this pandemic occurred was not one for which the education system was prepared. The students did not benefit from technology media education programmes in the school, and many of the teachers did not take introductory courses in new technologies, nor did anyone prepare them to use the necessary tools during a pandemic period<sup>12</sup>.

The November 2020 edition of the *Education and Training Monitor*, as well as the country report for Romania, presented a well-known reality. The early school leaving rate in Romania decreased to 15.3% in 2019, from 19.1% in 2015. Although it represents the largest decrease (-3.8%) of this indicator, registered at the level of the 27 European Union countries, over the last 5 years, the indicator remains high, above the 10% target that had been set at European level for the 2020 horizon<sup>13</sup>. According to Eurostat data, in 2019 no

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<sup>10</sup> Popescu, A.M., Motoi, G. (2021), Educational communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results of an empirical study among university students. *Revista Universitară de Sociologie*. XVII (2), p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> Mustafa, N. (2020), Impact of the 2019 - 20 coronavirus pandemic on education. *International Journal of Health Preference Research*. pp. 1-36.

<sup>12</sup> Popescu, A.M., Motoi, G. (2021), Educational communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results of an empirical study among university students. *Revista Universitară de Sociologie*. XVII (2), p.126

<sup>13</sup> European Commission (2021), *The Education and Training Monitor 2020*. [online] available at: <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2020/en/>

less than 43% of Romanians aged 16-74 had reduced digital skills, ranking Romania first in the European Union in this regard, Bulgaria (38%) being second. In terms of people with superior digital skills, the data show that only 10% of the population masters such skills, Romania being this time on the last place in the European Union, Bulgaria having 11% to this indicator.

The response of European countries in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was almost unanimous in closing schools, in an attempt to stop the spread of the disease, with work continuing in most cases exclusively online. But, as some authors are saying, what is most important is that this period of time was and will be „the starting point of scientific debates about the future of the educational systems and their real effectiveness“<sup>14</sup>. The main strategy used globally to slow down and, in the long run, stop the spread of SARS - CoV - 2, was to impose measures on social distancing, isolation and, in cases of endemic Community spread, the introduction of a strict quarantine in the affected communities<sup>15</sup>.

Pre-existing economic and social problems, accentuated by the reduction of the activity of economic entities and public institutions, by the reorganisation of the activity of health services, social assistance and, especially, education, have directly led to the increase of vulnerability in children, families and communities, such as limited access to social services, healthcare, inequalities in access to education and poverty<sup>16</sup>.

In addition, the period of confinement brought to light a problem already known in the Romanian education system: inequalities in access to education for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. In this sense, in March-June 2020 we encountered two situations: on the one hand, for children from families with a normal socio-economic level, the school moved online, and they continued to learn; On the other hand, for children from vulnerable backgrounds this period represented a total disruption of the school community. Also, for all these children, the interruption of school also meant the removal of access to minimum nutrition programmes, conducted in schools (such as, for example, programmes that offered a hot meal at school). Unfortunately, school food was for many of these children their main meal for the day, and so the closure of schools also had an impact on the quality of their lives, relative to their nutrition.

The situation was, therefore, more difficult for pupils from very poor rural areas or disadvantaged communities: they have poor living conditions, lacking

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<sup>14</sup> Kaleynska, M. (2020), *Online educational activities proposed during the social period of the COVID-19 pandemic*. Conference. Annual University Scientific Conference 2020 Vasil Levski National Military University. At Veliko Tarnovo: Vasil Levski National Military University Ed. P.309

<sup>15</sup> Salceanu, C. (2020), Higher education challenges during Covid-19 pandemic. A case study. *Revista Universitară de Sociologie* XVI (1): 104-114.

<sup>16</sup> Zamfir, C., Zamfir, E. (2020), *Calitatea vieții în timpul pandemiei: probleme s&ș i politici de răspuns. Un punct de vedere sintetic*. Bucharest.[online] available at: <https://acad.ro/SARS-CoV-2/doc/d01-CalitateaVietii.pdf>

minimum hygiene terms, as well as sufficient space for each of the members who make up the family (housing being overcrowded). They had one or both parents deprived of the possibility of daily work (the first did not affect the loss of employment were people from rural areas), therefore, the economic power of the family, which was still small, fell further. Thirdly, they previously have had no access to technology: phone, tablet or computer connected to the Internet, and if they had it, access to the necessary and age-appropriate information was non-existent, in the absence of a minimum guidance or support.

### **3. Case study: National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP)**

Before analysing the measures provided by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, it is necessary to mention one of the important initiatives chosen at national level in order to generate a faster process of adapting the system from education to the new health context. In addition, this initiative comes to answer many of the problems of the Romanian education system, which stood out, more than ever, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On October 26, 2020, the Ministry of Education and Research launched the process of developing the Strategy on digitization of the education in Romania 2021 - 2027, called SMART.Edu - concept focused on the following key concepts: Modern, Accessible School, based on Digital Resources and Technologies<sup>17</sup>.

In line with the European agenda on adapting education and training systems to the COVID 19 crisis, respectively on ensuring sustainable competitiveness, social equity and resilience (according to the above-mentioned initiatives), this is a call for action for closer cooperation. stakeholders at national level, starting from the following priorities:

- *Accessibility*: providing digital infrastructure and emerging technologies for access to inclusive and quality education. 62% of rural households did not have internet connection (2018) and 58% of rural households did not have a computer or laptop. Moreover, 12% of children in Romania do not have strong enough internet connection to be able to support online courses<sup>18</sup>;
- *Connectivity*: developing digital skills for the digital transition to a competitive society, focused on sustainable development, social equity and resilience; digital literacy and combating misinformation; use of

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<sup>17</sup> The strategy can be consulted at the following adress: <https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/SMART.Edu%20-%20document%20consultare.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> IRES (2020), *Școala în Stare de Urgență*. Bucharest. [online] available at: [https://ires.ro/uploads/articole/ires\\_scoala-din-romania-in-stare-de-urgenta\\_sondaj-de-opinie\\_aprilie-2020.pdf](https://ires.ro/uploads/articole/ires_scoala-din-romania-in-stare-de-urgenta_sondaj-de-opinie_aprilie-2020.pdf)

open educational resources. Only 52% of young people aged 16 to 19 have basic digital skills or above this level<sup>19</sup>;

- *Innovation*: use of all digital / emerging resources and technologies, stimulating creativity and entrepreneurship. With a score of 42 out of 100, Romania ranks 55-th out of 141 states on the innovation capacity indicator, according to the Global Competitiveness Report 2019, conducted by the World Economic Forum.
- *Sustainability*: ensuring medium and long-term predictability, through cross-sectoral cooperation, for quality education and a green and digital economy.

Facing the new challenges, European states have tried to find answers and adopt resilience plans, starting from the idea that resilience helps bridge global education security and education system strengthening<sup>20</sup>.

At European level, at the end of July 2020, the European Council published the budget proposal for both the future Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and the *Next Generation EU* recovery instrument (NGEU). Part of the *NGEU* is also the *Recovery and Resilience Facility*, which has an allocation of 672.5 billion euros (of which loans are: 360 billion euros, and grants are: 312.5 billion euros). It will support Member States' reforms and investments to mitigate the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and increase the sustainability and resilience of EU economies, as well as to better prepare them for the challenges posed by the green and digital transition.

This instrument will help Member States address the challenges identified in the European Semester in areas such as competitiveness, productivity, environmental sustainability, education and skills, health, employment, and economic, social and territorial cohesion. Also, it will ensure that these investments and reforms are properly focused on the green and digital transition, in order to contribute to job creation and sustainable growth, and to make the EU more and more resilient.

Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP)<sup>21</sup> is a strategic document, which provides for investments and reforms, structured on 12 priority areas. The priority areas cover six pillars and are divided into grants and loans. These total 171 measures (64 reforms and 107 investments) and are based on 507 benchmarks and objectives. Of the total, 14.24 billion euros represent grants, and 14.94 billion euros represent loans. The six pillars are: the green transition; digital transformation; smart, sustainable, and inclusive

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<sup>19</sup> Matoi, G., Bourgatte M. (2020), (coord.) *Les politiques d'éducation au numérique en Europe. Former des citoyens connectés*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

<sup>20</sup> Zhu, X., Jing L. (2020), Education in and after Covid-19: Immediate responses and long-term visions. *Postdigital Science and Education* 2.3: 695-699.

<sup>21</sup> Approved with a total allocation of 29.2 billion EUR, on September 25, 2021

growth; social and territorial cohesion; health, economic, social and institutional resilience; policies for the new generation.

In terms of resilience, here the main segments are: education and skills (in-depth restructuring of the education system through the project „*Educated Romania*“, early education, infrastructure improvements); health (construction and refurbishment of public hospitals, outpatient services, especially in rural areas); labour market and social policies (pension and wage reform, implementation of an average income of social inclusion); administration (modernization of public administration - investments in digitalization; stronger fiscal administration).

The NRRP proposed by Romania addresses through component 15 - *Educated Romania* - these challenges through 6 reforms and 18 investments, with a total budget proposition of 3.6 billion euros.

Proposed reforms include the following:

- Development of a system of early education services for children from birth to 6 years, which is unitary, inclusive and qualitative, as well as based on an effective mechanism of inter-institutional cooperation and intersectoral coordination, which will ensure beneficiaries high access rates and participation;
- Reforming the compulsory education system by increasing the autonomy of educational units in order to identify and implement specific measures to prevent and reduce school dropout;
- Establishing a complete professional route, facilitated by a reformed baccalaureate, which would offer students the opportunity of an open route, with access to higher education institutions with a technical profile;
- Adopting the legislative framework for the digitalization of education;
- Modification and efficiency of the normative framework for ensuring safety and quality standards, environmentally friendly, in pre-university and university education units
- Reforming the governance of the pre-university education system and professionalizing the management in the conditions of an increased autonomy of the schools.

The education dimension of the NRRP aims at measures to combat school dropout (Romania has one of the highest dropout rates in Europe), the emphasis being on reducing inequality of opportunity between students (especially concerning rural students, who have limited chances to access higher education, for example), as well as on the inclusive nature of the education and training system, including measures to increase labour market integration through the development of basic and / or advanced skills, including digital, and by stimulating vocational training in a dual system. Also, the reforms on early education, as they are specified in the NRRP are cording to



the policy documents of the European Union, especially those from 2011-2014, which are focusing on „early childhood education and care of high quality, fighting against segregation in education“<sup>22</sup>.

Also, the education dimension of the NRRP involves reforms and investments in order to increase the resilience of the education system by modernizing the educational infrastructure and related endowments, in conjunction with the current and future needs of the labour market, to ensure participation in an educational process quality, modern and inclusive. Thus, investments are considered for the creation / modernization of existing infrastructure and its endowment, ensuring the legal framework for the digitization of educational services, taking into account the situation of the sector following the COVID - 19 crisis. Investments in infrastructure and endowments are combined with software reforms prevention and reduction of school dropout, for the creation of adequate digital skills for teachers and pupils, for the adaptation of the curriculum to the needs of the market and for the involvement of the private environment in sustainable partnerships to stimulate dual education, etc.

### **Conclusions:**

The chronic underfunding of education system affects all levels, with a domino effect on the level of pay and, implicitly, on the motivation of teachers, on the level of funding per pupil/student, and, implicitly, on the accessibility of quality educational services, on infrastructure and materials. and last but not least, impacts the quality of the educational act, etc. Moreover, the underfunding of the system ultimately reflects the status that education has at the level of a society. Far from being a priority for the authorities, as shown by the constant level of underfunding, it has affected the way in which public opinion values and relates to education, as well as to the status of the teacher or the educational act itself. We can conclude that the Plan addresses a significant part of the older structural challenges that remained unresolved, as identified in the relevant specific recommendations addressed to Romania by the Council of Europe in 2019 and 2020.

The plan's emphasis on addressing education challenges and promoting green and digital skills will enhance Romania's long-term growth potential and stimulate inclusive growth by reducing disparities, with potential spill-over effects on the labour market.

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<sup>22</sup> Kaleynska, T. (2014), Children and inclusion - European Standards and Community Implementation. In *Challenges in Building Child Friendly Communities. Proceedings of International Conference Zadar, Croatia*, Europe House Slavonski Brod, p. 126

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