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Towards a better understanding of COVID-19 impact on young people and on the youth sector in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

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About this report

This study is the result of the work undertaken in the summer of 2021 by Maria-Carmen Pantea and Tamar Makharadze, commissioned by the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly influenced every aspect of life - making it more challenging and stressful. Some groups, particularly those who experienced challenges in social and economic integration even before the pandemic, were more affected. (Unites Nations, 2020). These groups are likely to suffer more severely and experience long term impact from the crisis. Therefore, they need more support for recovery.

According to the World Youth Report (2018), young people worldwide had experienced problems in social and economic integration even before the COVID-19 pandemic - many of them had limited access to employment, education, social and political life (United Nations, 2018). These challenges were stronger for young people during the pandemic, especially in low-income countries. In countries with considerable economic and political turbulences, COVID-19 severely affected the well-being of young people, impacting their lives in regards to employment, education, mental well-being, rights and social activism (United Nations, 2020). Its disruptive effect on local young people and youth sector needs a deeper analysis to inform rapid and effective steps for recovery.

In 2020, the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership started to monitor the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people and the youth sector in Europe, establishing an online platform COVID-19 Knowledge Hub. Data was collected and analysed on the impact at local and national levels through surveys to European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP) and the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR). The results were analysed in a series of thematic and policy briefings, a cross-country study based on EKCYP contributions and a meta-analysis of findings on the immediate and short-term impact of COVID-19. The data collection and analytical work continue in 2021.

This study was initiated as part of that monitoring process. It aims to analyse the implications of the pandemic on the young people and the youth sector in the six countries of the Eastern Partnership cooperation, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to map the main responses, outline the policy gaps and to propose recommendations towards a post-COVID recovery. To avoid any confusion on the countries covered, the study will refer to Eastern Europe and South Caucasus region.

1. METHODOLOGY, SOURCES AND FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on the 6 countries in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus (EECA), all until recently part of the Eastern Partnership cooperation: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. It aims to gather a closer understanding of: i) the situation of the young people and the youth sector during COVID-19; ii) the policy and youth sector responses for reducing the impact of the pandemic; iii) the needs to be addressed towards a 'post-COVID' recovery.

The study aims to identify patterns and trends, while acknowledging the heterogeneity of the country situations within the region. It explores ways of supporting the young people and the youth sector during the COVID-19 crisis and in its aftermath. The study aims to provide evidence basis for the youth sector in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to develop policies and interventions in the period after the pandemic and for scoping the support that the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership can offer.

The study builds on a combination of desk research (documentary analysis), contribution from youth sector stakeholders and expert interviews. The literature review is based on published research, policy briefs, documents and reports on the impact of COVID-19 on young people and the youth sector in EECA policy and youth sector responses and needs. The authors used electronic sources (scientific papers, reports and organisations' websites) in English, Georgian, Romanian and Russian. The EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership's COVID-19 Knowledge Hub and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum provided reliable collections of recent data. Other sources included United Nations agencies and bodies (notably UNICEF, UNFPA, OHCHR, ILO), World Economic Forum, World Health Organisation, government reports and youth councils/ civil society briefs. Media sources were used especially for documenting the challenges of youth participation in the region.

In addition, the review integrated the information from:

- two surveys (2020, 2021) carried out by the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership on the impact of COVID-19 in Eastern Europe and in EECA;
- the recordings and *padlets* of two consultative meetings carried out the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership with stakeholders from the youth sector in South Eastern Europe and in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus.

The study also integrates findings of 14 targeted interviews with experts from the youth sector from the six countries. Interviews were carried out in September-October 2021 and complemented the review, providing important perspectives on the ways forward. All

interviews were conducted online and lasted between 50-70 minutes. Records of the interviews informed the study. The team had to balance the ethical obligation of protecting the identity of informants and the need for transparency. At times, this was a difficult decision, especially for highly sensitive data. The choice was to protect the respondents who, at times, run political risks when speaking about the youth sector in countries facing undemocratic backlashes.

In addition, the study is based on authors' participation in the following events:

- the consultative meeting of the European Knowledge Centre on Youth Policy correspondents (EKYP) and the members of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) (June 8, 2021);
- EU-CoE Youth Partnership consultative meeting (June 10, 2021);
- expert meeting on the future role of the EU-CoE Youth Partnership in supporting the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda (June 17, 2021);
- consultative meeting of the Advisory Group of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (July 5, 2021);
- conference 'Reassess & Reboot – Civil Society's Quest for Better Reforms in the Eastern Partnership' (March 22, 2021);
- conference 'Youth Work in Flux: An Academic Point of View on Youth Work Training and Education' (June 15-17, 2021);
- Council of Europe consultative meeting on the Review of the CM Recommendation on Young people's access to rights (September 16-17, 2021);
- the 15th conference of the European Sociological Association 'Sociological Knowledges for Alternative Futures' (31 August – 3 September 2021);
- the roundtable 'Restricting NGOs: From Pushback to Accommodation' organised by the International Society for Third Sector Research (October 7, 2021).

The study incorporates the feedback received from the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership secretariat, which was supportive also in securing links with key youth sector experts in the region.

Inferring causality is difficult. This is especially true in the EECA region, where baseline assessments allowing comparison with previous time frames are often lacking. Many of the challenges attributed to the pandemic were pre-existent in EECA countries. It may be that COVID-19 brought them to the fore in aggravated forms. Researchers focused on distilling what elements were predominant during the COVID-19 crisis, despite not being the only factor shaping the youth sector. Inevitably, the study cannot entirely reflect the input and the views of all those who contributed. The findings should be read as provisional and providing a base for further research to help make sense of the implications of the pandemic, since it is still unfolding.

The study is organised into four areas of interest for understanding the situation of young people and the youth sector in the region. They are: 1) mental well-being; 2) young people's social inclusion (mainly in relation to education, employment, and health); 3) youth participation, including volunteering; 4) digitalisation. Other relevant issues (e.g., emerging inequalities, vaccination status and its role in the future of learning mobility) are explored under these thematic approaches. Conclusions and proposals on implications for further policy action are advanced for the four areas.

2. COVID-19 AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Mental health affects thinking, feeling and action; it determines capacity to cope with stress (WHO, 2018). According to the World Health Organisation, mental health and wellness is defined as "a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to his or her community "(WHO, 2018. P. 2).

Most countries in the region have a complex history of socio-economic and political development which is not without emotional implications and even trauma. Since the 1990s, all the countries in the region except for Belarus have experienced armed conflicts with severe implications on the general well-being of people. All these countries still suffer from political turbulence and instability. According to a WHO report (2019), one in five people living in conflict-affected areas lives with mental health issues.

There is also a complex relationship between social exclusion and mental health and well-being and even illness, and low income, weak social networks and unemployment causing high level of psychological distress (Sayce, L. & Measey, L., 1999; Gordon, S. et al., 2017; Hall, T., et al., 2019). The socio-economic difficulties in the region also have implications for young people's mental health and well-being. So far this relationship has been insufficiently addressed in the region.

Studies indicate that COVID-19 has greatly harmed the mental health and well-being of young people worldwide (OCED, 2021). Since lockdown, symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression have risen dramatically within the youth population (UNDP, 2020b). The reasons for the deterioration of young people's mental health and well-being vary and are interlinked – the displacement and loss of lives during the war; the poor quality and insufficient quantity of mental health services; the wide-ranging impacts of school closures, and a labour market crisis; connection to virtual environments for a long time and uncertainty about the future; a sudden lockdown and physical distancing measures, etc. The negative influence of COVID-19 on young people's mental health and well-being has been underlined by the experts in interviews. For example, the respondents from Georgia and Moldova mentioned that young people have become less self-confident and started showing less interest in face-to face meetings and activities – they prefer to stay home and participate online. It seems that young people have adapted to restricted social life that can impoverish their social network and threaten their social functioning.

According to a study conducted in Armenia, restrictions and the lockdown have caused certain emotional issues in young people and negatively influenced their emotional state

(Poghosyan, 2021). Young respondents complained about limited mobility and connections with friends, worsened eyesight because of online classes, high level of stress and anxiety; they also revealed some emotional difficulties with staying at home fulltime. According to UNICEF, there are over 52 organisations in Armenia providing mental health and psychosocial support services across the country (UNICEF, 2021). To deal with the emotional crisis caused by COVID-19 and political tensions, Armenian non-governmental organisations have been providing training modules in psychological first aid, as well as mental well-being and psychological assistance (Harjes, 2021).

In Ukraine, there are many adolescents and young people experienced severe anxiety after months of lockdown; cases of aggressive outbursts have also been reported. Based on interview results with young people aged 14–35, a large proportion suffer from stress, aggression, apathy, and depression as a result of COVID-19 (Yale, 2021). This emotional state is caused by financial difficulties in the family, troubles in finding a job, lack of involvement in the community, etc. Similarly, a study conducted by the UNDP project "Civil Society for Enhanced Democracy and Human Rights in Ukraine", confirms that a significant percentage of young people (45.9%) felt constant stress and anxiety due to uncertainty at the beginning of the quarantine (UNDP, 2020a).

In Moldova, young people had experienced lower psycho-emotional well-being before the pandemic as well (Mastrotheodoros, 2020). In 2018, about 36% of young people in Moldova were disadvantaged and lacked access to quality services and equal opportunities which negatively affected their health, education, employment and social inclusion. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the emotional state of young people in Moldova deteriorated. Recent research confirms a damaging psychological impact of the distancing and isolation measures on young people, characterised by a higher level of stress, anxiety, more pronounced depression symptoms and stronger feelings of uncertainty (UNFPA Moldova, 2020). The situation is more acute for young people with disabilities, who were affected more by the restrictions imposed during the pandemic. 38% of those with disabilities experienced a high level of anxiety, compared to 28% of the young people without disabilities.

Upon the outbreak of COVID-19, Moldovan young people also noted dissatisfaction with their lifestyle and physical isolation: 38% of young smokers reported smoking tobacco more during the pandemic; 13% of those who previously had a tendency of self-harm revealed they had more attempts during the lockdown. Half of the interviewees said that to deal with depression and anxiety, they needed support during the pandemic, yet only about 60% of them received it. Additionally, it was found that young people who had been already victims of violence felt more abused during the lockdown and that more girls (43%) than boys (17%) felt they needed support (UNFPA Moldova, 2020).

Although Belarus did not impose strict measures or a lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, Belarusian students under quarantine and self-isolation had a much higher rate of alcohol consumption than those not in restriction; those who reported increased alcohol consumption experienced a higher degree of fear, depression, loneliness and anger (Gritsentko et al., 2020).

Finally, similar to other countries, young people in Georgia declared higher levels of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety symptoms. Those living in poorer social and economic conditions showed an even higher level of psychological distress. Limited physical activities and lack of social interactions were commonly identified by Georgian young people as the cause of mental health problems during COVID-19 (Makashvili et al., 2020).

Although young people's mental health has been seriously impacted by COVID-19, their psycho-emotional well-being and mental health issues have been insufficiently addressed through relevant support measures across the region. There is a need for long-term structured policy interventions and robust programmes addressing social anxiety issues and helping young people develop coping skills and emotional resilience.

3. COVID-19 IMPACT ON THE YOUTH SECTOR ACROSS THE REGION

The COVID-19 outbreak has had serious implications on important youth policy dimensions such as participation and volunteering, social inclusion, youth services, youth work and digitalisation. This larger chapter explores youth social inclusion, participation and volunteering, social inclusion and the digitalisation of the youth sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the countries of the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus.

3.1 COVID-19 and youth participation

Participation has been described as young people taking part in activities, in general, and in decision-making processes, in particular. It takes place in both formal structures (such as youth councils, civil society organisations) and in everyday situations. Participation is both a process and an outcome. Young people's participation matters as it respects their rights, it can lead to better decisions, it enhances democracy and empowers those marginalised (Thomas, 2007). Youth participation is embedded in societies' structures of power; it is dependent on the stages of the decision-making process, the roles given to young people and their level of political socialisation, among others. Digitalised spaces mediate, complement, and sometimes provide an alternative to physical participation[1]. Youth participation can be situated at different levels of political engagement: from participation in volunteering (*good citizenship*) to activism, including participation in protests (*active citizenship*).

This section explores youth participation, including volunteering, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the countries of the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. The vibrant political dynamics during the pandemic makes is difficult, in some cases, to attribute the forms of youth participation to the pandemic period alone. 2020 was the year of presidential elections in Belarus, Georgia and Moldova. Parliamentary elections were held in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. There was a referendum in Armenia, local elections in Ukraine and Moldova changed three governments. Inevitably, these processes influenced the forms and rationales for participation. Many undemocratic processes were happening at the time of the COVID-19 outbreak and the pandemic sometimes created the enabling circumstances for further illiberal measures to occur. New grounds for populism emerged and new divides appeared in the population and among the young people. Some of the protests, for instance, were driven by electoral processes and by complex blends with restriction and economic measures. In this context, it is more prudent to speak about co-occurrences, rather than causal relations with the pandemic alone.

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[1]A more detailed account on young people's digital participation, is provided in Chapter "Implications of COVID-19 for digitalisation".

Access to information is a precondition of youth participation and citizenship. During the pandemic, governments from Eastern Europe and South Caucasus had varying responses to this right. At one end of the spectrum, the government of Georgia demonstrated a considerable commitment to transparency, publishing daily updates on its dedicated webpage (available in Abkhaz, Armenian, Azerbaijani, English and Ossetian, as well as Georgian) and sending instructions on new measures directly to citizens by text messages (EaP CSF, 2020c). The Armenian government provided regular updates through a Facebook Infocenter. Towards the other end of the spectrum, the information provision of the governments of Azerbaijan and Moldova were criticised as incomplete. Belarus government did not provide data disaggregated per regions and CSOs considered its communication as 'inconsistent or contradictory' (EaP CSF, 2020c).

Pre-existent and overlapping processes of deteriorating civil society environments

Promoting democratic values has been an important challenge in the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. The countries have a history of laws and regulations that limit the capacity of civil society actors (individuals, organisations and movements) to operate. The process has been described as 'closing' or 'shrinking' civic space and it is part of a global trend. It includes, among others, digital and transparency-linked restrictions, discrediting civil society organisations' (CSO) voices, impeding the freedom of movement of civil society activists, stigmatising progressive donors, intricate processes of manipulation and propaganda (ICNL, 2018; Deželan et al, 2020; Pantea, 2021).

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) from Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus have been involved in countering 'hybrid threats' and attacks aiming to discredit the Europeanisation of these countries (Gogolashvili et al., 2019) and the use of the COVID-19 crisis for further weakening the democratic processes. Moreover, demographic ageing and brain drain increasingly decapacitated the struggling youth organisations in the region, which continued to lose young staff members, activists and volunteers, including due to political reasons.

At the time of COVID-19 outbreak, the civic environments of Azerbaijan and Belarus were described as 'considerably illiberal and restrictive, in stark contrast to the circumstances in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine' (Bosse et al., 2021). Although evidence on the situation of the youth sector is under-developed, one can infer it was no exception. The undemocratic tendencies exacerbated in Belarus, as several legislative processes adversely affecting civil society organisations. Several examples are the development of the draft Law 'on Volunteer Activities', the tightening of legislation and practice regarding the receipt of foreign non-reimbursable assistance, the amendment of the Law on Public Associations with adverse consequences for CSOs (EaP CSF, 2020a). While the consultation process for the law on volunteering was limited to comments on the state law portal, the Strategy of development of state youth policy in Belarus lacked any public event, despite its'

importance. According to interviews, youth organisations from Belarus were not able to submit feedback or propose amendments to the draft Strategy.

In the summer of 2021, the situation in Belarus deteriorated rapidly. The state decided to withdraw from the Eastern Partnership and other international initiatives and set off 'unprecedented attacks against civil society organisations, human rights defenders, and activists' (Bosse et al., 2021). A wave or liquidation of democratic NGOs in Belarus followed, with many democratic youth NGOs being forced to stop their operations officially.

The deterioration of Azerbaijan's civil society environment has been going on for eight years (Bosse et al., 2021). It included severe legislative restrictions, prosecutions of human rights defenders and political activists, culminating with the forced departure of over 50 Western donor organisations (Mahmudov, 2019).

In Ukraine, several legislative amendments (ex. Law No. 2682) risked weakening the powers of trade unions, including the right to strike, through the introduction of higher minimum membership requirements (OHCHR, 2020).

In 2019, Moldova witnessed political turmoil, with as many as three changes of government. This decreased the freedom of expression for the general population, with as few as 40% of citizens feeling free to protest or to express their opinions on the country's leadership (CSO METER, 2020). Despite these frequent government changes, the country held democratic Presidential and parliamentary elections during the pandemic period. In addition, several legislative measures taken in 2020 brought long awaited improvements in the lives of (youth) organisations in Moldova. Yet, these measures cannot be attributed to the pandemic context, as they respond to previous international commitments. The new 109 Law on 'non-commercial' entities eliminated several associative restrictions for foreign citizens, regulated the forms of government support, removed the rigid internal organisation structure, simplified the registration procedures and set clear limits on the relationship between non-profits and political parties (CSO METER, 2020). The bureaucratic simplifications were particularly relevant for small, youth-led organisations without strong administrative capacity. However, during the pandemic, the National Youth Council was excluded from several consultations without adequate explanations and despite its stated availability to continue to contribute to policy-making processes.

Lockdown measures by country

The public measures attached to the COVID-19 epidemic were different in the six countries.

In response to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Armenia introduced martial law and total mobilization. According to the interview data, the enforcement of the COVID-19 related measures was less successful, as the harm caused by the war was considered higher and the

epidemiologic risks, downplayed at the population level. The vaccination program was less effective in supporting the population take informed decisions. The use of vaccines not approved in the EU is likely to pose further mobility concerns, including for young people exploring exchanges or learning mobility opportunities.

In Azerbaijan excessive measures were used to enforce citizens' compliance with lockdown measures. Several 'revenge operations' and physical abuse by police were also reported (EaP CSF, 2020e). The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict escaladed in September 2020, when a full-scale war broke out. Azerbaijan introduced martial law, a curfew in several regions and partial mobilisation. In the context of the war, youth organisations in Azerbaijan were required to prioritise the assistance to those involved in the conflict or their dependents: mainly by securing funds and provision of assistance to families affected.

In Belarus the government withheld information about the COVID-19 impact from the public (BAJ 2021). Withholding information about coronavirus infection rates has become one of the most serious problems that led to an increase in mortality (CSO Meter 2020). Several bloggers and journalists were prosecuted for making public data on the COVID-19 incidence and the healthcare system (Bosse et al., 2021). Overall there were no restriction measures other than social distancing; mandatory wearing of face masks; distant learning and distance working for those institutions where confirmed cases were identified; mandatory self-isolation for persons with epidemiological risks (COVID-19 Health System Response Monitor, 2021). Even though there were no hard restriction measures imposed in Belarus, the pandemic triggered spontaneous civic activism which filled the gap left by the state's failure to address or even acknowledge the pandemic.

After severe mobility restriction and lockdown during 2020-2021 in Georgia, on June 1, 2021, the state decided to soften the restrictions. Since then, there are no mobility restrictions. In the second half of 2021 wearing facemasks has become mandatory both indoors and outdoors. Restrictions remain valid on holding wide-scale entertainment, wedding parties and events. Importantly, with very few exceptions, the learning process in schools, higher education, and vocational institutions have been carried out in a hybrid manner.

In Moldova, the measures taken by the government included restrictions of the freedom of assembly and freedom of movement, including by abusive interventions on peaceful rallies (CSO Meter, 2020). There was high inconsistency in the statements and actions taken by the government. The abundance of false information led to confusion and non-compliance by a large part of the population (CSO Meter, 2020). An attempt for media censorship was countered early by civil society organisations. The situation changed after the election of the new parliament in July 2021, when the country began applying closely recommendations from ILO.

In Ukraine, the first restrictions started in March 2020. The measures included: self-isolation, "stay at home" measures; closure of all educational institutions; metro shutdown in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Dnipro; all commercial intercity road travel was banned; non-essential businesses were recommended to work from home, among others. In May 2020, the Government launched the first phase of easing the quarantine and lifted part of quarantine restrictions (COVID-19 Health System Response Monitor, 2021). Additional (and very restrictive) measures were imposed for people from the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine.

According to major human rights treaties[2], most rights are not 'absolute' as they could be 'legitimately limited if a prevailing public interest exists' (Cherevko, 2020). Importantly, however, all limitations of rights should be 1) prescribed by law; 2) pursuing legitimate aim (including inter alia public health protection) and 3) necessary in a democratic society. As states can generally meet the first two requirements, the assessment of the third criterion of necessity is more problematic and harder to prove; this is where many human rights derogations taken during the pandemic failed to prove their necessity (Cherevko, 2020).

By the period of writing the report (19 November 2021) the statistics of persons fully vaccinated in target countries looks as follows: Armenia – 9.38%, Azerbaijan - 44.07 %, Belarus – 25.69%, Georgia - 24.47 % , Moldova 13.14 % and Ukraine - 21.79% (Our World in Data, 2021).

COVID-19 and youth organisations

The rapid changes caused by COVID-19 jeopardised ongoing activities and projects of youth organisations, their funding and sustainability. While youth organisations tried to keep up with the changes and shift their activities to the online spaces, there were major challenges related to quality and inclusiveness, especially linked to the transition to online tools. The 'stay-at-home' measures limited young people's freedom of movement, which has had a severe impact on the rights to participate in public life, among others (ILO, 2020). Youth organisations experienced difficulties in keeping both volunteers and their target groups involved in online events; Internet fatigue was prominent among the young people exposed to digital content in multiple areas of their lives. Interviews suggested young people with many household commitments, or without proper space at home experienced difficulty to engage online. The capacity of several platforms to meaningfully engage young people, appeared limited. In time, they created distorted expectations from participants who limited

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[2] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention of Human Rights.

their involvement to mere presence. Some organisations had to cancel their mobility activities and projects, internship programmes, creating an increased workload for permanent staff members and depriving young people from the possibility to learn while working. The pandemic brought 'fragile pathways of youth workers towards quality learning opportunities', as youth workers' possibilities for immediate social contact and complex learning experiences were replaced by the inherently limited digital technologies (Potočnik, 2021).

In Belarus and Ukraine youth workers experienced changes in working conditions, reduced working hours and a sense of job insecurity (O'Donovan and Zentner, 2020). In Ukraine, the situation was aggravated by the established practice of short-term contracts, highly dependent on European or private funding. There, the youth work sector experienced an abrupt decline in funding compared to the previous period when many Western donors were active in Ukraine. In general, independent, small organisations were the hardest hit by the new financial conditions that limited access to grants, fundraising activities whilst still in need to maintain their operations.

The capacity of youth organisations to continue their work varied considerably during the pandemic in Moldova and Armenia. The initial attempts to work online were unable to meaningfully involve the young people usually participating in their initiatives. Despite efforts to move projects online, the process was far more complicated and discouraging for participants and later, for the youth workers themselves. Calls for small scale offline activities became more frequent at the end of 2020 in Armenia and Moldova.

Availability of physical space for youth participation has always been a problem. In several countries, the restrictions maintained after the lockdown, further highlighting the challenges of space and costs. For example, the conditions in Moldova required no more than 20 (later 50) participants with one square meter around each participant. This made organising events very difficult and extremely expensive (O'Donovan and Zentner, 2020). Organising events posed many challenges. At the one end of the spectrum, interviews suggested some organisations (e.g. in Azerbaijan and Ukraine) in favour of small and safe offline activities were not permitted by donors to proceed that way. In other situations, donors demanded that organisations relaunch in-person activities while they continued to apply strict lockdown for themselves.

The pandemic also highlighted grant dependency. Many youth organisations had to cancel their programmes for 2021 due to insufficient funding; more than half of organisations experienced payment delays and pending grants (European Union and Council of Europe, 2020). With the exception of Belarus, where CSO-led crowdfunding campaigns were very successful, other countries experienced legal barriers in fundraising via crowdfunding and even prohibition (Azerbaijan). Scarce resources increased an environment of unhealthy competition (instead of cooperation) among youth organisations.

Recent research in the region suggests that budgets of several already awarded multi-year projects has been cut down by almost 30% and that many new calls are reoriented towards COVID-19 mitigation, economic recovery and service provision, at the expense of addressing critical human rights concerns in the region, environmental issues and gender (EaP CSF, 2020d). In Azerbaijan and Belarus the inability to register grants from foreign donors persisted during the pandemic and was further aggravated by slow performance of the authorities (EaP CSF, 2020d). Closed borders prevented Belarussian CSOs from accessing their funding sources abroad. In Azerbaijan the closure of several banks led some CSOs to repurpose their domestic resources allocated for the human rights area towards the support of health workers or the most vulnerable populations (EaP CSF, 2020d). There, the political priorities of 2020 (notably, the war) strongly discouraged organisations from working on *soft* issues such as gender equality, cultural diversity, social inclusion etc.

Youth activism

Protests during the pandemic are an ambivalent issue. In Ukraine, surveys on civil disobedience during the pandemic showed that people were still willing to attend physical, offline protests at high rates, even when this may have violated lockdown rules and despite fears of getting infected (Cherevko, 2020). As the pandemic unfolded, there were gatherings of young people as an expression of pandemic-fatigue, irritability and stress. Often, they reflected reactions to declining economic situations and to confinement measures. Governments from the region (and not only) searched to discourage them as violations of lockdown rules, or as part of the turn to authoritarianism.

There were illegal gatherings, including private parties in defiance of the lockdown measures. Many such actions were used for negative labelling and scapegoating young people as disobedient. Narratives around young people's disruptive behaviours were often disproportionate and they tended to de-politicise young people's voices in situations where the rule of law was under threat. In less democratic systems, the costs young people pay for speaking up against their governments is rarely recognised.

Between September 2020 and March 2021, according to the "Student Initiative Group", a Belarusian student union quoted by the media, as many as 415 students have been arrested at protests; some 135 others have been expelled from university for their civil position and charges have even been brought against 27 students (Danilovich, 2021). Many chose to live as exiles rather than face persecution during the pandemic. Several Belarusian Student Association activists were searched by police, detained in KGB prisons with no official charges, together with other 150 students (EaP CSF, 2020b). The young journalist Raman Pratasevich (age 26) and Sofia Sapega (age 23) were detained after the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in Minsk on 23 May 2021.

Several actions of the government of Azerbaijan were considered unacceptable, in particular the arrest of eleven people and an alleged physical abuse of Karim Suleymani, a young person and the arrest of the 27-year-old activist, Qiyas Ibrahimov (EaP CSF, 2020e). A 33-year-old freelance reporter, Natig Isbatov, was detained in April 2020 after filming a protest action held in front of an employment office (RSF, 2020). The repression of women's protests against domestic violence in the context of a war and the COVID-19 lockdown in Azerbaijan is another example of limiting freedom of assembly. In Belarus major concerns over serious repression against civil society were expressed by international organisations, with over 120 people arbitrarily detained and sentenced to fines and arrests for participation in peaceful assemblies between 6-13 May 2020 (EaP CSF, 2020a). With these protests against the general pushback on freedom of assembly, neither the policy reports nor statements issued by CSOs, acknowledged the identity of protesters as 'young'.

3.2 COVID-19 and youth social inclusion

The EU and Council of Europe put social inclusion at the heart of policies and see it as "the process of promoting the values, relations and institutions that enable all people to participate in social, economic and political life on the basis of equality of rights, equity and dignity" (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, 2020). Social inclusion was one of the priorities for Cohesion Policy in 2014-2020 - 'Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination' (European Commission, 2014). The Resolution on the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, underlines the crucial role of eradicating youth poverty and all forms of discrimination for promoting social inclusion (European Union, 2018). Youth social inclusion is the process of a person's self-realisation, acceptance, integration and recognition within societies (European Union and Council of Europe, 2020). It is a complex process that affects young people in many ways, such as their economic, social and psychological conditions. For this reason, while discussing the topic of social inclusion of young people the study will mainly focus on the impact that COVID-19 has had on their education, financial circumstances and employment, psychological and emotional state.

COVID-19 and education

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly interrupted educational processes worldwide, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents (UN, 2020).

Studies show that the most negative effect of COVID-19 on young people was perceived in the field of education (Gritsenko, V., et. Al., 2020, Makharashvili N. et. Al., 2020; Donovan, J. & Zentner, M., 2020). The closure of educational institutions, the change of teaching-learning habits, the obligation to move from physical to digital learning spaces and pressure

to adapt quickly, the lack of personal interactions between students and educators, the lack of digital competencies, and other internal and external barriers led to educational crises. A sociological survey conducted in Ukraine highlights the acute problems identified by young people in the area of education: 61% of young people complain about decreased knowledge acquisition; more than a half of respondents found the tutors' assignments difficult to access and comprehend; they also struggled with time management - because of losing the usual daily routine young people had a problem with scheduling the day properly. The respondents highlight lack of educational planning and decrease of motivation to learn, as well as difficulties with learning materials due to the lack of interactive activities (UNDP, 2020).

According to the Social and Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in the Republic of Moldova, COVID-19 has intensified the inequalities of educational performance between young people from socially advantaged and socially disadvantaged families. Reasons for this inequality included- disparity in availability of equipment (computers, tablets, notebooks) and poor Internet or no internet connection at all (UNDP, 2020). Due to COVID-19 and its effects, the educational conditions worsened for young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). Neglecting young people from vulnerable groups is also mentioned in the research conducted in Georgia (IDP Women Association "Consent", 2021). According to a survey conducted in the border regions of Georgia, COVID-19 has further aggravated the situation of vulnerable and marginalised young people. COVID-19 and lockdown also had a negative impact on the quality of education in schools of targeted regions. Before COVID-19 in Georgia, the quality of education was positively assessed by 55% of respondents, while after the lockdown this number dropped to 32%. Some respondents thought that because of the complicated economic situation, more young people will have to leave education and go to work and help families (IDP Women Association "Consent", 2021).

Insufficient digital competencies of teachers and educators, as well as young people were critical reasons why the teaching-learning process deteriorated at schools and in higher educational institutions. This concern is relevant across the whole region (IDP Women Association "Consent", 2021; UNDP, 2020; Poghosyan, 2021; UNFPA, 2021). A more detailed account on the implications for digital competences is provided in the chapter "Implications of COVID-19 for digitalisation"

The devastating effects of the pandemic on the educational system in Armenia were highlighted in the Impact assessment of the COVID-19 outbreak on well-being of children and families in Armenia (World Vision Armenia, 2020). The report on COVID-19 response measures in the Republic of Azerbaijan stated that the spread of the virus and the lockdown had a negative effect on the education of children and young people, the livelihood of citizens and the economy of the country (OHCHR, 2020).

The situation also deteriorated in terms of non-formal education and training. Due to COVID-19, non-formal education activities declined in 2020. Youth organisations and NGOs providing non-formal and informal education have been affected by the lockdown measures of COVID-19 and had to close their physical spaces as well as postpone ongoing projects (EU and CoE, 2020). More details on COVID-19 impact on youth NGOs are provided in the Chapters "Implications for young people and organisations" and "Implications of COVID-19 for digitalisation".

COVID-19 and employment

For young people's personal and professional development, it is crucial to have a stable, decent job. Employment also plays a significant role in their socio-economic integration and social inclusion within society. The youth labour market is characterised by higher levels of employment in spheres, such as - retail, hospitality, tourism and entertainment; and considerably higher rates of part-time, freelance jobs and casual work (Dhillon and Cassidy, 2018). During the COVID-19 crisis, because of these characteristics of the youth labour market, young people were more inclined to losing jobs, having their hours reduced and salaries cut. According to the World Economic Forum (2021), young people were left unemployed by the pandemic in far greater numbers than adults and the effects were worse in lower-income countries. This puts youth from South Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) in a worse condition, as even before COVID-19 these countries have had weak socio-economic systems and a high rate of unemployment (Meister, 2020). In post-Soviet countries, youth unemployment has been recognised as a critical issue for the modern labour market of young people worldwide (Mizintseva, et al., 2017). Welfare Monitoring Survey shows that the youth unemployment rate in Georgia remains one of the serious problems for the country (UNICEF, 2017). Even though the economy of the Republic of Moldova has managed to recover after the banking and financial crisis of 2014, COVID-19 led to increased unemployment rate in the country, with many people, including young people, losing their jobs. Only 50% of young people living in rural areas own computers and have internet access in the Republic of Moldova. This means that they have limited (or no) access to information, which makes it even more difficult to find a job. It is predicted that COVID-19 will likely amplify such inequalities and barriers (UNDP, 2020).

Young people from Ukraine highlighted difficulties in obtaining employment during and after quarantine. Young entrepreneurs also notes that their businesses had been either closed or were about to close (UNDP, 2020a). In Georgia COVID-19 distinctly affected young people in the context of employment, especially those who were employed in fields that were severely affected by the pandemic (tourism, restaurant and hotel business, etc.) (UNFPA, 2020).

Despite public and NGO sector initiatives, a large proportion of young people still face severe problems with education and employment. All this has a negative impact on their social inclusion and, if not addressed, may lead to social exclusion, further poorer health and decreased quality of life (Prattley et al, 2019).

3.3 COVID-19 and digitalisation

Digitalisation has been defined as a transformative process accelerated by new technologies, with a high social and economic impact (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, Glossary, 2017).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the youth sector has changed dramatically across the region, with the distinctive rise of online services and activities, undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. The "new normal" has accelerated digitalisation of the youth sector. It has brought about new challenges, threats, barriers, and limits. It also opened up new opportunities. This study acknowledges that not all the challenges identified here were directly caused by COVID-19. However, the pandemic aggravated all of them.

Digitalisation of the youth sector brought additional outreach challenges. According to an OECD note, Internet penetration in the EECA region ranges from 63% of the population in Georgia and Ukraine to 80% in Azerbaijan; fixed broadband subscriptions are below the OECD average in all these countries except Belarus (OECD, 2020). Hence, disadvantaged young people often lack access to digital tools and the Internet. They also lack devices as well as quiet places to use them and connect with other young people (UNICEF, 2020). While online activities offer a great potential to those who can take advantage of them, COVID-19 particularly affects the already marginalised young people who end up more disconnected from youth services and support.

Other obstacles to efficient online youth activities include difficulties in keeping young people motivated and digital fatigue or reluctance to participate. The higher involvement of girls in care and domestic work during COVID-19 limited their capacity to engage in online activities. Youth organisations faced difficulties with reaching some of the most vulnerable young people they used to target – those from disadvantaged (poor, remote or rural) communities, those with disabilities, those speaking minority languages or those with other specific needs. It is evident that COVID-19 has widened the digital divide, since the most vulnerable young people do not have the technological resources or sufficient digital competences to use online platforms or other tools (Escamilla and Lonean, 2021). These limitations can be explained by underdeveloped ICT infrastructure, difficulties adapting to new technologies, and lack of access to such technologies across the region.

According to a policy paper on digital literacy in times of COVID-19 in the Eastern Partnership Countries, 'digital literacy is not widespread across the countries and the majority of the population in the region lacks basic digital skills' (Akhvlediani and Khutkyy, 2020). There is a need for consistent efforts by public authorities and the NGO sector to tackle the digital divide and create access for young people and youth work practitioners to digital literacy programmes.

Youth workers and staff of youth NGOs also lack equipment or competences (Escamilla and Lonean, 2021). Many youth work practitioners have insufficient digital competences to hold online activities with young people and to fully benefit from online training themselves. The forced necessity to embrace online tools at a high speed has negative implications both for their emotional well-being and work productivity.

The quality of digital youth work has also suffered. The COVID-19 pandemic touched every aspect of the youth work field - its activities and event formats, tools and methods, spaces and places (Karsten, 2020). The accelerated digitalisation of youth work generated challenges for youth workers and youth organisations, as they needed to change and adapt their methodologies within a short timeframe and with limited resources and support, especially during the lockdown periods. To assist young people in meeting the main needs and tackling challenges during the pandemic, youth workers and youth organisations struggled to develop new methods and techniques for youth work and non-formal education in online spaces, to find a new distinct place for their services to engage with young people digitally. Youth NGOs tried hard to move their activities online, yet in many cases, there were neither enough digital resources, nor digital competences available to ensure quality and inclusive processes. While many young people having phones are familiar with social media, using online platforms was often a challenge. An interviewee working for a youth organisation recalled spending an entire day explaining potential participants how to use zoom and its facilities.

Funding the shift to online activities were not granted sufficient support, compared to physical activities. Even when activities took place online, the shift often resulted in additional costs for youth organisations, because not all of them had sufficient equipment to cover those activities and not all youth workers were trained to run online programmes. Equipment, safety measures and training costs affected the budgets of youth NGOs. Support (technical, methodological, organisational) to youth and youth work organisations deserves special attention and resources.

There is much concern about safety, privacy and ethics of increasing online activities for young people. State and non-state actors are facing challenges in responding to young people's needs in the online world. Youth workers face safeguarding concerns particularly in work with younger age groups who might access the internet in an unsupervised manner or use less secure online applications. Online youth work activities need to respect the safety

and privacy of young people; both youth workers and young people require competences to manage risks (cyberattacks, cyberbullying, frauds, breach of private data, etc) and safeguard their rights online.

Privacy and ethics, an increase in fake news and disinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic are also challenges linked to the online world in EECA countries. Participation on social networks is high, while the digital competences are less developed; the combination of insufficient digital literacy and the high use of social media risk increasing people's exposure to cyber threats and disinformation (Akhvlediani and Khutkyy, 2020). Young people, more than older age groups, rely on online sources to stay informed. As the online environment is more exposed to disinformation, the risk of young people becoming victims of fake news might be higher. There is a need for activities aimed at helping young people develop their critical thinking and media literacy skills to make them more resilient to fake news and disinformation. Building young people's capacity to report online disinformation is also important.

Another aspect related to the use of digital tools for raising awareness of COVID-19 among young people and building capacity through community engagement and youth-led activism (UNICEF, 2020c). During the COVID-19 pandemic young people connected their communities with national and international institutions through electronic platforms. Social media channels, apps, platforms, and software were used by young people as new digital advocacy environments. There is a need for broader recognition of the innovative forms of online participation as well as for greater support for online activism and journalism.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced significant adjustments in the youth field and gave a strong impetus to developing digital youth work, boosting digital competences of youth workers and improving young people's media literacy. Digital youth work showed potential to engage young people in tackling personal sensitive issues in ways that would not have been possible in the offline format; to reach uninvolved youth groups in consultation processes leading to policy changes; to build online peer support communities, co-construct the online landscape and co-create information content. Online and blended youth work activities should be recognised as valid and beneficial forms of delivering services to young people.

Alongside new challenges and barriers, the pandemic brought about innovations in the youth sector. The move to online could be viewed as a catalyst in the process of creating and promoting innovative and more efficient tools for dealing with youth issues in the digital era and meeting new demands of a knowledge-based society.

4. RESPONSES TOWARDS MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE YOUTH SECTOR ACROSS THE REGION

4.1 International responses

European Commission mobilised an important emergency relief package for the six countries, part of its global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It programmed an ambitious support of over €980 million within the framework of its 'Team Europe' initiative (Bosse et al., 2021). The support places an emphasis on responding to immediate needs, including helping local schools with distance learning or assisting emergency medical services. Importantly, the EU included freedom of expression and media plurality as stand-alone priorities within its COVID-19 funding. This measure followed the calls of civil society to "reconsider the purpose and recipients" of the COVID-19 support and to orient funding to *bona fide* organisations, when states choices are compromised (Marocchi et al., 2020; Bell 2020). Ukraine received the highest amount of support in COVID-19 funds, including allocations for fighting disinformation (€202 according to estimations of Bosse et al., 2021). Several increases of funding were applied during the pandemic for some countries, including for Belarus, as part of the general neighbourhood support. In addition, an EU budget line called Financial Support to Third Parties is allocated for small scale projects (less than €60,000) involving organisations from Eastern Partnership countries and from EU Member states, in cross-regional cooperation (Bosse et al., 2021). Erasmus+ special calls during COVID-19 19 pandemic enabled organisations from the region to participate in larger consortia. Also, support for vaccine was essential.

On April 8, 2020, the Council of Europe published 'Coronavirus: guidance to governments on respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law', a toolkit for governments across Europe on respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law during the COVID-19 crisis. The document focuses on four areas: derogation from the European Convention on Human Rights in times of emergency; respect for the rule of law and democratic principles in times of emergency, including limits on the scope and duration of emergency measures; fundamental human rights standards; protection from crime and the protection of victims of crime, in particular regarding gender-based violence (Council of Europe, 2020). The guidance document was sent to all 47 Council of Europe member states. The European Youth Foundation encouraged organisations to be responsive to the diversity of needs and concerns at the grass-roots level and to propose authentic interventions ('pilot activities') that that reflect local realities. The organisations receiving grants during 2020-2021 were advised to pay particular attention to the social inclusion issues that emerged under COVID-19 in the region.

EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership has been exploring the effects of the pandemic on young people through its research networks and supporting the partner institutions and

other stakeholders in data collection and analysis of their findings COVID, all published on the COVID-19 Knowledge Hub. The Hub integrates research, briefings, studies, reports and initiatives related to the young people and the youth sector in the context of COVID-19. The analyses identify gaps and draw relevant conclusions for European and national initiatives on adapting youth policy and youth work practice to new conditions and needs triggered by the pandemic. Over 120 resources, five thematic briefings, three cross-country policy briefs, two meta-analysis studies, a series of thematic analytical papers and two cross-country analytical reports were produced to inform European youth policy sector initiatives.

International organisations provided responses towards mitigating the impact of COVID-19 in collaboration with national actors. For instance, UNFPA with its national youth sector partners across the region actively ran online campaigns (e.g. #YouthAgainstCOVID) and organised online trainings, webinars and marathons, engaging young people on various topics in the COVID-19 context, such as health, gender equality and stereotypes, personal development, migration and online activism and journalism. In Ukraine, an online flashmob #HealthyChallenge was launched for promoting healthy behaviours among young people during the pandemic.

In Armenia, to ensure sustainability and increase youth employability, a series of online skills development trainings (Skills Labs) were conducted by regional youth centres and civil society organisations with the support of United Nations. In Azerbaijan, UNFPA, in partnership with local youth houses organised a series of online trainings on gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights for adolescents and youth (UNFPA, 2020). UNFPA Moldova, together with the Ministry of Education, conducted an online Youth Talks programme. It also financed a series of trainings and capacity building seminars for youth workers active in youth centres. As an alternative platform of non-formal education, this innovative project focused on personal development and motivation for young people, social media and branding, civic journalism and online youth participation. In Belarus, the EDU-HUB Distance Learning Platform was launched by the Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs. The EDU-HUB provides information and technical support for specialists working with adolescents and young people, including those at risk. The Republican Volunteer Centre implemented with the support of UNICEF the project #AntiCOVID-19, fostering volunteer and coordinators' participation in mitigating the impact of COVID-19. The project included online trainings on preventive measures and hygiene, webinars and online camps for young volunteers.

4.2. Government responses towards mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on the young people and the youth sector

The public health system was a very high priority for the countries which recognised the existence of the pandemic. As other social groups required attention (elderly, repatriated migrants, frontline workers, the unemployed), young people and the youth sector were not a priority. It took time until the dimension and the implications of the pandemic were understood in the youth sector (and not only). An EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership survey suggests that while there were some examples of state sector initiatives addressing the impact of the pandemic on the youth sector, they appear to be the exception rather than the norm (O'Donovan and Zentner, 2020). In particular, the government of Georgia regularly conducted consultations with minority organisations and activists. Within the scope of the Human Rights Council, a communication platform was set up to hold regular meetings with Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs), LGBTQI+ activists, community and international organisations (Government of Georgia, 2020).

Governments had to navigate complex priorities and to respond to pressing needs from highly vulnerable groups. A report of the Georgian government discussed the measures for highly vulnerable groups including, but not limited to women victims of domestic violence; persons with disabilities; children; ethnic, religious, sexual minorities; older people; persons in detention; refugees and asylum seekers. Young people are in all but one of these groups. But young people were not seen as a group in need of early dedicated protection measures, largely because of them not being at a high epidemiological risk.

Maintaining communication with young people and raising their awareness of the COVID-19 situation in their respective countries was essential. Although building trust between the state institutions and young people is crucial, communication during the lockdown was mainly oriented toward the general population rather than targeted at young people (O'Donovan and Zentner, 2020). Prevention campaigns (through hotlines, educational material and videos) were mainly used to inform the general population about the threats of the COVID-19 pandemic and the protection measures. Some countries used unprecedented ways of sending information and updates to the population. For instance, the Georgian government sent personal messages with the latest updates to all residents having mobile numbers registered in Georgia. In Ukraine, the same type of messages and emails are sent via the mobile app 'Diia'.

Although the state sector used some means to communicate with people, communication was mainly one directional (Boskovic and O'Donovan). There is ample evidence that state communication was often contradictory: mixed messaging created confusion, alarm and uncertainty among young people in the region and not only (ETF and UNICEF, 2020). The interviews with representatives of youth organisations suggest that young people were not

invited/ not involved in public discussions about the mitigation and solutions to the pandemic.

Misinformation was one of the biggest obstacles to people's active participation in the COVID-19 response. According to young people surveyed in an ETF and UNICEF study, disinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories had a major emotional impact on young people who felt the contradictions 'created a situation in which fear and hate were easily spread' (ETF and UNICEF, 2020: 39). Youth organisations tried to communicate to young people on COVID-19 and to generate further information campaigns. Their communication was interactive, with increased possibilities for young people to participate. Ultimately, the actions of CSOs raised the expectations towards public authorities, which were asked to communicate more, to do it accurately and tailored to different groups.

The mental health implications on young people were a relatively late discovery, with increasing awareness as the pandemic ran its course. As of mid-2021, this study did not identify any robust state responses to young people's mental health and well-being issues that emerged during the pandemic (e.g. vouchers for psychological counselling, provision of free psychological services on a large scale). Some initiatives although not structural on psycho-emotional well-being were launched. Young people could access national platforms or mobile applications developed through public-private partnerships. They provided information and guidance in the areas of mental health (emotional crisis, depression, and suicidal behaviours), substance and alcohol abuse, protection from sexually transmitted diseases. Most platforms include chat-rooms, hotlines and are available 24/7. For example, in Ukraine, the apps Free2ask, BeWarned were developed for young people's mental well-being.

Several states intervened to enable the large-scale management of volunteer actions. The Ukrainian Volunteer Service and the Ministry of Youth and Sport of Ukraine launched a National Volunteer Platform (UNICEF, 2021) to support the emerging volunteer movements and develop civil society. In Azerbaijan, 2020 was declared the 'Year of Volunteers'. The Coordination Centre of Azerbaijani volunteers was established to promote volunteering among general population and to harmonise the management of volunteering-based service provisions. Online groups and web pages were created to provide information, including a UNICEF website on 'How teenagers can protect their mental health during coronavirus' (OHCHR, 2020). The Youth Agency in Georgia and UNICEF trained over 150 young people to implement activities in their communities (UNICEF, 2020; Boskovic and O'Donovan, 2021). The online youth platform (www. youthvolunteering.ge) was launched, where young people can gather trustful information on topics related to volunteering (UNFPA, 2020).

To mitigate persisting inequalities in access to technologies and digital competences development, governments allocated additional funding for digital competences development and digital platforms and supported the shift to remote learning programmes, especially for formal education. However, sometimes the response came very late. For

instance, in Azerbaijan, there was no formal education from March until September 2020. Even universities had struggled to adapt to the online mode.

Local and national governments, civil and international organisations tried various ways to address education related challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a UNICEF report, ministries played a key role in coordinating donors and mobilising television stations, Telecom and ICT companies to accelerate the provision of digital distance learning (DDL) and reduce the digital divide for disadvantaged groups in most countries of the region (UNICEF, 2020a). In Armenia and Azerbaijan governments quickly authorised additional spending on formal education (UNICEF, 2020a). In Moldova, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research organised delivering online courses for teachers and youth workers on online tools and methods. To support online teaching and learning, Ukraine started broadcasting video lessons via television and using online distance learning platforms. Organisations such as 'EdCamp Ukraine' organised digital professional development and provided peer-to-peer learning opportunities for educators to meet virtually and to share experiences of online education during COVID-19 (www.edcamp.org.ua).

Ukraine organised with the support of UNICEF an information campaign 'Schools, We Are Ready'. The campaign aimed at informing educators, students and their parents about the guidelines for safe learning in the 2020–21 academic year. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and the Ministry of Digital Transformation launched an Online School platform for distance and blended learning that assists teachers and students in staying connected, gaining access to educational materials, and continuing teaching and learning processes even when educational institutions stayed closed (https://lms.e-school.net.ua/). Armenia provided training modules for teachers of the technical colleges, in cooperation with the National Centre for Educational Technology Development and local NGOs (EuNeighbours, 2020). In Georgia, within 'The New School Model', 600 000 Microsoft Office 365 user accounts were created for Georgian school students, teachers and school administration. The Government and the Public Broadcaster of Georgia launched the "TV School" project to ensure wide access to education (GoG, 2020). However, for those from rural areas and those without internet access or digital technologies, such opportunities were difficult to avail of (DIF, 2020; UNFPA, 2020). It was not possible to introduce different platforms and approaches on a regional level, which could have prevented the closure of youth centres (that could not work during Covid lock-down) and would have raised the qualification of practising youth workers

The government of Georgia offered one time-limited tuition coverage to young people facing economic difficulties, mostly from vulnerable families and with high academic scores. Yet, it is not clear how this group of young people will be able to fund their education in the future. The situation in Armenia is similar. Even though the Government reimbursed tuition fees for graduate students and offered a full or partial subsidy of student loans, it is still unclear what will happen in the long run (KPMG, 2020). The government of Azerbaijan also

provided scholarships for students from socially disadvantaged families and beneficiaries of social allowances funded by the state.

Although governments took various steps to support the economy and business (such as direct subsidies to companies, grants for entrepreneurs), they paid less attention and did not take into account more specific factors related to youth employment, such as the lack of adoption of technologies on a local level, that leads to the alienation and deprivation of young people from rural areas (ILO, 2020). Governments across the region have not yet developed programmes for remote jobs opportunities, supporting young people in entering labour market and acquiring competences for digital transition. Nevertheless, some national platforms offered career counselling to young people in learning more about the labour market, about ways to use remote jobs opportunities or even to find jobs and internships, such as "I do it myself" (Belarus) or "Kolba Lab" (Armenia). In Armenia a project called Future Skills and Jobs for Armenia's Rural Youth was launched. It aims to enhance employability and promote self-employment and entrepreneurship for the most vulnerable groups of young people living in rural areas of Armenia, with an offer of agile skill building especially in the IT sector and opening remote jobs opportunities.

4.3. Youth organisation responses towards mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on young people and the youth sector

Youth organisations started by responding to the short-term needs and by filling states' gaps in providing hands-on assistance. At the outbreak of the pandemic, they focused on providing necessary services, while struggling to maintain their operations in a safe mode. confinement Many youth organisations catered to the needs of vulnerable groups, supplied missing personal protection equipment, supported health professionals, substituted public services (EaP CSF, 2020d). They raised awareness about the virus and countered misinformation. Although many volunteers were not able to support NGOs, COVID-19 allowed for new forms of youth participation and organising. Various volunteering initiatives were developed by young people in the region. In Belarus organisations were influential in setting up youth information campaigns and bringing the profile of youth participation higher in the public eyes. In Belarus and Ukraine, many young people showed their readiness to support the elderly in everyday actions or in accessing digital content (O'Donovan and Zentner, 2020).

Although the pandemic outbreak had its negative impact on the delivery of many activities, youth organisations showed flexibility in the new reality and adjusted their activities. They did so by searching to apply the COVID-related hygiene rules when offline and by organising interactive virtual events.

Examples of responses to the COVID-19 by the NGO sector in the field of digitalisation, include:

- producing videos to support young people and their communities;
- collecting information on COVID-19 and support services, and making it available online;
- collecting toolkits to support online youth work;
- providing online platforms for youth work practitioners;
- organising online activities to foster youth engagement and activism;
- organising webinars and online trainings to familiarise young people and youth work practitioners with different online and digital tools.

Youth representative bodies, youth NGOs and youth activists were involved in running online awareness raising campaigns. They offered information on the COVID-19 situation in their countries, disseminating World Health Organisation guidelines, focusing on the importance of physical distancing and proper measures to stop the spread of the virus, combating misinformation and fake news related to the pandemic. The NGO sector, in comparison with the state, sought a more interactive and innovative approach in supporting young people, sharing information and feedback as well as opening-up a dialogue using digital media (Boskovic and O'Donovan, 2021).

Youth organisations and youth activists tracked down fake news and tackled disinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination. They ensured that young people had access to valid, verified, and meaningful information by disseminating narratives on COVID-19 protection measures and guidelines. Youth organisations and youth activists supported their communities by raising awareness and keeping a positive spirit through social media platforms. The NGO sector widely engaged young people as communicators and influencers through online campaigns. The Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs shared stories from young people around the world to draw attention to the problems of young people and highlight their key role in fighting and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to UNFPA Moldova, active young people continued to participate in the life of their respective communities taking part in actions to raise community awareness by signing petitions, participating in face-to-face (when possible) and online public consultations, and volunteering to help the elderly (UNFPA Moldova, 2020a). The 'Restart' student initiative (Armenia) mobilised university students across the country to raise awareness about COVID-19 and to inform people about how to stay safe. As part of this campaign, a team of volunteers made videos, distributed posters and flyers with information about preventing the spread of the virus. UNICEF, in partnership with the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine, initiated the Children and Youth Award - 2020 Best Community Initiative. Its winners were chosen from more than 70 youth projects and practices, implemented by local

communities to find solutions to youth problems, such as social restrictions and access to rights and services (Boskovic and O'Donovan, 2021).

Youth NGOs offered young people online support and counselling, including counselling on legal regulations and consequences of violating the imposed measures. They adapted to the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis by reorganising their engagement online and providing tools for mental health support. UNFPA Belarus organised online marathons for adolescents and young people, focusing on young people from small towns and remote areas, to explore and discuss how to cope with emotional stress related to COVID-19 and with existing gender stereotypes, which negatively affect young people.

Youth NGOs offered online educational and entertaining content, including chats, online youth camps, virtual hiking tours, pub quizzes, online gaming, virtual discussion groups, online competitions, hackathons. NGOs provided online alternatives for physical activities (stay-at-home-activities) and sport during confinement. Young volunteers assisted teachers and educators by transferring and translating educational material for broader online use, or by providing tools for physical activity (e.g., online physical activity games, fitness bingo, virtual workouts, breathing and yoga webinars) during confinement. Last but not least, youth NGOs organised online trainings to support digital competences development of the specialists in the youth sector. In Ukraine an educational and mentoring program called "Prokachay" was launched to increase the youth work quality in the youth centres. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the format of the project was changed and focused on training the youth centres staff how to work with young people online.

While these actions receive a high level of visibility and public acknowledgement, the implications for the organisations embracing new functions are less explicit. According to EaP CSF (2020d), the new circumstances led to a 'sharp increase' in demand for NGO services and demanded adaptations in their *modus operandi*. This included remote ways of managing volunteers, increased financial pressures, loss of personnel and offices. As a consequence of the emerging public health concerns and of the new funding priorities, some organisations ceased their previous advocacy work and embarked on providing practical assistance while searching to respect the hygiene and distancing rules. Despite the tendency to celebrate instances of resilience, it became obvious in time that meaningful youth participation could not be achieved through online activities and that offline work, even in small groups, is preferable when the context allows. In many ways, young people from the region found it hard to manage school demands, family obligations, and conflicting political pressures of the time and to engage in youth activities. The challenges of involving 'hard to reach' groups (notably girls, young people in rural areas, ethnic minorities and young people with disabilities) were often, insurmountable.

The pandemic further limited the already fragile dialogue between governments and CSOs in the region: many previous initiatives being put on hold and the monitoring activities

obstructed (EaP CSF, 2020d). Despite the new priorities and the precarious financial situations, some CSOs continued advocacy on a range of issues, including respect for the rule of law, transparency, countering propaganda, and public spending monitoring. Civil society organisations in all six Eastern Partnership countries signalled concerns on the rule of law and the respect for fundamental rights during the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular in relation to the freedom of expression, access to information, personal privacy (EaP CSF, 2020c). In Moldova, for instance, a law allowing state censorship was stopped early through advocacy from civil society. Many organisations were active in holding governments to account.

A positive implication is the higher visibility of the civil sector in general and the youth sector in particular. Belarus civil society experienced an unprecedented vibrant growth, especially in the context of poor government ability to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, and its greater recourse to repression before presidential elections (EaP CSF, 2020d). Several youth information campaigns and actions for elderly support made volunteering among young people more visible (Boskovic and O'Donovan, 2021; O'Donovan and Zentner, 2020). Organisations in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine successfully took a public stance against insufficient government measures and even in countering un-democratic process, further demonstrating the capacity of the sector to influence democratic change.

However, youth initiatives during the pandemic did not come in a vacuum. They built on previous participatory experiences and were highly dependent on pre-existent levels of organising. Geo-politics and location matter and this showed in the large discrepancies between capital/ major cities and towns/ rural areas, characteristic of the region. Often, there are severe disproportions in state funding for youth structures of participation, depending on the region (e.g. Moldova). Situations where several organisations (including Gongos) and people had a privileged relationship with the state and received disproportionate funding were often reported in interviews.

The volunteering infrastructure in the capital cities is disproportionately advanced in comparison with small towns and rural areas. The culture of participation and volunteering is strongly influenced by the degree of urbanisation. Despite all efforts, the COVID-19 crisis revealed that the youth sector in the region had been unprepared for the shift to digitalisation, and the pandemic aggravated inequities among different groups of young people. Challenges of preparedness, quality, and access emerged everywhere. This was an abrupt change to a new reality requiring young people, youth work practitioners, and decision makers to adjust rapidly.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE YOUTH SECTOR RECOVERY FROM COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on all youth policy dimensions. Mitigating the harms caused by COVID-19 requires co-ordinated cross-sectional efforts as well as tailored measures by the international community, national, local authorities and non-governmental organisations. Building on the assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the youth sector and young people, this study advances a number of policy recommendations to support institutional responses to the crisis. The proposed ways forward are built around the main themes the study explored: mental health and well-being, youth participation and volunteering, social inclusion, digitalisation. The rationale is that the policy stakeholders across the region have a unique opportunity not only to tackle the immediate implications of the crisis, but also to adopt policies aimed at achieving long-term structural changes.

Mental health and well-being

Young people's mental health and well-being has to be at the core of recovery agendas. Governments must take into account the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's mental health and well-being and integrate mental health issues into the policy response. To provide remediation measures and mitigate the negative psychological impact of social isolation and physical distancing while new restriction measures are likely, digital solutions may be a first response available. Digital interventions, such as online counselling, chats and other initiatives may help to promote better e-health services, and cover specific needs of young people. Supporting young people in keeping their jobs, keeping them in schools and educational institutions greatly contributes to the improvement of their mental health and well-being. It is also important to develop more accessible mental health support. Mental health services can be provided based on school infrastructure and via mental health hotlines. Mental health trainings and consultations should be offered to parents and school practitioners to garner more support for young people. It is important to strengthen young people's resilience and get them more prepared for future turbulences. To respond to the damaging effect of the COVID-19 crisis on young people's mental health, the youth sector has to start talking about the mental health issues with them, encouraging young people to seek to specialist support when they show symptoms. It is important to have education programmes for youth workers focusing on mental health issues and how to effectively use referral services for mental health.

Youth participation

Youth participation requires stronger public visibility. For this study, it was difficult to infer statements on *youth* organisations based on reports on the broader civil sector. Mapping the contributions of youth organisations and young people requires data that speaks about youth organisations and young people *as such*. Organisations working with young people or on their behalf should promote more their identity as *youth* organisations. A next step would be to discern the internal diversity of the youth sector, as different youth organisations are active in different areas, have different managerial structures, size, history and may face different challenges.

Since a lot of youth organising is informal, there is a need for a better understanding of youth participation (including activism) outside officially and formally registered organisations. The generational lenses for reading political participation are few and normative (youth turnout to vote, for instance). Yet, in Azerbaijan and Belarus, young people pay a high price for standing up against undemocratic choices of their governments. Protesters and victims are rarely acknowledged as 'young people' even in CSO reports. For this study, for instance, researchers looked for the age of the activists mentioned in media and reports. One recommendation is for youth organisations to advocate for acknowledging the identity of activists and victims as *young*. It is often that innocent civilians, protesters, activists, freelance journalists or bloggers, victims of political repression referred to in the media or public accounts are young people. This advocacy on the age of those affected would also address the crisis of legitimacy regarding young people's actions. This would also counterbalance the narrative that de-politicises their behaviours (see the negative labelling of young people as turbulent, disobedient).

The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated that local problems may have global implications. It showed the potential of local youth organisations and put local actions for global change into the spotlight. This is an opportunity to reconsider the current governance models and modes of collaboration between citizens' needs, CSOs and authorities (Kascian and Zhechkov, 2021). There is a need for youth organisations to focus on bottom-up, participatory research and activities involving young people and to act based on their demands. Partnering with young people during and after the COVID-19 crisis in the design of the recovery plans ranks high in many studies reviewed (UN, 2020; UNFPA Moldova, 2020). Young people expect from youth sector policymakers to react to issues that have not been traditionally seen within its remit. This calls for rethinking the notion of youth issues and the mission of the youth sector in ways that go beyond conventional views. COVID-19 increased young people's awareness of the interconnectedness among people, the problem of environmental degradation, the need for global solidarity, as well as a greater understanding of issues related to power, geographic and gender divisions in society (ETF and UNICEF, 2020). Young people became increasingly aware of their role in shaping

environmental policies and in advocating for human rights and the rule of law. The youth sector from the region should keep these enduring issues on agenda.

Youth organisations beyond the capital and big cities should be supported and further developed. Although this may not bring about the scale of youth participation that is customary to urban projects, the number of participants should not be an end in itself (Volkogonova and Savinich, 2019). For instance, a pre-COVID survey in Belarus concluded that 'people aged 15-24 in rural areas are those most interested and ready to participate in civic activities', yet they have not been approached to get involved (Volkogonova and Savinich, 2019). In Armenia organisations' attempts to involve young people from rural areas had to overcome a severe lack of digital devices and competences. In Moldova investment in programmes involving young people from rural areas was deemed necessary in a 2020 structured consultation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP CSF, 2020f). Such outreach processes would contribute to engaging 'unorganised young people' and go beyond the usual suspects in promoting young people's participation in the Erasmus+ programme, for instance (EaP CSF, 2020f).

There are trade-offs associated with the CSOs' move towards service provision at the expense of human rights advocacy and watchdog actions. Other *soft* issues, including gender and environmental justice, cultural diversity, social inclusion, went backstage. There is, obviously a large heterogeneity *within* the youth sector, as not all youth organisations face the same problems. Some are better able to navigate restrictive environments. Further mapping of the field is needed, in order to add nuance to a narrative that sees youth organisations as either victims or resilient survivors against adversity. Although the impact of COVID-19 is important, inferring causality is not always easy, as many challanges were pre-existent.

COVID-19 raised the profile of young volunteers. Given the expected economic hardship in the COVID-recovery period, it is uncertain whether and to what extent young people will continue to get involved in volunteering. Changes in the understanding of volunteering are likely; organisations face staff shortages which risks replacements of paid personnel with volunteers. The likelihood of instrumentalising volunteering for employment purposes may increase, in a process that strips volunteering of its civic added value.

New barriers and exclusions from European and international youth events are likely. As of the end of 2021, the vaccine sharing mechanism and COVAX did not lead to robust results and other waves of infection with emerging variants of the virus pose concerns. Ukraine and Georgia for instance, have the lowest average availability of vaccines in the Black Sea region (PMCG, 2021). New forms of exclusions are likely to follow, based on the pandemic risk of the home country. In addition, the vaccination status, including the significant use of vaccines not approved in the EU may define the possibilities of learning mobility. These

changes need to be considered in the design of European and international youth events, to avoid further barriers or exclusion of the young people and youth workers from the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk factors generally associated with poor mental health; financial insecurity, unemployment, and anxiety. These are common to almost all countries during the pandemic. Mental health of the whole population, including of young people, has worsened significantly. Many young people lost their jobs and experienced financial difficulties that harmed their mental well-being. In this sense, protecting their jobs and income can be considered as an indirect measure tackling people's mental well-being. The mental distress of unemployed young people and their financial insecurity can be addressed by the Youth sector can play a role in strengthening the transversal and life skills for young people, supporting them to better adapt to the changing labour market. Youth organisations can work together with policymakers to improve mental health support for young people not in employment, education or training.

Social Inclusion

New programmes for supporting employment and entrepreneurship of young people, providing them with reliable sources of income, keeping them economically active and helping them develop new vocational skills and competencies should be rolled out. Quality jobs programmes and youth guarantees are needed for young people in sectors particularly affected by the lockdown measures. The new initiatives must keep young people economically active, getting them into work in the fields less harmed by the pandemic, supporting them in development of new vocational skills and competencies.

The funding of youth organisations must support cooperation and networking between them and not encourage competition. Development of youth infrastructure and spaces (e.g. youth centres, social centres) where young people can meet and socialise should be encouraged. Equipping these spaces with computers and internet connection can help those young people who have no or limited access to these resources at home.

Digitalisation

Governments should invest financial resources in youth sector digitalisation as well as in the development of digital literacy for young people and youth work practitioners. Considering the increased long-term needs caused by the pandemic, including risks and new forms of exclusion, financial resources should be allocated for all young people to have access to ICT tools and participate equally in online activities. In this context, investments in developing digital literacy both for young people and of youth workers are needed. Long-term policies and resources should be invested in expanding youth work programmes and training youth

workers in using digital tools to achieve a broader outreach and support the most vulnerable young people. Additionally, authorities could develop digital accessibility standards at national level. These should ensure that all digital tools and platforms used are operable, safe and accessible. Broader policy processes holding companies accountable for their online services is part of this process.

Investment in high quality digital youth work and youth services should be supported after the pandemic. Interviewees expressed a need for assistance in developing standards for online youth work. The EU-Council of Europe partnership could play a role in proposing quality standards for online youth work and for blended youth work activities. Guides and handbooks may help practitioners to build on the added value of the digital youth work also when considering their activities in blended or in off-line formats. Interviewees strongly demand that internationally funded activities allow for small physical events, where possible and within COVID-related restrictions. The importance of small offline events should not be underestimated.

Involvement of young people as partners in consultations on recovery planning is a must. In the scope of the recovery strategy aimed at overcoming the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need to establish closer cross-sectoral co-operation and co-ordination between national, local authorities, CSOs, ICT companies, the private sector and young people themselves. National support measures and programmes will have a greater impact and coverage if young people and youth organisations are invited as partners in planning for the recovery. To better plan policy-driven initiatives and interventions, it is important to collect information about the needs of different target groups of young people, about the ways how they have been coping with the pandemic challenges. This applies to those who have withdrawn from education and the labour market.

Interviews suggested that the online participation depreciated the quality of the processes. Often policy decisions were taken without sufficient consultations, as the administrative structures were insufficiently prepared for taking place online. As argued by an interviewee, 'the COVID accentuated decision-makers' ignorance of young people'. There is a need to (re)capacitate decision makers on how to involve young people in ways that are meaningful and not tokenistic.

Finally, research, data gathering and analysis should continue to build the picture of the impact of COVID-19 on young people and the youth sector in these countries and inform youth sector policies, programmes and initiatives to ensure young people actively support and benefit from post-pandemic recovery.

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