



ASSESSING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG PEOPLE IN GEORGIA

Report

Prepared by ACT Impact for
UNFPA

Tbilisi
November, 2020



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ACRONYMS

Gig economy	Demand-based economy where short-term contracts or part-time work is common instead of permanent employment
ACT Impact	Analysis and Consulting Team
Key informant	The person purposefully selected for an in-depth interview who represents the most informed group of individuals on the study topic
COVID-19	Coronavirus pandemic diseases caused by a novel Coronavirus
NEET	Individuals who do not work, do not study and are not involved in any kind of training
EU SURE	The European Instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment risks in an Emergency
IDFI	Institute for Development of Freedom of Information
ILO	International Labour Organization
UNFPA	UN Population Fund

INTRODUCTION

The assessment report has been prepared within the framework of the large-scale study "***Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Young People in Georgia***" planned within an initiative by the Government of Georgia. The research was prepared by ACT Impact with the support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Country Office in Georgia.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the UNFPA.

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1. BACKGROUND

Young people are a crucial resource for the country's development, since they can push for changes and actively participate in transformation. Supporting the youth in this process, equipping them with relevant knowledge or skills, and encouraging them is necessary to achieve results. Thus, studying the impact of what is going on in the country as well as globally regarding youth is important. This way, the direction of intense work, the stakeholders that should take responsibility for particular issues, and plans for ensuring the active engagement of youth in public processes can be defined. Naturally, in this context, it is of particular importance to study the impact of COVID-19 on young citizens and to identify measures to be taken by the government to support youth in the crisis.

There is no doubt COVID-19 is the most serious crisis of the past decade and will inevitably leave its mark on the economy both globally and on the local level. The same can be said on human rights protection, which is at risk. In addition, the crisis disproportionately and severely impacts the everyday life of those who belonged to vulnerable groups even before the pandemic started. Health-related risks, food safety issues and poverty are the challenges thousands of families all over the world have to face on a daily basis. Together with these challenges, now the universe has to fight against a new crisis, under which the final goal of actions carried out by states and governments is to protect lives, ensure the right to health, and save the economy. It can be concluded that these are the main goals of the measures taken by countries to cope with the pandemic, while the measures taken are altered by countries in compliance with a change in the COVID situation.

When the COVID-19 crisis started, the government of Georgia took active steps to protect various groups of the society. A large portion of the government's anti-crisis plan was dedicated to the protection of citizens and their financial support. Similar to other countries, it is difficult to cover every group equally in Georgia. In addition, it is clear that the crisis would not affect every group equally. Taking this into account, it is important to analyze how Georgia responded to challenges faced by various groups because of the pandemic, how the state ensured access to information, education and different services, and how it managed to respond to the needs of various groups.

The goal of the presented study was to assess the socio-economic impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on youth. To this end, it was deemed important to assess not only the impact of the pandemic on youth, but the response of the government to the needs of young people. The effectiveness of the response and important steps to be taken in the future were defined in the research objectives. The given assessment in this context touches multiple important topics.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Similar to other countries, the Coronavirus pandemic significantly affected young residents of Georgia. The state had a concrete response to the challenges that emerged in this new reality. What are the challenges that were particularly important for young residents of Georgia, how did the state respond to them, and what are the main steps that need to be taken in the near future in order to respond to the said challenges? These are the major questions answered in the report.

According to the study results, the following main conclusions can be made:

■ Education

As the study demonstrated, the affect of COVID-19 on young people was among the most serious in the field of education. The following major issues emerging in the field of education for young people were identified:

- ▶ Challenges related to online learning that affected the effectiveness of this format were related to (1) the readiness of students, (2) the readiness of academic personnel, and (3) technical issues. A large portion of *students* did not appear to be ready to consider an online format for learning as a comprehensive study process, which resulted them perceiving the study process as less serious. In addition to this, the technical skills of a certain part of *academic personnel* did not turn out to be relevant for online teaching. These issues are combined with problematic *technical issues* related to online classes. Namely, (1) limited access to internet and (2) low access to material and the technical appliances required to attend online classes. Apart from the fact that access to internet differs by geographic location, another challenge was that due to limited financial resources, many young people still did not have access to the internet. Added to the fact that a certain part of students did not own a personal computer, their involvement in the online learning process was hindered. Another problem was that several family members switched to an online learning and remote working regime simultaneously, which left little room for students. All of the given problems affected the effectiveness of online classes in general and reduced the possibility to receive a quality education.
- ▶ The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic is important in the context of internationalization. Regarding the key informants' assessment, during the pandemic, the state had to manage the process that referred to the departure of Georgian and foreign students abroad or their return to Georgia. During this process, through special charter flights, the state organized the return of Georgian students studying abroad to their homeland in the spring and their departure abroad in September. The state also ensured the departure of foreign students for the spring term and their return to Georgia for the autumn term. In order to regulate this process, webpage www.stopcov.ge has a registration form for foreign students willing to arrive in Georgia. Completing this form is compulsory and it enables the state to manage the process of foreign students' arrival in the country. The key informants participating in the study consider the existence of such a mechanism to be crucial for the effective management of the process.
- ▶ Regardless of the challenges related to online classes, the study also identified that this format has its pros. Namely, *saving time and financial resources, and the possibility to more easily combine studying with other activities* were named as advantages of online learning, due to which young respondents of the study deem it important to switch to a hybrid model of education. The importance of a hybrid format for employed young people and young mothers was particularly emphasized.
- ▶ As the study revealed, the state's response to challenges emerging in the field of education was important in different aspects. Namely, in terms of *switching to the online learning model, organizing the payment of tuition fees, and managing the departure/arrival process from/to abroad*. Even though problems in all of these processes were stressed, as assessed by study participants the state's response to these challenges was effective. In the context of education, key informants of the study¹ particularly mentioned and positively assessed the enrollment of *entrants living in occupied territories* in higher education institutions without entrance exams. If before the pandemic, future students living in occupied territories could enroll in various institutes of Georgia only for a bachelor's program, this

¹ The person purposefully selected for in-depth interview who represents the most informed group of individuals on the study topic.

year they were allowed to enroll at the master's level as well. Apart from the elimination of barriers related to the restriction of movement, it is noteworthy that the state also provides full scholarships for students from the occupied territories. This is important as it gives more young people from the occupied territories an opportunity to study (to continue studying) at higher education institutions in Georgia.

■ Employment

As the study revealed, the Coronavirus pandemic particularly affected young people in the context of employment. Impacts in this direction differ by youth groups. In particular, the impact was different for young people who (1) *continue working*, (2) *lost a job during the pandemic*, and (3) *did not work before the pandemic*.

- ▶ Some young people switched to a remote working regime during the pandemic, while others continued working offline. As the study revealed, the main challenges related to *offline work* were related to the commute to and from the workplace, which was caused by restrictions set in force on the movement of intercity transport.
- ▶ Regarding *online work*, the study revealed that working hours were extended for young people when working online, and they had to work much more than in a traditional format. Another problem related to working online that is still topical implies the emotional and physical (not having enough space at home to fulfill every roles) difficulty of fulfilling various roles (mother, child, employee) simultaneously within the same space. It is worth mentioning that the transformation of the home into an office appeared to be particularly difficult for young parents, and primarily for women. Combining online work and being a mother when kindergartens do not work, schools are in an online format and a nanny service is not affordable for everyone makes many young mothers consider quitting their jobs. This increases the probability that the unemployment rate for women will increase.
- ▶ According to the study results, the pandemic has had a major impact on the economic activity of youth, as the majority of youth were employed in fields that were severely affected by the pandemic (tourism, restaurant and hotel business, etc.). Apart from the fact that some young people lost their job, according to the assessment of study participants, some young people also lost the opportunity to receive an education as they could no longer pay their tuition fee. Regardless of the mechanisms offered by the state in terms of tuition fees at the beginning of the crisis, it is difficult to define how this group of young people will be able to fund their education, as the negative impact of the pandemic will reflect on upcoming academic years. Respectively, in a more long-term perspective, it was deemed important to offer specific mechanisms of overcoming the crisis and connect young people to jobs.
- ▶ As for those young people who *did not work before the pandemic*, the reality has become even more difficult because of the ambiguity of employment perspectives. Unemployment is one of the most serious challenges for the country. According to National Statistics Office of Georgia, as of the third quarter of 2020, the country's unemployment rate is 11.9%.² As for the assessment of the population, according to one of the studies published in August of this year, seven out of ten inquired respondents believe that the biggest problem for the Georgian economy is unemployment (67%).³ Unemployment was the most severe problem in the country according to the study conducted in 2019, too (48%).⁴ These challenges get even more complicated because of the impact of the pandemic on the labor market, where lots of young people lost a job but managed to gain some working experience. Compared to this category of youth, the employment chances for young people who did not work before the pandemic and have very little to no working experience are even smaller.
- ▶ The financial allowance envisaged in the anti-crisis plan for those temporary unemployed and on unpaid leave, including young people, was identified as a more or less effective measure taken by the state. However, as the study revealed, informally employed citizens were left behind for the allowance package. One of the main reasons for this problem was that some employers thought that the state would use certificates issued to informally employed individuals as a certain punishing measure against employers. This adds up with the fact that informally employed citizens were not particularly active in defending their labor rights.

² <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/38/dasakmeba-da-umushevroba>

³ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2019 Georgia. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/na2020ge/ISECUNMP/>

⁴ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, August 2020. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/cb2019ge/IMPISS1/>

- ▶ It is worth mentioning that young respondents as well as key informants stressed that various human rights were not violated, but that they were limited. According to their main point, the limitation of rights was necessary because of the situation. Respectively, when speaking about the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on rights, it is reasonable to pay attention to the limitation of rights. As the study demonstrated, the right to *free movement and quality education* were the most limited for young people. As for a violation of rights, in this context study participants stressed the *violation of labor rights* only. It is worth mentioning, that as noted by young participants, and as in the case of every other right, employers were forced to limit employees' rights. Accordingly, those respondents believe that the situation did not qualify as a violation of rights, but as a limitation of rights. However, according to a second discourse reported by young respondents, employers violated labor rights in the form of firing employees, giving them unpaid leave or terminating contracts without compensation. As assessed by key informants, lots of employers dishonestly took advantage of the force majeure situation and actually violated the labor rights of many employees.

■ Social connections, health and other impacts

- ▶ As the study demonstrated, another serious challenge imposed on young residents was regarding limited *social connections* as well as *limited physical activity* during the pandemic. Young respondents of the study believe that minimized social connections resulted from the regulations negatively impacted their psycho-emotional state. Moreover, they believe that the negative effects of restrictions will be more noticeable in the future and pose various threats relating to the mental health of young people. In addition, an additional factor affecting mental health was limited physical activity.
- ▶ The special importance of physical activity was stressed within the study by key informants, where they positively assess the development of *protocols for professional sports, fitness, gymnastics, and swimming pools*.
- ▶ Young respondents of the study did not stress a particular impact of the pandemic on health or challenges in terms of the accessibility of healthcare services. It turned out to be difficult for them to identify impacts on health that occurred for young people, specifically as a result of the pandemic. Moreover, it was noted that healthcare services were available, including healthcare services abroad, despite travel restrictions. The only topics young participants identified in the context of health were related to stress levels caused by limited social interactions and predicted problems in terms of mental health in the future. Key informants noted that many medical services, as well as the provision of medications to various groups, were more or less promptly tackled and lots of services were made available in an online format in a short period of time.

■ Information

- ▶ For young people, sources of information on the regulations or other decisions with regard to the pandemic are quite diverse. Apart from traditional and new media (television, internet pages, social media), important sources of information include SMS notifications, family members and workplaces.
- ▶ *Facebook* from social networks and www.stopcov.ge from internet portals were named as sources of information. It is noteworthy that as assessed by key informants participating in the study, social networks would most likely be the main source of information for young people. However, as young respondents reported, one of the ultimate sources of information on regulations and decisions with regard to the pandemic was television, as this source was believed to be highly trustworthy. As assessed by young people, lots of fake news was disseminated all over the internet, largely in social networks, raising questions about the credibility of information. This is in contrast to television, where information undergoes a certain filter before being aired, and the probability of sharing fake news via television is lower.
- ▶ One of the main sources of information was the *workplace* for employed young people. In addition, important actors included *family members*, for whom television acted as the main source of information.

- ▶ Even though as assessed by young respondents and key informants, information on regulations or decisions was widely accessible through various sources, challenges still appeared. When speaking about challenges, young participants of the study stressed the *awareness level of citizens representing ethnic minorities*. As the study demonstrated, information was accessible for those who speak Georgian, but for those who have difficulty understanding Georgian, receiving information on regulations or decisions relating to the pandemic was and still is problematic. As for the distribution of information leaflets and flyers in regions containing ethnic minorities, which was mostly assessed as a good example by key informants, young participants of the study noted that the activity was a little belated. It was also noted that leaflets and flyers presented general recommendations on hygiene requirements and rules, which does not address the issue of access to information that is updated daily.

■ Steps to be taken by the state in the near future

As demonstrated by the study results, in order to respond to the needs of young people, it will be important to take steps in multiple directions. Particular attention was paid to the following issues:

- ▶ Starting work on a *hybrid education model* is one of the needs identified during the Coronavirus pandemic. As assessed by young respondents, even though exclusively online education is less effective, online learning has its advantages (saving time and financial resources, easily combining learning with other activities), which will be important to utilize in the future. Respondents stressed the importance of this model for employed citizens and young mothers. As noted by one of the respondents, the state has already started thinking about switching to a hybrid education model, but specific steps have not been taken yet.
- ▶ *The improvement of technical skills of academic personnel* was identified as one of the most important steps to take. It was emphasized that in order to increase the effectiveness of online learning, it is necessary to equip lecturers with the technical skills and knowledge relevant for the new model of learning. As the current digital competencies of academic personnel are fully or partially irrelevant, taking steps in this direction was deemed important.
- ▶ Together with re-assessing the format of education, the study identified that it is important to *re-assess employment opportunities*. In particular, in terms of employment, respondents stressed the increased role of digitalization and the high probability of increased demand for specific skills relating to digitalization. The role of youth was emphasized in this process. As skills and knowledge relevant for the new reality are more accumulated in the younger generation, their employment opportunities and competitiveness may increase. Respectively, supporting young people in this aspect (e.g. the acquisition and improvement of digital skills) was deemed important.
- ▶ *The development of a specific strategy by the state* to support the employment of young residents was deemed important as the said strategy would generate employment opportunities for youth. In this context, respondents believe it is important that the strategy of the Employment Agency point out provisions focused on youth specifically. In order to support youth, the formation of a special fund is suggested, which would provide funding exclusively to the initiatives of young residents. This way, the younger generation will not have to compete with older generations who already have experience working and retrieving financial resources. Respectively, the probability of funding youth initiatives will increase.
- ▶ *Understanding the importance of labor formalization* during the pandemic was emphasized by study participants, and it was noted that the state needs to start taking specific steps in this direction together with stakeholders.
- ▶ As the study demonstrated, offering various services in an online format to individuals with special needs had quite a positive effect during the pandemic. Respectively, it is suggested to start working on the *modification of certain services* (e.g. therapy courses for disabled children). It is quite realistic that the utilization of said services in a range of cases will be effective even in the post-crisis period. The availability of such services may increase access for those who cannot otherwise receive this service because of geographic location. In addition, recipients of the service may prefer the online format under certain circumstances and timing (e.g. they could attend therapy sessions online if

the weather is bad instead of physically travelling to a place). In addition, the availability of online services will increase the involvement of parents in the therapy process, which will positively affect the effectiveness of the process.

- ▶ According to study results, the pandemic made it clear that attitudes towards *mental health problems* need to change on the political level. Namely, it was suggested to connect some healthcare programs with social programs so that citizens with mental health problems will not be necessarily transferred to psychiatric clinics. Instead, they could be provided with the relevant service locally, at family type small-group homes.
- ▶ The fulfilment of existing regulations by citizens was identified as one of the more serious challenges. Thus, it was deemed important for the state to take specific measures that would ensure the *strict monitoring of the fulfillment of regulations*. As the study revealed, this is particularly important in regions.
- ▶ Speaking of awareness and the spread of information, study participants deem it important to take specific steps *in order to increase the accessibility of information in ethnic minorities' native languages*. In order to enable Georgian citizens who have a hard time understanding information in the Georgian language to receive the latest news promptly, it is important for television to allocate time and provide the most up-to-date information in ethnic minorities' native languages on a daily basis.
- ▶ The study also identified that it is important for the state to take specific steps *to involve youth in various activities*. One important aspect of youth engagement is volunteer work, implying the increased involvement of young people in various volunteer activities. Another aspect is to involve young citizens in the decision-making process, especially in cases when the decisions refer specifically to youth.

New opportunities

According to study results, even though the Coronavirus pandemic posed various challenges to the country, it also exposed new opportunities. The following opportunities were stressed by study participants:

- ▶ As assessed by young respondents of the study, one of main fields where new opportunities emerged is *digital sales*. Increased demand on online sales resulted in increased demand on *delivery services*. Thus, employment opportunities in these two fields increased for young people. It was stressed that while delivery services were already available in large cities and simply expanded, online sales with relevant services became available in small towns only during the pandemic.
- ▶ Another field in which some positive effects can be noticed is *agriculture*. As noted by young respondents of the study, people in general and young residents especially became interested in agriculture, and started implementing various activities that can potentially lead to positive outcomes in a long-term perspective. This may result in the increase in the number of young people employed/ self-employed in this field.
- ▶ *Digitalization of generations* is another positive effect of the pandemic that was identified within the study. On one hand, many services saw the need of digitalization and accelerated this process. On the other hand, it became obvious that digitalization is important not only for youth, but for older generations, too. Processes taking place in education partially responded to this challenge, but study respondents believe that the state needs to continue working in this direction and actively help older citizens adapt to the new reality.
- ▶ One more opportunity mentioned by young respondents is *increased accessibility to various learning courses*. Through this opportunity, education has become much more accessible and global during the pandemic, which was assessed very positively.
- ▶ Overall, as assessed by young participants of the study, the pandemic exposed new opportunities in terms of discovering new talents and starting business activities. As some discovered new talents and started thinking about developing those talents, this crisis turned out to be a motivator to start a new activity or transform an old one.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1. Study Goal and Objectives

The main **goal** of the given study was to assess the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on young people in Georgia.

Specific **objectives** of the study were as follows:

- To assess what new/specific challenges has the coronavirus generated for these young people;
- To assess how the state of emergency affected their rights;
- To assess measures taken by the state to ensure the accessibility of education and the right to education;
- To assess the impact of the pandemic on the right to labour of young people and whether their employment opportunities changed;
- To assess the access to healthcare and social services as well as possible restriction during the pandemic / state of emergency;
- To assess the accessibility of COVID-19-related reliable information to young people;
- To assess the State actions taken in response to the needs of young people;
- To assess the promising international practices that aim to mitigate the negative consequences of COVID-19; and
- To identify what should be done by the Government in order to improve its response to the needs of young people in case of future waves.

3.2. Study Design and Methodology

In compliance with the project goal and objectives, a study design has been developed that envisages the utilization of **desk research** and **qualitative study** methods.

The qualitative study integrated *in-depth interviewing* and *focus discussion* techniques.

Over the course of the qualitative study, overall attitudes and evaluations of key informants and young respondents were thoroughly analyzed with regard to the impact of the pandemic on youth, the state response to emerging challenges, and steps to be taken in the future.

The results of the qualitative study enabled us to assess the socio-economic impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic on young citizens of Georgia and to develop general recommendations based on them.

Study instrument

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with respondents at pre-arranged time through the online platform chosen by them. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted following the guidelines prepared by a moderator in advance. The research instrument was developed through close cooperation with the client. The duration of in-depth interviews was about 30-40 minutes, while the focus groups lasted about 1.5-2 hours.

Target segment

Within the scope of the study, it was planned to conduct 20 in-depth interviews and 8 focus group discussions. However, taking important issues into consideration, the number of interviews increased to 23. In total, 23 interviews and 8 focus group discussions were conducted.

Respondents of in-depth interviews included:

- Representatives of various agencies (ministries, LEPL);
- Representatives of local self-governing bodies;
- Representatives of international organizations;
- Representatives of the non-governmental sector; and
- Young people.

For public agencies, the international and non-governmental sectors as well as local self-governments, respondents were selected according to their experience working in various fields (education, healthcare, social protection, human rights, etc.). As for young people, the following criteria were taken into consideration when selecting respondents: age, gender, region, type of settlement, ethnic group, working experience, education, and so on.

As for focus group discussions, respondents were selected according to the following specifications:

- 18-24 years - 4 discussions;
- 25-29 years - 4 discussions;
- Urban settlement - 4 discussions;
- Rural settlement - 4 discussions;
- Women's group - 2 discussions;
- Representatives of ethnic minorities - 2 discussions.

In addition, respondents invited to participate in discussions had different kinds of experience in terms of their involvement in study processes or work. Selected young individuals included those who continued studies in an online format and those who suspended their education because of the said format. Respondents also included young people who continued working both offline and online during quarantine; those who continued working online after the quarantine; young people who lost their job during the pandemic, and those who did not work either before the pandemic or after. In addition, the study respondents included young mothers. Some young mothers continued working and some were not employed at all. Respondents included young people with health problems, as well as those who studied abroad during the quarantine and had to return to the homeland due to the pandemic.

Considering the new reality, interviews as well as focus group discussions were conducted in an online format through online platforms and phone calls.

Table # 1. Study design

Qualitative study		
Technique	In-depth interview	Focus group discussion
Target group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives of various agencies (ministries and LEPL); • Representatives of local self-governing bodies; • Representatives of international organizations; • Representatives of non-governmental sector; • Youngsters. 	Youngsters Among them: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-24 years - 4 discussions • 25-29 years - 4 discussions • Urban settlement - 4 discussions • Rural settlement - 4 discussions • Women's group - 2 discussions • Representatives of ethnic minorities - 2 discussions
Sample size	23 interviews	8 focus discussions (45 participants)
Research area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tbilisi • Kutaisi 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tbilisi • Imereti • Kakheti • Samtskhe-Javakheti • Kvemo Kartli
Sampling method	Purposeful	Purposeful
Duration of interview/discussion	30-40 minutes	1.5-2 hours

3.3. Study Limitations

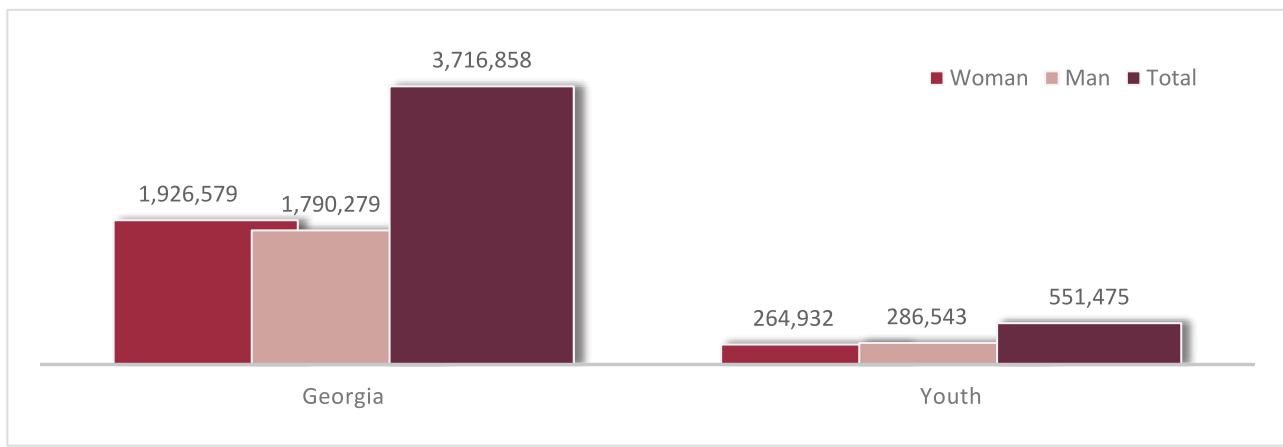
The design selected for the study covered important groups of stakeholders. Many criteria were envisaged when sampling young respondents to assess the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic. In addition, various important research and documents were studied within the scope of the desk research. One study limitation can be the condition that young people in general were not completely covered, so the collected results cannot be generalized without quantitative data. It is also worth mentioning that many different subgroups can be identified in the group of youth who have specific needs (for instance, young people working in different fields, young people living in different regions, young people who are victims of violence, single young mothers, young people with mental health issues or special needs, young people living and/or working in the streets, etc.). Challenges and needs identified as a result of the qualitative study can be considered substantial for a major portion of youth, but conducting a quantitative study and focusing on specific subgroups would make the study wider and more generalized.

4. DESK RESEARCH

4.1. Youth in Georgia

According to the data provided by the National Statistics Office of Georgia, as of 1 January 2019, youth make up 14.83% (551 475) of the Georgian population. While the total number of women is greater than number of men in the country (women - 51.83%, men – 48.16%), among young people, the number of men is slightly but still higher than the number of women (men - 51.95%, women - 48.05%).

Chart # 1. Number of population and youth by gender



Among 18-29 year-old young residents, 54.83% belong to the 18-24 age range, and 45.17% belong to the 25-29 age range.

Table # 2. Number, gender, age of youth

	Quantity (thousand individuals)	Quantity (%)
Youngsters - 18-29 years old	551,475	14.83% (of population)
Young men	286,543	51.95%
Young women	264,932	48.05%
18-24 years old	302,367	54.83%
25-29 years old	249,108	45.17%

If we view the data in the context of the workforce, as of 1 January 2019, the number of economically active citizens in the 15-29 age group was 338.5 thousand. Naturally, the largest portion falls within the 25-29 age group (184 thousand), similar to the largest portion of employed youngsters (149.3 thousand).

Table # 3. Number of economically active citizens among 15-29 year-old youngsters

	Age		
	15-19	20-24	25-29
Active residents in total (Workforce) (<i>thousand individuals</i>)	31.9	122.6	184.0
Employed (<i>thousand individuals</i>)	22.4	85.2	149.3
Hired employee	9.4	57.4	100.2
Self-employed	13.0	27.8	48.9
Undefined	0.0	0.0	0.2
Unemployed	9.5	37.4	34.7
Population outside the workforce (<i>thousand individuals</i>)	174.1	77.1	65.1
Unemployment rate (<i>percentage</i>)	29.7	30.5	18.9
Activity rate (<i>percentage</i>)	15.5	61.4	73.9
Employment rate (<i>percentage</i>)	10.9	42.7	59.9

It is worth mentioning that according to the study results published by UNICEF, unemployment in Georgia, including the high unemployment rate of youth remains the most important problem.⁵ Apart from unemployment, Georgian youth face various problems. In order for young people to be able to use their resources and achieve development, start managing their own life, become involved in public life and manage to make independent decisions, it is necessary to create an environment where education, employment, social inclusion, financial problems, and other difficulties will not disturb their development. There are many such barriers in the country. The study published by UNICEF points out these difficulties as well. Namely, as the study states, in official educational institutions, the attendance rate of children from the richest and poorest groups significantly differs. Children from poor families tend to receive preschool or elementary education less frequently. The attendance rate of 15-18 year-old children from the poorest group is almost 81% at schools, while the rate of the same age children from the richest group is 98%. The difference becomes even more obvious after age 18, when children from poor families leave educational institutions. Almost 5% of 20-year old children from the poorest group continue studying at any type of higher educational institution, while this rate is 77% for children from the richest group.⁶

As of 2017, the number of so-called NEET youngsters was significantly high in Georgia, which means that 30% of young people neither work nor study, and are not involved in any type of training.⁷

Similar to the rest of the world, Georgia had to face many challenges as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. Considering the fact that young people are still in the process of self-discovery, they try to find new opportunities. While working experience is slim, the probability is high that a crisis caused by the pandemic will turn young people into one of the most vulnerable groups on the labor market. It is likely that the new reality will show the importance of digitalization, and from this point of view, the resources of young citizens will be more utilized than the resources of older generations. When added to the challenges in the field of education and many other aspects, the risks in terms of employment are still high. Thus, it is of particular interest to explore the challenges imposed on young people in Georgia during the pandemic, how the state responded to those challenges, and what their main needs will be in the near future.

⁵ „Welfare monitoring survey 2017“. 2018. UNICEF; <https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1221/file/WMS%20GEO%202017.pdf>

⁶ “Welfare monitoring survey 2017“. 2018. UNICEF; <https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1221/file/WMS%20GEO%202017.pdf>

⁷ Exploring the Diversity of Young People Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET): The Gender Profile of NEETs in Georgia and Armenia. April, 2019. WB; <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/591061559766670862/pdf/Exploring-the-diversity-of-young-people-not-in-employment-education-or-training-NEET-the-gender-profile-of-NEETs-in-Georgia-and-Armenia.pdf>

4.2. National Youth Policy

Young people play a crucial role in the strategic development of the country. Society tries to encourage young people through state institutes, supporting the targeted development of youth potential so that more or less everyone can express and realize their skills. The active engagement of young people helps the strategic development of the country in a long-term perspective. To this end, it is important to have youth policy, as well as support instruments at hand, which are supposed to generate additional opportunities for young people.

Georgian youth policy has been defined and is being implemented in compliance with "The Georgian National Youth Policy Document"⁸ adopted with Decree N553 by the government of Georgia on 28 March 2014. The goal of the youth policy is to encourage the establishment of a relevant environment for comprehensive youth development, where young citizens will be able to actively engage in all spheres of public life. According to national youth policy document, achievement of the goal is defined in four strategic directions. These are: (1) participation; (2) education, employment and mobility; (3) health and healthy lifestyle; and (4) special support and social protection of youth.

The target group of the Georgian national youth policy is residents in the 14-29 age range. Apart from age classification, according to the policy documents, two specific groups are identified as direct beneficiaries: (1) school age children and (2) young people with special needs (disabled youngsters, minor pregnant/parents, children living and/or working in the streets, young people deprived of parental care, young people illegally abusing psychotropic and narcotic substances, young people in conflict with the law, young people who are victims of violence, young people living in highland regions, and so on).

Together with the youth policy document, starting from July of 2020, the country has developed the *Georgian National Youth Policy Concept for 2020-2030*,⁹ which has been approved by the Parliament of Georgia. Strategic priorities of the concept are as follows:

- Active participation of young people in public life and democratic processes;
- Promote youth development and assist in the realization of their potential;
- Health and well-being of young people;
- Economic empowerment of young people; and
- Improvement the management of the National Youth Policy at the central and municipal levels.

April 1, 2021 is the date to develop an action plan for the implementation of the youth policy concept. The action plan is supposed to define the relevant activities and actors responsible for implementation.

The central government of Georgia was tasked with implementing strategic priorities defined in the concept and local governments are tasked with their fulfillment. In order to achieve the goals envisaged in the concept, close coordination and cooperation among government bodies and other stakeholders in the youth policy field is required. As the document states, the Government of Georgia, for the purpose of coordination with stakeholders, ensures the proper functioning of the relevant mechanisms on political (interagency) and technical (working group) levels. This implies vertical as well as horizontal coordination. The Youth Agency will assist with the development, functioning and reporting of coordination mechanisms.

Prior to 2017, the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs was responsible for youth-related matters. Since January of 2018, the services of this ministry were combined with the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. As decided by the Government of Georgia, after the abolition of the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs of Georgia, a decree on the establishment of a new LEPL - Youth Agency was published on August 26, 2019.¹⁰ This new legal entity of public law was established for the development, implementation and coordination of the national youth policy strategy.

⁸ The Georgian National Youth Policy. <http://msy.gov.ge/files/veko/2014%20weli/marti/.pdf>

⁹ Georgian National Youth Policy Concept for 2020–2030. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4936402?publication=0>

¹⁰ <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4642829?publication=0>

Functions of the agency include participating in the development and implementation of the national youth policy, developing the government's youth field and activity strategy and action plans, executing these plans and coordinating enforcement among various agencies, as well as monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the process. In addition, the agency is assigned with defining the rules of qualification and certification of youth workers and participating in the development of professional standards. In addition, the agency is assigned with supporting the development of the youth policy and municipal youth activities at the municipal level. One of the agency's functions is to plan programs that include young people representing various groups (disabled persons, IDPs, NEET groups, etc.).

Together with the agency, an important actor in the implementation of the youth policy is the local government, which within its competence should assist with the development of strategic priorities defined in the youth policy concept as well as help develop youth policy at the municipal level.

The Committee on Sports and Youth Affairs of the Parliament of Georgia is responsible for implementing annual monitoring. To this end, the committee will hear a report prepared by the Youth Agency on the achievement of goals envisaged in the concept at least once a year.

The achievement of the goals envisaged in the concept is projected for 2030.

4.3. Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Youth and the State Response

On February 26, 2020, the very first case of Coronavirus was confirmed in Georgia. WHO announced COVID-19 as a pandemic, while the Government of Georgia declared a State of Emergency on 21 March.

In order to adapt to the virus and manage the epidemiological situation in the country, the policy of the Government of Georgia comprised of 4 main stages:

- ▶ *Stage one* started a month earlier, before the first case of contamination was confirmed. This stage envisaged “**preventing**” the spread of the virus through intense thermal screening at airports and border checkpoints.
- ▶ State policy entered *stage two* on February 26, 2020, when the first case of Coronavirus was confirmed in the country. At that point, the main goal was to “**slow down**” the spread of the virus. The main recommendations of the government were as follows: social distancing with the slogan “stay home”, using masks indoors and practicing hygiene-sanitary norms, private and public establishments switching to a remote work regime, avoiding public spaces, etc.
- ▶ As the fulfillment of recommendations provided by the government had gaps and problems, the threat of an uncontrolled outbreak was real in the country. Respectively, the Government of Georgia went to *stage three* of virus management, which implied “**management**” of the virus outbreak. At that point, recommendations became compulsory and a State of Emergency was declared from March 21, 2020 through May 22, 2020 According to a report published by the government in 2020, the decision to announce a state of emergency was based on three main points: (1) the virus was rapidly spreading and the goal was to avoid massive contamination and overload the healthcare system; (2) considering the country-specific cultural tradition, different generations live under one household, which makes it impossible to isolate risk groups; (3) acceptance of the society towards recommendations was not high.
- ▶ *Stage four* of the fight against Coronavirus was the post-state of emergency period, which implied a **gradual lifting of restrictions and adaptation**. In this period, the Government of Georgia presented an anti-crisis plan that aimed to gradually restore economic activity, target allowances for certain social groups, and develop unified regulations which, under increased interaction, would maximally ensure the safety of citizens. Respectively, after the last stage of the fight against the pandemic, 4 main regulations stayed in force, with 3 of them being compulsory and 1 being more general: (1) following the rules of social distancing is compulsory; (2) wearing a mask in public places and indoors is compulsory;¹¹ (3) following the rules set in forth by the Ministry of Healthcare is obligatory for legal entities; (4) continuing a remote format of working and limiting physical contact is recommended as much as possible.¹²

¹¹ According to the decision of Interagency Coordination Council of 3 November, 2020, wearing a mask outdoors became compulsory. http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=541&info_id=77641

¹² Report on the measures taken by the Government of Georgia against COVID-19. <https://stopcov.ge/Content/files/Government--report.pdf>

It is worth mentioning that provided regulations and restrictions affected various social and age groups of the society to a different extent. Due to increased threats during the crisis, media and society mostly focused on the vulnerability of pensioners, elderly citizens, disabled persons and those with different health problems. The reason for this focus is that in case of contamination, the probability was quite high that members of the mentioned groups would have serious health problems.

Even though specific members of the society are more at risk in terms of contamination with the virus (e.g. elderly citizens, disabled people, citizens with various health problems), the scale of the outbreak and outcomes of the pandemic immensely affect all groups in the society, including young people.

According to the study conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the socio-economic integration of youth was an important challenge before the pandemic.¹³ Accordingly, it is more likely that the current crisis will have severe and long-term effects on this group. As the study results demonstrate, the impact of the pandemic on young people is "systematic, deep and non-proportional".¹⁴ Based on the given study, women, 18-24 year-old citizens, and young people living in low-income countries are the most severely affected. Study results clarify that the Coronavirus crisis most severely impacted education, economic activity, mental health, and the social activities of young people.

According to one group of authors, the pandemic crisis particularly affected young people in several aspects of life. Namely, the impact was particularly severe on education, employment and economic activity, physical and mental health, accessibility of information, safety, and online safety.¹⁵ As assessed by this group of authors, as young people spend more and more time on the internet, the issue of internet safety became more important. This crisis increased the probability of utilizing technologies and resources that were not properly verified and confirmed for large-scale use. As a result, the probability of cyber-attacks increased. In addition, young people became more prone to threats such as online bullying, viewing/sharing harmful content, the use of hate speech, etc. According to one study, the Coronavirus pandemic particularly led to a deterioration in the condition of homeless young people worldwide.¹⁶

Even though many topics are important, particular emphasis was made on fields that were most acutely felt by young people, as confirmed by international studies. Namely, education, economic activity, accessibility of information, accessibility of healthcare and social services, as well as the protection of various human rights are main topics on which the study focused.

■ Education

The Coronavirus pandemic significantly hindered the educational process. As of May 2020, 90% of pupils and students in the world (1.6 billion people in 188 countries) continued the learning process in an online format as a result of regulations set in force because of the pandemic.¹⁷ Regulations and the crisis impacted young people differently. Namely, access to various services was limited, the probability of being expelled increased, social activities in which educational institutions paid an important role were minimized, and opportunities for increasing social capital and development declined. It is noteworthy that the negative impact is even bigger if the young person in question is disabled.¹⁸

From March 2020, after a gradual increase in the number of domestic cases, the Government of Georgia decided to switch schools and higher and vocational institutes to an online format. The government developed the innovative project "TV School" for pupils and teachers who continued the educational process in an online regime. This project was recognized as one of the most successful remote learning models by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development. In addition to this, in May 2020, the government launched the educational project "WebSchool" offering entrants of exams webinars on topics in main subjects

¹³ Youth and COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being. 2020. ILO; https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf

¹⁴ Youth and COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being. 2020. ILO; https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf

¹⁵ Youth Homelessness in Generation Covid19: How does Covid19 impact on vulnerable and already marginalised young people experiencing homelessness? By Robbie Stakelum and Miriam Matthiessen. <https://pjpi-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/64941298>Youth%2520Homelessness%2520in%2520Generation%2520Covid19%25202026-05%2520final.pdf>/ac5351f2-8b03-4283-251c-4f8c4e11230c

¹⁶ Youth Homelessness in Generation Covid19: How does Covid19 impact on vulnerable and already marginalised young people experiencing homelessness? By Robbie Stakelum and Miriam Matthiessen. <https://pjpi-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/64941298>Youth%2520Homelessness%2520in%2520Generation%2520Covid19%25202026-05%2520final.pdf>/ac5351f2-8b03-4283-251c-4f8c4e11230c

¹⁷ Pandemic School Closures: Risks and Opportunities. April, 2020. <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2352-4642%2820%2930105-X>

¹⁸ COVID-19: Working with and for young people. May, 2020. Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action; <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COMPACTCOVID19-05.pdf>

required for passing national entrance exams. As for education, the state approach was limited to providing recommendations for higher education institutes and vocational schools. Following this recommendation, institutes and vocational schools became involved in remote learning. It is worth mentioning that universities tried to make online classes maximally accessible for every student.

When the State of Emergency was announced in Georgia, some universities already had online teaching systems. For example, Ilia State University used the "Argus" system. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University already had electronic learning programs at www.e-learning.tsu.ge and www.courses.tsu.ge.¹⁹ Caucasus International University used the WebEx system to manage online classes and Camtasia to record lectures. The learning process also involved the electronic learning system "Goni".²⁰

After universities started responding to this important challenge by adjusting their teaching format to the new reality, another important challenge they had to cope with was a low level of internet access and low ownership of electronic devices. In the process of switching to a remote learning format, young people who did not have access to internet or technical appliances were identified and decisions were made based on specific cases (e.g. university or local government provided students with a computer). As of today, information is not available on how many young citizens' needs were responded to by universities, or how many young people couldn't be fully involved in the learning process because of limited access to internet or electronic devices. However, in terms of internet coverage and use in the country overall, it is noteworthy that according to the latest study, 79% of households living in Georgia are provided with an internet connection.²¹ The level of internet access is higher in urban parts of the country (city - 86%, village - 69.9%). It is worth mentioning that according to the same study of IDFI, as of 2019, one-fifth of pupils in Georgia could not manage to be effectively involved in the learning process due to limited access to a computer or internet connection.²² According to 2019 data provided by Caucasus Barometer, 79% of households in general and 93% of 18-35 year-old young people in particular have access to the internet via a mobile phone.²³ According to the same study, 67% of 18-35 year-old young people have a laptop or computer,²⁴ and 88% of them use the internet.²⁵

As a new academic year started, the Government of Georgia adopted new decrees, based on which educational centers (schools and universities) in some Georgian cities and villages would work in an online format from 15 September, while starting from 1 October, the process would continue in schools and university classrooms throughout the country.²⁶ However, due to a spike in contamination cases, the educational process switched to a hybrid model from October - some studies would be conducted online, while other classes would be conducted in classrooms.²⁷

It is important to take into account that lots of Georgian youngsters are involved in various programs and in the process of obtaining education abroad. At the first stage of the pandemic, young people who were abroad for study purposes appeared to be in a difficult situation. For the end of May 2020, the government took measures to ensure the return of 3 517 citizens with special needs, including 794 students to the country. In addition, in cooperation with the US government, a flight was arranged that ensured the return of 79 students to Georgia.²⁸ At the following stage, students found it challenging to travel back to their universities abroad. As decided by the government of Georgia, in order to address this issue, young people were allowed to return to their studying processes abroad. Thus, in September, hundreds of students returned to their universities in foreign countries.²⁹ In addition, as a result of coordination between the Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Protection, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and universities, the Government of Georgia developed a registration form that is available on www.stopcov.ge together with obligatory rules for students arriving from foreign countries (e.g. requirement to own health and incident insurance policy). After this, it became possible for foreign students to gradually arrive in the country, with the number of such students up to 13 000 as of 2019-2020.³⁰

¹⁹ <https://edu.aris.ge/news/ra-etapzea-elektronuli-swavleba-saqartveloshi.html>

²⁰ <https://bm.ge/ka/article/igegmeba-tu-ara-universitetebshi-swavlebis-onlain-rejimshi-warmartva-/50667>

²¹ Internet accessibility and use trends in Georgia, 2020. IDFI. https://idfi.ge/public/upload/Covid/Internet_access_and_use_in_Georgia.pdf

²² Same

²³ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2019 Georgia. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/cb2019ge/CELLINTH-by-AGEGROUP/>

²⁴ Same; <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/cb2019ge/OWNCOMP-by-AGEGROUP/>

²⁵ Same; <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/cb2019ge/WEBHOMEH-by-AGEGROUP/>

²⁶ <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/618233-skolebshi-axali-sascavlo-celi-daicqo-did-kalakebshi-scavla-onlain-rezhimshi-ganaxlda/>

²⁷ <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%A9%E1%83%94%E1%83%95%E1%83%90% E1%83%A1%E1%83%A2%E1%83%A3%E1%83%93%E1%83%93>

²⁸ Report on the measures taken by the government of Georgia against COVID-19. <https://stopcov.ge/Content/files/Government--report.pdf>

²⁹ <https://info9.ge/politika/229236-studentebi-sazhvargareth-sastsavleblad-tsasvlas-shedzleben-giorgi-gakharia.html?lang=ka-GE>

³⁰ <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/61/umaghlesi-ganatleba>

Economic activity

To ensure maximal distancing and minimizing social interaction, in compliance with the decree of the Government of Georgia dated on March 21, 2020, economic activity has been temporarily restricted (the only exception applies to vitally essential sectors and specific companies). As the situation stabilized, gradual restoration of economic activity envisaged in the anti-crisis plan took place.

According to international studies, the crisis resulting from the Coronavirus pandemic had a particularly negative impact on the economic condition of citizens, including youth. As studies highlight, young people represent one of the most economically unstable segments of society, which is caused by factors such as: being close to the poverty threshold, having little or no savings, and often working in the informal sector.³¹ As the policy paper prepared by ISET Policy Institute regarding the impact of Coronavirus in Georgia predicts, significant deterioration of wellbeing will most likely take place as a result of the pandemic. In addition, the crisis had a disproportionately negative impact on individuals working in the informal sector. The absence of a complex social allowance system will particularly affect their economic condition.³²

As the study conducted by UN Women in June 2020 demonstrated, the novel Coronavirus posed challenges to all age groups. Half (49%) of 18-34 and 35-44 year-old citizens expect their income to decline. Considering the fact that citizens rarely have a savings, more than 85% of the workforce (including young people) depends on income received as a result of ongoing economic activity.³³ The expectation of lower incomes and high risks of an increased unemployment rate make us think that as a result of the pandemic, the social situation will deteriorate for all groups, including youth.

When assessing economic impact of a crisis, it is important to share and consider previous experiences. Most recently, the largest global financial and economic crisis started in 2008. During that crisis, the youth unemployment rate disproportionately increased, and it took time to reverse that negative trend.³⁴ During the crisis of 2008-2013, the youth unemployment rate was over 40% in the developed countries of Europe, and the number of young people (15-29 years-old) who did not have a job or any educational training whatsoever hit a record historic maximum (16%).³⁵ As predicted by economic experts, the current crisis may have similar outcomes, because young citizens mostly work in the sectors and positions that are most affected by the crisis.³⁶

Apart from a sector analysis, it is interesting to view a gender and age perspective analysis. According to the study of ILO, which was conducted through an online inquiry and involved 12,605 respondents from various countries, as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, 18-24-year-old young people were more affected than 25-29 year-old youngsters. According to the study results, 23.1% of 18-24 year-olds lost their job, while the same index is 13% in the 25-29 age group. This can be explained by the fact that young people in the 18-24 age group (especially students) are mostly employed in fields and positions that do not require a high level of formal employment, but that require more communication and contact with customers. Based on the same study, the probability of losing a job is the highest for groups of people who work in administrative positions, and in sales and service fields (27%), rather than in management (7%), a professional category (15%), and technical or more complex positions (14%).

According to the study conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center in Georgia in June of 2020, it turns out that 27% of inquired respondents lost their job during some stage of the Coronavirus crisis. According to the study results conducted from June 4 to June 6, differences are not reported between 18-34 and 35-54 age groups, since in both of these groups about three out of ten inquired respondents reported losing a job (18-34 – 33%, 35-54 – 32%).³⁷ It is worth mentioning that significant differences were not revealed by settlement type. Similar to age, three out of ten respondents reported losing a job in the capital city (29%) as well as in other towns (27%) and villages (26%). The results are more interesting from a gender perspective.

³¹ COVID-19: Working with and for young people. May, 2020. Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action; <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COMPACTCOVID19-05.pdf>

³² COVID-19 in the Region of FREE Network: The Case of Georgia. 2020. Free Network Project; https://freepolicybriefs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/covid19-policy-brief_iset-final.pdf

³³ Rapid gender assessment of the COVID-19 situation in Georgia. June, 2020. UN Women; <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20georgia/attachments/publications/2020/rga-unw.pdf?la=en&vs=143>

³⁴ COVID-19: Working with and for young people. May, 2020. Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action; <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COMPACTCOVID19-05.pdf>

³⁵ <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/is-history-repeating-itself-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-crisis-on-youth?fbclid=IwAR0fesUyzP9Yc3Upcvle-TVNVvSgjtFhNosGoOwmPmaaTXNLBsjBQFw-nPM>

³⁶ Youth Homelessness in Generation Covid19: How does Covid19 impact on vulnerable and already marginalised young people experiencing homelessness? By Robbie Stakelum and Miriam Matthiessen. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/64941298>Youth%2520Homelessness%2520in%2520Generation%2520Covid19%25202026-05%2520final.pdf>

³⁷ Covid-19 Monitor, 2020, wave 6. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/cv2020w6/CVLSTJB-by-AGEGROUP/>

As the study results confirm, more inquired men lost their job at some stage of the Coronavirus crisis (36%) when compared to female respondents (19%). It is also worth mentioning that after losing a job during the crisis, 50% got a job again. The study did not reveal any substantial differences among various demographic groups. Only 2% of inquired respondents reported starting a new job during the Coronavirus crisis.³⁸

In addition to the threat of remaining unemployed, another threat is that people working in a range of specific fields are more at risk of infection. One such field is healthcare. As the latest world trends demonstrate, the healthcare sector is one of the largest employers of young people, and this tendency is noticeably growing.³⁹ In terms of gender, it is noteworthy that the employment rate of women in the healthcare system is significantly higher than men. Among those employed in the healthcare system worldwide, 70% are women.⁴⁰ In Georgia, the number of women working in the healthcare system is significantly higher than the number of men in the system. In addition, more women work as caregivers and in positions that require more interaction with patients. As a result, the risk of infection is higher for women, including young women.⁴¹

As for young people who managed to keep their job or continue working in an online regime, they noted that their productivity has declined a lot, which results in a decrease in income and economic losses.⁴²

It is also worth mentioning that apart from the direct negative impact of the crisis, young people are more flexible and better adjust to existing conditions. Namely, a large portion of young people living in Europe managed to start work online.⁴³ It is noteworthy that 19% of Georgian young people who work online are 18-34 year-old youngsters, and this share does not differ significantly among 35-44 (16%) or 45-54 (21%) age groups who work online.⁴⁴

As for the steps envisaged in the anti-crisis plan presented by the government of Georgia in May of 2020, the document does not specifically focus on young people as a separate group. However, we can conclude that the plan envisages assisting employers and employees in various directions. This part of the plan is universal for every citizen of Georgia who is involved in economic activity during the pandemic or who lost their job during the crisis. Economic assistance is comprised of three main components. One component involves monetary compensation for those who lost income from March-May 2020. Those citizens will receive monetary compensation in the amount of 200 GEL per month for a six-month period, making up to 1 200 GEL in total. According to information from the Support Employment State Agency of Georgia, as of October, 161 905 unique beneficiaries/employees received the compensation totaling 200 (two hundred) GEL within six months since the program was enacted, and a total of 106 288 400 GEL was transferred.⁴⁵

The anti-crisis plan also envisages that according to regulations set in force, if the salary of a hired employee does not exceed 1 500 GEL, the employee is exempt from paying the tax imposed on 750 GEL.

The other component of the plan refers to self-employed citizens. According to the mechanism set in force, self-employed citizens received one-time compensation from the state in the amount of 300 GEL. According to information from the Support Employment State Agency, as of August, this one-time 300 GEL compensation was paid to 171 801 citizens, and the total sum of the transferred compensation was 51 540 300 GEL.

One more component of the anti-crisis plan was focused on protecting socially vulnerable households and families in need. This component indirectly helps and responds to the needs of the most vulnerable young people. According to the anti-crisis plan of the Ministry of Healthcare of Georgia, those vulnerable and socially unprotected families with a rating score lower than 100 000 will receive an allowance of 600 GEL for 6 months. In addition, the same plan envisages a monthly financial allowance for disabled persons in the amount of 100 GEL for 6 months. Funding for utility bills also could be considered as indirect assistance to young people. The government made the decision to pay utility bills for electricity and/or natural gas and/or drinking water/sewage for March, April, and May 2020 (for each month).

³⁸ Same

³⁹ COVID-19: Working with and for young people. May, 2020. Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action; <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COMPACTCOVID19-05.pdf>

⁴⁰ COVID-19: A Gender Lens. Technical brief protecting sexual and reproductive health and rights, and promoting gender equality. March, 2020. UNFPA; https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf

⁴¹ Report on measures taken by the government of Georgia against COVID-19. <https://stopcov.ge/Content/files/Government--report.pdf>

⁴² Youth and COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being. 2020. ILO; https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf

⁴³ <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/63918992/POY%2520EYE%2520Digital%2520platforms%2520covid%25202026%2520May%25202020.pdf/ebef686d-c741-9e35-e2c1-96fb299eb759>

⁴⁴ Rapid gender assessment of the COVID-10 situation in Georgia. June, 2020. UN Women; <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20georgia/attachments/publications/2020/rga-unw.pdf?la=en&vs=143>

⁴⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/worknet.gov.ge/>

Access to information

After cases of Coronavirus were confirmed worldwide, the government of Georgia activated various channels of information for citizens, which would ensure the accessibility of information for various groups of society.

- The special webpage www.stopcov.ge was launched and provided comprehensive information on the Coronavirus. Information uploaded on the webpage is updated on a daily basis. In addition to Georgian, the webpage provides information in the English, Abkhazian, Ossetian, Azeri, and Armenian languages.
- In order to effectively inform the society, spokespersons of various agencies provided information through briefings and official statements. This practice continues to this day. It is worth mentioning that briefings held after Coordination Council Sessions are interpreted in sign language. In addition, as soon as the briefing is over, the text is uploaded on the government's social media page.
- Citizens are provided with information on the Coronavirus through the government's hotline - 144.
- Citizens are informed of critical situations through SMS notifications.
- For the effective prevention of the spread of the Coronavirus, in compliance with international recommendations, various informational materials were created including video and visual materials, educational posters, and info graphics shared through social networks. All of these materials are easily accessible to the wider society. These materials were translated into the Abkhazian, Ossetian, Armenian, and Azeri languages.
- The government's anti-crisis plan was presented live on television. The given plan is also available on the internet.

According to the public opinion study conducted in June of 2020, the main source of information is television for the majority of inquired respondents (84%), while the main source of information is social networks (41%) for four out of ten respondents. Looking at age categories, we see that for almost equal parts of 18-34-year-old young people, the main sources of information on the Coronavirus are television (67%) and social networks (62%). Young people also report receiving information on the pandemic through the internet (36%) and word of mouth (21%).⁴⁶

According to the results of another study conducted in Georgia in June of 2020, an absolute majority of inquired respondents reported that they were regularly informed about mechanisms, strategies and risks of fighting the Coronavirus (99%). As assessed by the absolute majority, provided information was credible, easily understand and useful (women – 94%, men – 91%).⁴⁷

Healthcare and social services

The main goal of countries and governments during the pandemic is to ensure citizens with healthcare services and avoid the collapse of the healthcare system. In addition, it is particularly important to keep healthcare services accessible, especially for women, people with special needs and beneficiaries of state programs.

Women represented one of the more vulnerable groups in the pandemic. In addition to the fact that a large portion of frontline workers in the healthcare system are women, they are also significantly affected by economic instability, similar to other vulnerable groups. Women who are victims of gender-based violence suffered the most during the pandemic. In addition, citizens with respiratory diseases, disabled, and HIV-positive individuals were identified as vulnerable groups.⁴⁸ It is noteworthy that as demonstrated by various international studies, the crisis affected the provision of women's reproductive and sexual health services.

⁴⁶ Study of Public Opinions in Georgia. June, 2020. NDI; https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20Poll%20Results_June_2020_Final%20Version_GEO%20%281%29.pdf

⁴⁷ Rapid gender assessment of the COVID-10 situation in Georgia. June, 2020. UN Women; <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20georgia/attachments/publications/2020/rga-unw.pdf?la=en&vs=143>

⁴⁸ Adolescents and Young People & Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). March, 2020; https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_Preparedness_and_Response_-_UNFPA_Interim_Technical_Briefs_Adolescents_and_Young_People_23_March_2020.pdf

However, according to the results of studies conducted in Georgia, women did not face challenges from this point of view. Based on the results of the study conducted by UN Women in June, 91% of inquired women declared that they did not need gynecological services during the pandemic, and only 9% reported having the need to use such services. Most respondents did not report any problems receiving these services, and only 3% of respondents reported having minor problems. Similarly, an insignificant number of respondents said that they had some problems accessing birth control.⁴⁹ As for pregnant women, in order to receive antenatal services, they had to register online.⁵⁰

Disabled persons appeared to be at high risk during the Coronavirus pandemic, and the registered number of such citizens is 125 thousand in Georgia. Disabled persons are often dependent on caregivers, their family and the state. Apart from disabled persons, serious problems were imposed on caregivers as well, because they had to cope with many severe challenges at the same time.⁵¹ Different groups of disabled persons (pensioners, children, etc.) were provided with various services remotely and/or on-site (medications were delivered to them).⁵²

It is worth mentioning that for beneficiaries of various state programs, the Government of Georgia mobilized resources to keep healthcare services available to these vulnerable groups. Specific measures were taken to provide beneficiaries of state programs (those registered at psychiatric clinics, beneficiaries of a hemodialysis program, beneficiaries of the Hepatitis C Elimination Program) with medications and services in a remote format.⁵³

At the initial stage of the virus outbreak, one important issue was the shortage of sanitizers and masks caused by excessive demand. Almost half of respondents inquired within the scope of the study conducted by UN Women noted that they had problems accessing protective medical gear, and some inquired women (28%) reported having problems accessing hygiene and cleaning goods. In order to address this problem, the state started the production of masks to ensure that every citizen had access to this means of protection. The study also assessed the psychological, mental and emotional states of citizens during the lockdown and post-lockdown periods. Even though the study results state that young people report the lowest levels of anxiety and stress, the anxiety level was 34% among respondents of this group. In other age groups, four or more out of ten respondents reported having higher anxiety and stress levels caused by the Coronavirus.⁵⁴

■ Participation and civil engagement

One of the crucial factors for the growth and development of young people is their engagement in public and civil processes. In these processes, they are able to realize their abilities, develop a sense of belonging to certain groups, build social interactions, and accumulate social capital, which positively affects their wellbeing in general.⁵⁵ It is worth mentioning that apart from the importance of socialization, the participation of youth in these processes is important in terms of policy making and implementation. It is important to note that promoting the participation and civil engagement of young people is one of the main priorities of state youth policy.⁵⁶ As stated in the National Youth Policy Concept adopted by the Government of Georgia in 2020, the active participation of young people in public life and democratic processes is one of the five strategic directions.⁵⁷

Even though social distancing, the prohibition of gatherings and other measures that have been taken due to the pandemic have negatively impacted the involvement of youth in public processes, young people could still realize their right of participation through volunteer work and their active involvement in charity initiatives organized by municipalities and other organizations. It is worth mentioning that over the course of the Coronavirus pandemic, various charity projects or events were implemented with the cooperation

⁴⁹ Rapid gender assessment of the COVID-10 situation in Georgia. June, 2020. UN Women; <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20georgia/attachments/publications/2020/rga-unw.pdf?la=en&vs=143>

⁵⁰ Report on measures taken by the government of Georgia against COVID-19. <https://stopcov.ge/Content/files/Government--report.pdf>

⁵¹ Rapid gender assessment of the COVID-10 situation in Georgia. June, 2020. UN Women; <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20georgia/attachments/publications/2020/rga-unw.pdf?la=en&vs=143>

⁵² Report on measures taken by the government of Georgia against COVID-19. <https://stopcov.ge/Content/files/Government--report.pdf>

⁵³ Same

⁵⁴ Rapid gender assessment of the COVID-10 situation in Georgia. June, 2020. UN Women; <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20georgia/attachments/publications/2020/rga-unw.pdf?la=en&vs=143>

⁵⁵ COVID-19: Working with and for young people. May, 2020. Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action; <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COMPACTCOVID19-05.pdf>

⁵⁶ „Implementation of youth policy on local level: Imereti and Tbilisi”. 2020. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/15958.pdf>

⁵⁷ National Youth Policy Concept for 2020-2030. http://www.parliament.ge/ge/ajax/downloadFile/137045/National_Youth_Concept__May_25_Final

of the state, private sector and young people. According to one of the most recent studies conducted in Georgia, Georgian companies from various sectors were involved in campaigns that aimed to support senior citizens, vulnerable, or other target groups. Contributions implied financial contributions to the state fund in order to fight the Coronavirus as well as to the distribution of food and other products for relevant groups.⁵⁸ According to the same study, a range of companies participated in a charity project organized by Tbilisi City Hall. Under this project, senior citizens and disadvantaged families were provided with food products and essential goods. In this direction, it is important to note that up to 15 000 families received an allowance under the project as of May 2020.⁵⁹

Regarding volunteer work, the project *Youth Volunteering in Response to COVID-19 in Georgia* could be mentioned, which is being implemented with the support of UNICEF and the engagement of the Youth Agency by the NGO *Helping Hand*.⁶⁰ Within the scopes of the projects, more than 150 volunteers were trained who are now involved in various volunteer activities. As a result of the same project, the youth online platform www.youthvolunteering.ge was launched, where registered young people can obtain information on various interesting topics related to volunteering.

In the fight against the pandemic, the Red Cross of Georgia established the Coronavirus response group, which young people could participate in by registering on the organization's platform at www.help.redcross.ge. Many young volunteers were involved in charity events organized by the Red Cross Society and played an important role in helping the elderly and vulnerable families residing in borderline villages, such as Marneuli and various other locations particularly affected during the first wave of the pandemic.⁶¹

4.4. International Practices

The very first case of Coronavirus was reported in China at the end of 2019. At the end of February 2020, the first cases of the contamination were reported in Georgia, in neighbors Armenia and Azerbaijan, and in many Eastern European countries. As of 1 November 2020, 46 million cases have been confirmed in the world, while the amount of deaths has reached 1.2 million worldwide.⁶² Currently, a large portion of cases are in Europe, which also has the highest death rate. The number of infected people in Europe exceed 11 million in November.

It is worth mentioning that from the start of the pandemic until now, the contamination rate is increasing among young people. According to the data of the World Health Organization, the contamination rate in 15-24 year-old youngsters increased from 4% at the start of the pandemic (week 9-10) to 14% for week 42. Within the same period, the contamination rate increased from 50% to 65% in the 25-64-year-old population. It is worth mentioning that a growing dynamic is reported among of children, too (0-4 years: from 0.5% to 2% and 5-14 years: from 1% to 5%), while on the contrary, among citizens aged 65+, we see a declining number of cases and stabilizing dynamics. If 40% of Coronavirus cases fell on this age group in the beginning, the rate has declined to 15% in November.⁶³

Specialists explain the tendency of changes in the age perspective with several factors, including increased monitoring and the accessibility of tests. When the pandemic started, control over the process and testing capacities was limited, and everyone focused on the at-risk population (age, various chronic diseases, etc.), who were hospitalized at an early stage. However, as tools for the control and accessibility of testing increased, so did the probability of identifying cases with minor or no symptoms.⁶⁴

For the purpose of preventing the domestic spread of the virus, governments of various countries took specific measures before the outbreak. Governments started enforcing light regulations before the virus spread widely. After the first cases were confirmed, the response of some countries was assessed as light, while the response of others was too strict. For example, regulations introduced by the government of Vietnam were assessed as "overreacted", but because of the low rate of positive cases and death toll, the example of

⁵⁸ Private Sector Contribution to Georgia's 2020 Voluntary National Review on Sustainable Development Goals. July 2020. Global Compact Network Georgia. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26446GCNG_Report_Private_Sector_Contribution_to_SDGs_in_Georgia.pdf

⁵⁹ <https://report.ge/society/martokhela-khandazmulebis-dakhmarebis-meore-e/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.unicef.org/georgia/ka/%E1%83%9E%E1%83%A0%E1%83%94%E1%83%A1>

⁶¹ <https://www.forbeswoman.ge/post/volunteerscovid19>

⁶² COVID-19 Weekly Epidemiological Update. 1 November, 2020. WHO; <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/weekly-epidemiological-update--3-november-2020>

⁶³ COVID-19 Weekly Epidemiological Update. 1 November, 2020. WHO; <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/weekly-epidemiological-update--3-november-2020>

⁶⁴ Same

this country is considered to be one of the most successful.⁶⁵ According to the global index on responding to COVID-19 calculated by FP Analytics, New Zealand represents the best example of managing the virus.⁶⁶ In addition to immediately starting to prepare the healthcare system to manage the pandemic, this country started aggressive testing of the population, closed schools, and limited movement/travel. Other important measures taken by the government were: postponing taxes and loans, stimulating the economy, limitations on the freedom of media, and so on.⁶⁷

Even though the examples of many countries are interesting in the context of the fight against the Coronavirus pandemic, in terms of being relevant to a comparison with Georgia, it may be more interesting to study cases of those countries that have more common with Georgia according to various criteria. Based on their geographic location, population numbers, GDP, common past, and culture, within the scope of the desk research, we studied the responses to the Coronavirus pandemic in Armenia, Azerbaijan and some of the Baltic (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) and Eastern European (Croatia and Slovakia) countries.

Table # 4. Countries studied for desk research according to GDP and population as of 2020

	GDP (thousand) ⁶⁸	Population (million) ⁶⁹
Georgia	4.41	3.7
Armenia	4.31	2.9
Azerbaijan	4.12	10
Latvia	17.23	1.9
Lithuania	19.88	2.8
Estonia	22.99	1.3
Slovakia	18.67	5.5
Croatia	14.03	4.1

Analysis of international practices demonstrates that in order to prevent the spread of the virus in the country, the aforementioned countries announced a State of Emergency and strict quarantine in March 2020. The main regulations enacted during the State of Emergency included: closing borders and airports, the prohibition of massive gatherings, limiting domestic travel, closing shops, schools, universities, cafes, restaurants and other public spaces, urging to keep social distance and disinfection of public spaces. Public transportation was suspended from March to May in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Starting from May of 2020, these countries started to lift regulations and gradually restored economic activity. It is worth mentioning that as soon as the virus outbreak was reported, countries had to tighten regulations on specific locations or countrywide, which mostly implied the enforcement of stricter quarantines or other regulations.

After announcing the State of Emergency, countries presented anti-crisis and economic rehabilitation plans to society. Strategies approved by states were comprised of several main directions that were common for every country we studied.

■ Measures to support the economy

A significant part of anti-crisis plans included measures to stimulate the economy. Through various financial tools and funds, those plans supported companies that tried to support citizens who lost their jobs as well as vulnerable industries that subsided salaries and introduced different exemptions.

In order to support business, the government of Armenia implemented three types of activities. Namely: (1) subsidies on 2-3-year loans in order to ensure the short-term support of businesses affected by the crisis; (2) direct subsidies so that small, medium and large companies could keep their employees; (3) grants for entrepreneurs. It is worth mentioning that in cooperation with NGOs, the Government of Armenia generated temporary jobs for RA citizens and stateless persons residing in the Republic of Armenia. For example, they were offered to participate in the construction of riverbanks in the highlands of the country.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52628283>

⁶⁶ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/countries-with-best-covid-responses/>

⁶⁷ https://globalresponseindex.foreignpolicy.com/?_ga=2.187063912.1578301659.1599591842-142889722.1598632622

⁶⁸ <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>

⁶⁹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>

⁷⁰ Programs to address the social impact of COVID-19. The Government of the Republic of Armenia; <https://www.gov.am/en/covid-19-cragrer/>

From April 2020, the government of **Azerbaijan** started implementing anti-crisis measures aiming to support citizens and businesses. Implemented actions included: (1) partial subsidy of salaries; (2) support of micro-entrepreneurs; (3) generation of temporary jobs; (4) support of unemployed citizens and those with no income; (5) subsidies for energy and education sectors; and (6) increasing the amount of money allocated to the Entrepreneurship Development Fund. On 2 June 2020, the President of Azerbaijan approved a bill of tax changes that provides exemptions for sectors affected by the Coronavirus, including the fields of tourism, transportation, and culture.⁷¹

The Government of **Latvia** approved a support package in the amount of 3.4 billion Euro to fight against the outcomes of the pandemic. The largest portion of the package envisaged the support of affected industries with loans and bank collateral. Additional money was addressed to companies operating in specific sectors. The amount of 875 million EUR was allocated to support aviation, transportation, healthcare, educational sectors, and infrastructural projects so that they could preserve their businesses. The third direction envisaged tax exemptions and the fourth direction envisaged an allowance for those left without a job.⁷² It is worth mentioning that companies that were involved in the salary subsidy scheme could receive a 50% subsidy from the government to fund the salaries of employees. In order to make the scheme equally accessible for large as well as small companies, as decided by the Government of Latvia, the total amount of employees receiving a subsidy should not be more than 20 per company. In case of involvement in the scheme, the state provided a subsidy for 50% of employee salaries. Since the main goal of the said subsidy scheme was to generate full-time jobs, after being involved in the scheme for 3 months, employers were obliged to hire those receiving a subsidy for at least an additional 3 months. Similar to the Government of Armenia, the Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia established generated employment opportunities in order to support students left without jobs and other unemployed citizens who no longer received the relevant compensation. The same ministry also plans to organize fast and effective training courses.⁷³

It is worth mentioning that **Estonia** is one of the world's leading countries in terms of digital development, with experience providing education and public services in an online format, and with the respective infrastructure and citizens who use the said services. Respectively, the impact of the pandemic was minimal on the country from this point of view.⁷⁴ However, it is also worth mentioning that even though the country is well-adapted to digital systems, the international economic crisis will not leave without a trace even for the economy of Estonia. Moreover, Estonia is actively involved in international trade. The total value of the country's imports and exports is 170% higher than the GDP, and in addition, the field of tourism, which is one of the most affected sectors by the pandemic, comprises 15% of the GDP.⁷⁵

In order to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the crisis, in March of 2020, the Government of Estonia approved a supplementary budget that was comprised of almost 9% of the GDP. The said budget had three main directions: support of the unemployed, support of the healthcare sector, and support of the business sector.⁷⁶ In order to preserve jobs, a significant amount was allocated from the budget to subsidize the wages of citizens employed in affected industries, so that employers would not have to fire employees. According to this plan, beneficiaries would initially receive a 70% subsidy of their salary or allowance in the amount of 1 000 EUR. From June, only 50% of wages were compensated and the amount of the allowance decreased to 800 EUR. In addition, more than half of the anti-crisis budget was allocated to support the private sector. Directly and through state-owned KredEx, the Government of Estonia offered private sector collateral for bank loans for the purpose of restructuring, as well as subsidies for working capital and capital and investment loans. At the regional level, additional budget funds were allocated to local governments and companies operating in regions received business loans and collateral through the rural development foundation.⁷⁷ In addition, the Government of Estonia offered private sector tax exemptions. Namely, the tax collector system offered various exemptions to enable the private sector to have the capacity to generate more jobs from a long-term perspective. The private sector also offered to defer tax debt and suspended the accrual of the postponed tax interest rate.

⁷¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

⁷² same

⁷³ <https://bnn-news.com/latvian-welfare-ministry-proposes-a-number-new-employment-support-activities-214387>

⁷⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/estonia-advanced-digital-society-here-s-how-that-helped-it-during-covid-19/>

⁷⁵ TRANSITION REPORT 2020-21 THE STATE STRIKES BACK. Country Assessments: Estonia. EBRD. file:///D:/System/Desktop/transition-report-202021-estonia.pdf

⁷⁶ Same

⁷⁷ Same

Changes were made by the Pension Fund; namely, in order to stimulate consumption, the pension fund temporarily suspended contributions.⁷⁸ Even though the Estonian Government set in place complex measures to mitigate economic outcomes of the pandemic, the government still observes ongoing processes, and if the crisis deteriorates significantly or lasts too long, it may expand the budget and add supplementary measures.⁷⁹

The Government of **Lithuania** approved various plans after March 2020 and formed foundations in order to help industries and citizens affected by the crisis. The fiscal package approved by the government in March 2020 envisaged the following measures: (1) support of the healthcare system and emergency management in order to cope with the current situation; and (2) additional funds for social allowances and the support of various targeted groups including school age children, disabled persons and wage subsidies for employees in affected firms. In addition, the government expanded guarantee schemes for SME and agro loans. As for foundations established during the crisis, the government of Lithuania established a *business support fund*, which aims to provide liquidity to medium and large businesses through direct loans or investments in equity and debt securities through the end of 2020. Economic plans also envisaged interest compensation support for SMEs and offering cheap loans targeted to hard hit sectors (services, accommodation, tourism, etc.).⁸⁰

From March 2020, anti-crisis measures taken by the Government of **Croatia** were addressed to support the private sector, employed citizens and those left without a job. Measures taken at the initial stage included: the deferment of public obligations, free of interest for three to six months and the temporary suspension of payments of selected parafiscal charges. Similar to other Eastern European countries, Croatia utilized EU funds to create new credit lines and provide entrepreneurs with micro loans. In addition, the government resorted to the purchase of unsold stocks of finished goods in agriculture, food processing industry, medical equipment, and similar strategic goods. Similar to other countries, Croatia ensured the subsidization of net minimum wages for three to six months in order to preserve jobs and refund taxes early for individuals.⁸¹

Starting from June 2020, Croatia applied to the EU Solidarity Fund and EU SURE (temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency). In order to enable the private sector to continue functioning, from June 2020, the government announced the possibility of introducing a short-term work program financed by EU SURE to safeguard jobs. Through this measure, employers who needed to introduce shorter working hours due to a decline in business activities would be entitled to aid for the payment of a part of their workers' wages. The measure was intended for all sectors and for all businesses with more than 10 employees. It is worth mentioning that even though all sectors could engage in the short-term work program, two times more support was envisaged for industries that were particularly affected (transport of passengers, hospitality, travel agencies, recreation-related businesses, as well as cultural businesses and sporting events).⁸²

It is worth mentioning that as initiated by the Ministry of Health of Croatia, the government plans to involve and hire 1 200 unemployed medical personnel who are registered with the Employment Agency in the fight against the Coronavirus pandemic. In addition, it is planned to create a special call center, which will be responsible for identifying the contacts of infected citizens. In order to establish such a unit, the government plans to train and hire 1 200 unemployed non-medical personnel.⁸³

In March of 2020, the Government of the **Slovak** Republic approved a package of anti-crisis measures that aimed to intervene in various directions in order to alleviate the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. The said package envisaged several important measures such as: (1) subsidizing of wages in affected industries and for self-employed citizens and for those who were left without income. It is worth mentioning that *employers* affected by the crisis, *self-employed* persons whose income decreased due to declined sales in the crisis, and individuals *who did not have any income* during the crisis were entitled to involvement in the subsidiary program.⁸⁴ As decided by the Slovak government, social allowances were increased. (2) Important measures were taken to support small and medium business by funding bank guarantees and interest rates. In addition, the Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic and Slovak Investment Holding jointly developed an anti-crisis guarantee scheme, which consists of a portfolio guarantee for financial institutions providing

⁷⁸ <https://www.kriis.ee/en/economy-and-business>

⁷⁹ same

⁸⁰ <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

⁸¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

⁸² Same

⁸³ <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/news/47790-medical-chamber-for-hiring-jobless-medical-staff-for-covid-contact-tracing>

⁸⁴ <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/slovakia-government-and-institution-measures-in-response-to-covid.html>

commercial loans to SMEs and an interest subsidy (of up to 4%) for enterprises that manage to preserve existing jobs.⁸⁵ (3) The self-employed and affected companies were supported with health insurance. In addition, employees working in affected industries were completely exempt from social, healthcare and income taxes.⁸⁶ (4) The government introduced important tax exemptions for the private sector. Namely, the payment of taxes for physical and legal entities was deferred till 30 June 2020. Deferral also applied to VAT declaration deadlines, tax inspections and the completion of tax declarations. The Slovak government also introduced simple mechanisms to defer VAT and eased fines for companies that didn't pay taxes in a timely manner.⁸⁷ (5) As initiated by the government, labor code requirements have been eased, which gives more flexibility to employers to make staff and salary changes during the crisis more quickly and with simplified procedures.⁸⁸

In addition, the Slovak Government envisaged rental subsidies. In addition, the anti-crisis plan of the government included increased medical spending.⁸⁹ Similar to other EU member countries, the Slovak Republic aims to utilize EU funds in order to ensure more effective restoration of the economy. To this end, the government started negotiations with the European Structural and Investment Fund.⁹⁰

Social support programs

Measures taken to support the economy were more focused on supporting legal entities and entrepreneurs, while targeted allowances were more tailored to the needs of individuals and households. Various members of society, including young people, could become the recipients of such allowances. This subchapter focuses on those measures that were taken to include young people as beneficiaries.

Within the scope of the anti-crisis approach, the social allowance program approved by the government of Armenia defined various types of beneficiaries that would receive one-time or multiple allowances. At the individual level, two types of beneficiaries were identified: (1) pregnant women or their husbands who were left unemployed during the pandemic; and (2) students for which 100% (only for students who were in their last year of studies) or 75% of the tuition fee would be subsidized. In addition, the social program envisaged the complete or partial (5%) subsidization of student loans from 1 May 2020 to 31 December 2020.⁹¹

The government of Azerbaijan provided scholarships for those students who are from socially disadvantaged families and who are beneficiaries of social allowances funded by the state.⁹²

One of the priority directions of the anti-crisis plan approved by the Latvian government was to support the education sector and develop social allowance packages. In April 2020, the Government of Latvia adopted a law that enabled municipalities to consider the provision of social allowances and services to targeted groups that were not previously included in the law.⁹³ Through measures taken by the Welfare Department of the Riga City Council, every foreign student residing in Riga who had economic difficulties because of the Coronavirus could receive a one-time allowance (in the amount of 128 EUR).⁹⁴

The Parliament of Lithuania made amendments to the law on higher education and research, doubling the budget allocated to social scholarships (different from academic scholarships). In addition, the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania funded the project to enhance the mental health of students. The main goal of the project was to offer free therapy consultations to students of those universities that do not have a psychologist. During project implementation, 862 students were provided with therapy sessions. In addition, 46 seminars and trainings were conducted on the topic of personal growth.⁹⁵

⁸⁵ <https://www.whitecase.com/publications/alert/covid-19-slovak-government-financial-assistance-measures>

⁸⁶ https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/sk/pdf/external/Navrh-opatreni-zameranych-na%20pomoc-ekonomike-COVID-19_DRAFT-0.5_na%20vladu.pdf?utm_source=email+marketing+Mailigen&utm_campaign=KPMG+Alert%3A+The+Business+Implications+of+COVID-19+1932020&utm_medium=email

⁸⁷ same

⁸⁸ <https://www.whitecase.com/publications/alert/overview-most-recent-measures-government-slovak-republic-regarding-spread-covid>

⁸⁹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

⁹⁰ https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/sk/pdf/external/Navrh-opatreni-zameranych-na%20pomoc-ekonomike-COVID-19_DRAFT-0.5_na%20vladu.pdf?utm_source=email+marketing+Mailigen&utm_campaign=KPMG+Alert%3A+The+Business+Implications+of+COVID-19+1932020&utm_medium=email

⁹¹ <https://www.gov.am/en/covid-19-crarger/>

⁹² <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/azerbaijan-government-and-institution-measures-in-response-to-covid.html>

⁹³ <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

⁹⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/municipal-support-available-for-foreign-nationals-in-latvia-during-covid-19-emergency>

⁹⁵ <https://www.esu-online.org/?news=students-mental-health-and-financial-support-in-lithuania>

As for the cases of **Slovakia**, **Estonia** and **Croatia**, youth-oriented activities envisaged in anti-crisis plans mostly refer to the management of the remote learning process. It is also worth mentioning that the government of Croatia involved 300 volunteer students from medical schools to manage the epidemiological situation.

As the desk research demonstrated, anti-crisis plans were more focused on supporting the economic and business sectors and the provision of various types of allowances (one-time, multiple) for various groups of society (unemployed, temporarily jobless, etc.). Beneficiaries of these measures would definitely be young residents, too. It is worth mentioning that none of the countries identified young people independently as a vulnerable group affected by the crisis whose needs require a special response. The only exception can be the group of students whose needs are more or less envisaged in anti-crisis plans. All other subgroups (employed, unemployed, women, mothers, disabled young people, youngsters living and/or working in the streets, etc.) of young people who required (and who still require) special support, similar to students, have not been identified.

5. STUDY RESULTS

5.1. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Youth

According to the study results, the COVID-19 pandemic put several significant challenges on the agenda of young people and impacted different aspects of their lives. Among those, the most topical and important are related to challenges appearing in the fields of **education** and **employment**. The significance of these challenges was particularly highlighted over the course of the study undertaken with young people as well as with key informants.

5.1.1. Impact on Education

As the study results demonstrate, in the field of education, the most topical issue was related to **online classes**. According to the main discourse, switching to this mode of studying was a kind of obligatory necessity, and the assessment of the as well as its results is non-homogenous. When assessing the effectiveness of online education, certain important factors were pointed out. Namely, the **readiness of students**, **readiness of academic personnel** and **technical issues**.

Regarding the **readiness of students**, it was noted that the perception of a new study format as a comprehensive study process appeared to be difficult for a large portion of students. This is how young people participating in the study explain “distraction” and “their lack of concentration” during lectures, which in the end, resulted in the ineffectiveness of studies.

“Other students and I had the feeling that the studying process had not been started yet; we could not perceive it as a commencement of studies”. [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

“When you attend classes using your phone and not physically in the classroom and the process is not live, it appeared to be less interesting for me. I could not concentrate, I was distracted”... [Man, 24-29 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

The Readiness of academic personnel is another factor that impacted the effectiveness of online learning. As evaluated by youngsters, some personnel did not have technical skills relevant to the requirements of online studies. Respectively, quite a large portion of the lecture was dedicated not to topics envisaged in the curriculum, but to fixing technical issues. Thus, as believed by young people, it is critically important that the academic personnel having the aforementioned gap in skills undergo training and acquire the technical skills they need to teach online.

“Time envisaged for lectures was not more than 1 hour and it took 15-20 minutes to turn the online meeting on, to fix technical issues... I would train lecturers”... [Man, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

Another factor that impacted how ineffective online classes were seems to be connected to **technical problems**. To this regard, respondents emphasized challenges emerging in two directions. One challenge is related to *low access to the internet*, and the other challenge implies *limited access to the material-technical equipment required to conduct online classes*. It is worth mentioning that when speaking about the accessibility of an internet connection, the problem not only included that internet is not equally accessible for everyone at any location of the country, but respondents pointed out that residents living in rural and

mountainous settlements face a different reality compared to urban parts of the country. As noted within the course of the study, with limited financial capital, regardless of the digital connectivity of the geographic location, purchasing specific services was a challenge for some young people. As a result, internet access was not provided to them.

As for limited access to technical equipment, in this regard it was noted that certain students did not have a personal computer, which hindered their involvement in online classes. In addition to this, several students had a number of family members that switched to an online work regime and online classes, which left less room for them.

"I live in the village and you know how hard it is to study online when you live in the village. There are young people in my village who were enrolled in institutes, but who cannot attend online classes because some of them do not have access to internet. Some of them do not have proper sound system on the computer". [Woman, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

"There is one student in my family. I am a teacher and have a little brother – we cannot all use internet at the same time – student, teacher, pupil. Other families have to deal with this issue, too. When they have 2 pupils and 2 students, they cannot all use the internet simultaneously". [Woman, 18-24 years old, representative of ethnic minority, rural settlement, Kvemo Kartli]

As noted by some of the youth participating in the study, they are familiar with attempts aimed at fixing technical problems. In some cases, universities try to solve the problem, and in other cases, the local government provided a solution. This topic was emphasized over the course of the study with key informants. As noted, the state had to respond to two challenges related to education: one, it was important for universities to switch to a remote regime in a short amount of time; secondly, the involvement of students in online studies needed to be ensured. As the study with key informants revealed, the "*system coped with challenges pretty well, after 2-3 weeks from the announcement, the system switched to online studies*". However, regardless of this, participants noted that with high probability, there are many students who are left behind in online classes or who cannot fully engage in the process due to technical difficulties.

"In my university, our dean told us that to send him a list of students who do not have access to internet or a computer so that the university could help such students". [Man, 18-24 years old, representative of ethnic minority, rural settlement, Kvemo Kartli]

"[Universities] were supposed to provide comprehensive information on how, or through what methods they coped with the online regime of studies. If there is a university that cannot help students fix internet-related problems, it needs to have some alternative mechanism to ensure the involvement of this student in the study process. Every university submitted the relevant plan to the center National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement in April. If there are a few cases, students apply to us with a statement". [Representative of public agency]

"Those who requested, maybe someone was still left, but we have good examples of when universities managed to provide students with laptops and other equipment, often delivering it to their homes. Clearly, there are some students left without such support. I cannot say the demand is fully met and we don't have any problem in this direction, but lots of universities managed to do their best to address this challenge". [Representative of public agency]

When discussing the impact this pandemic made on youth, key informants participating in the study paid attention to the field of education. They noted that regardless of the fact that educational services were provided remotely, there were and are challenges because not every single youngster has the chance to be involved in online classes. Similar to youth, key informants emphasize the current situation of limited access to internet and technical appliances.

Apart from the challenges that were identified as defining the low efficiency of online studies, a specific group of students was identified, for which the remote mode of studies appeared to be especially ineffective. Namely, as claimed by young participants of the study, online classes cannot be deemed effective for students for whom a certain stage of studies was supposed to be dedicated to practical classes. As online classes cannot ensure the provision of knowledge relevant to certain professions, some students decided to take the semester/year off.

"Those who studied in the field of wine and were in their last year had problems in terms of practical courses. How are you supposed to attend practical courses online? You need to do it yourself; you need to touch and learn the process. Students did not have the chance to attend these practical courses". [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Kakheti]

"I study at the Academy of Arts and studying online was so ineffective I decided to take an academic year off. You cannot learn art online, and that's why I decided to take this time and then continue more quality education rather than study at the Academy of Arts online". [Woman, 18-24 years old, representative of ethnic minority, urban settlement, Kvemo Kartli]

Within the scope of the study, young people paid attention to what a severe challenge it was for first-year students to start university in an online regime in September. As noted by young people, first-year students do not have experience or knowledge of the educational process, they do not know administrative or academic personnel as well as their fellow students, and they have to be involved in the process in a completely strange environment. For these reasons, difficulties related to online studies can be assessed as more serious for them. However, it was also noted that online education was not easy for last-year students either, and in general, the quality of education was relatively low, which apart from the aforementioned problems resulted in the absence of social connections, interaction and opportunity to exchange opinions.

"The hardest moment for me was that we did not have a graduation ceremony and did not throw our graduation caps. We did not have the feeling that we graduated from university. Shortly, so many problems resulted from this pandemic thing". [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"The quality of education was low and our right to education was violated because giving education is not just providing information, right? This is the process of interaction, and in Zoom classes half of the time is spent on someone being offline, someone having their mic turned off, someone having problems hearing others, and this is how time is wasted". [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"For me personally, the process of studying became less interesting and informative because I already had a chance to listen to lectures on any topic on YouTube". [Man, 24-29 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

As noted by young participants of the study, they can also stress that the **right to education** was limited, due to switching to online learning and challenges related to this transformation. However, it was also stressed that this was a compulsory measure that not only the Government of Georgia was forced to take, but a large portion of the world. Respectively, this should be qualified as a limitation of rights and not a violation of rights.

Generally, it should be noted that under the Coronavirus pandemic, young study participants as well as key informants stress the limitation of rights rather than the violation of rights of young people. The main argument is that it was a "compulsory limitation" of rights because of "public safety" rather than a violation.

"Violation of rights is wrong, I would say limitation because of some cause". [Man, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"If we judge through the eyes of the Constitution, what Chapter two states, the majority of those were violated but we can't really call it a violation, because it was actually relevant and necessary..." [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"Right to movement and education [were probably violated] but I can't really call it a violation of rights, it's just being deprived of possibilities because of the situation..." [Representative of international organization]

"I can say that the limitations of rights were coming from the epidemiological situation and that was absolutely necessary at that time not to allow a deterioration of the situation". [Representative of public agency]

Apart from the challenges that appeared to be important for young people in terms of education, the study conducted with key informants also emphasized the topic of **internationalism**. As noted by respondents, under the pressure of the pandemic, the state not only had to work on the process of switching the educational system to an online format, but to manage the process for those students who are citizens of Georgia and already studied abroad or planned on leaving. The state also had to manage the process for foreign citizen students who were in Georgia at the time or who planned on arriving. In this direction, it was noted that the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took specific steps and appointed charter flights – „our students returned and foreign students departed to their countries". The process did not involve students who study abroad through their own funding ("we don't even have information on such students"), but those students who have the funding of the International Education Center or who are involved in various exchange programs.

As for challenges related to the new academic year, as noted by respondents, out of more than 13 thousand foreign students who study in different programs at Georgian universities, approximately 6 thousand left the

country during the pandemic. Respectively, for the new academic year, the challenge was to bring them back. In order to manage this process, the state developed an app that is available on www.stopcov.ge. The app enables the state to manage the process of the arrival of students and their stay in the country. According to regulations in force, before the commencement of studies in Georgia, foreign students complete a registration form posted on www.stopcov.ge in order to obtain permission to enter the country. Upon submission of the registration form, the state approves the arrival of the applicant student in the country, and after their arrival, foreign students stay in isolation and comply with quarantine rules in accordance with the regulations set by the state.⁹⁶

"First, it became necessary for a foreign citizen to have insurance, including the reimbursement of utility costs. After the student completes the application form, the university provides the insurance document where it states that it takes liability and the student has insurance. Afterwards, the student is accommodated in a quarantine space and pays for PCR tests. Final approval is issued by the Ministry of Education". [Representative of public agency]

The main discourse of the study conducted with young people pointed out the low effectiveness of remote studies, but respondents emphasized the **positive aspects of online classes**. As it turns out, saving *time and financial resources* and *being able to simply do other things together with studying* are the main advantages of online education. Moreover, this was the reason why certain young participants emphasized the importance of a hybrid model of education. As believed by them, remote learning helps young people better manage time and combine studying and other business. This is important for those who have a job and those who are young mothers. Switching to a hybrid model of learning gives young people more time to work and respectively, to gain financial independence. A hybrid model of education also ensures live interaction in classrooms with fellow students and academic personnel.

"I live in Rustavi and I had to commute to and from Tbilisi every day to attend classes at the university. I used to spend an hour and a half on the road. After switching to online classes, this problem was solved. I was involved in online lectures and kept the same quality of studies as before... When you have to physically attend lectures at the university, you waste 2 hours on the road and attend 4 lectures. Why spend 2 hours on the road when you can use it to work and even attend the lecture from your workplace..." [Woman, 18-24 years, representative of ethnic minority, urban settlement, Kvemo Kartli]

"I am married, I have a child, and I work. It is very hard for me to attend lectures at the university. Online classes worked really well for me and I actually learned more than before. I used to miss some lectures, since I was at work and could not attend classes, but now my lecture starts at 8 in the evening and I still attend it because I can do it from home. I would not be able to physically commute to the university, and this is why it worked for me very well". [Woman, 25-29 years old, representative of ethnic minority, rural settlement, Kvemo Kartli]

"It [hybrid model] will be really effective because online lectures are uploaded, and you have more time to work and can actually manage better. A hybrid model of learning will be tailored to students because we will be able to combine work and studies in addition to communicating with our peers. We will be able to attend some lectures in the classroom and it will actually work". [Woman, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Imereti]

As the study with key informants revealed, the decree currently in force that regulates the implementation of the educational process in universities does not mention the hybrid model, but work has been started in this direction. Moreover, it was noted that the decision made by the coordination council envisaged lab and practical courses that are conducted in classrooms during the autumn term. For other lectures, the decision enabled universities to make up their minds on organizing the process online or remotely and implied steps that should be taken to establish a hybrid model of learning.⁹⁷

5.1.2. Impact on Employment

As demonstrated by the study results, young people stated that the COVID-19 pandemic particularly impacted youth jobs. In this context, challenges the pandemic made topical for young people are united in several categories. There are challenges that the pandemic created for **employed youngsters** who continue to work, and there are challenges for those who **lost their jobs to the pandemic**. In addition, it was also noted that the reality became even more harsh for those young people who **did not work before the pandemic**. Since the employment generation is declining and employees with experience are being fired, the probability that those who did not work before the pandemic will get jobs in the near future is even lower. The future of those young people who recently started working and "*did not manage to gain experience*" is similar.

⁹⁶ Decree of Government of Georgia N322. May 23, 2020 on Approval of the rule of isolation and quarantine. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4877009?publication=45>

⁹⁷ <http://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=11257&lang=geo>

As for the challenges *employed youngsters* have to face, it is worth mentioning that study participants did not point out any changes in terms of income/wages, neither with regard to changes in working specifics, except for the working format. Difficulties related to **offline** and **online work** appeared to be particularly important for employed young people.

According to the study results, the main challenge related to **offline work** implied difficulties in commuting to and from the workplace. Restrictions associated with the latter (the schedule of public transportation, limit on the number of passengers in a taxi, and curfew) made it hard for employed citizens to do their work.

"This was the problem of the commute that was raised in the first place"... [Man, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"We had a curfew after 9 p.m. and I was afraid all the time to be at home before nine". [Woman, 25-29 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

"Restrictions set on public transportation affected me. When it stopped working, I did not have my own car and I was forced to buy one immediately because I had no other option to commute in the city. Other employees were affected too; they were forced to grab a taxi. For those who did not have their own car, commuting to work was related to serious financial expenses". [Man, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

Two challenges related to **online work** were identified. First, an unregulated work schedule, and second, both emotional and physical problems related to the necessity of performing various roles (mother, child, employee) simultaneously. Regarding the first case, respondents noted that it was difficult for employees to distinguish when the work day was starting and ending, and they often had to work extra hours than normal. In the other case, the problem was that the "house was turned into an office" and employees constantly had to spend their spare time in a different setting (beyond the office, i.e. the house), which was also prohibited. Accordingly, this was causing serious emotional discomfort.

"If before the pandemic I worked from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., during the pandemic I had days when I worked until 12, 1 or even 2 a.m.". [Man, 24-29 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"I used to work and have lessons. I was at school until 2 and then I was free to go home, but during online classes I worked 24 hours a day. Parents called me, other teachers too to help them with matters related to the internet. We worked all the time; 24 hours. Parents would call me at 12 a.m. asking me how to do the homework". [Woman, 25-29 years old, representative of ethnic minority, rural settlement, Samtskhe-Javakheti]

Even though young respondents noted that being at home and spending more time in a family environment "made them closer" to family members, this was not the main discourse of the study and difficulties related to online work were much more important for young people. The transformation of the home into an office created serious barriers for young parents, especially women, since they had to perform the functions of mother, housewife and employee simultaneously in the same space. As assessed by study participants, young people did not have much success in performing multiple roles. Furthermore, with combining the role of mother with online work under conditions in which kindergartens do not work, schools are in an online regime, and babysitting services are not affordable for everyone, some young people consider quitting their jobs. This may become another reason for an increased unemployment rate among youth.

"The specifics of my work did not change because I can write a complaint or other various legal documents in any setting. In my case, the hardest thing is that when working from home, I cannot isolate my roles as a mother and as an employee... it results in losing quality in the process. If I used to work 8 or 10 hours, I have to work all the time now, because I can't do it all, I'm distracted and this is what concerns me a lot... I'd rather work in the office, rather than at home". [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"We waited for kindergartens to open since October 1. Today they announced that the date was postponed to October 19. No one knows what will happen and this is a serious problem for me; I may have to quit my job if this continues indefinitely". [Woman, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

Interviews with *key informants* revealed with high probability that the pandemic would particularly impact the economic activities of young people. According to one point of view, if pensioners or beneficiaries of the social allowance program continue to receive the same income during the pandemic, a certain part of young people would become vulnerable and lose their source of income as the pandemic severely affected the fields (tourism, restaurant and hotel business) in which a large portion of youngsters were employed. In this regard, it was emphasized that apart from losing the job itself, this factor would negatively affect their education. As stated by respondents, young people who work and pay tuition appeared "under double and triple hit". Despite the fact that dates of payment were postponed and other exemption mechanisms were enacted, the study with key informants highlighted that losing a job would be particularly painful for this group of people.

"[Young people] work to pay tuition fees and now they face more problems. I don't say this frequently, but pensioners have their monthly income, whether this income is high or low. But for young people who study in Georgia, work, and pay their tuition fee, they face this problem more severely..." [Representative of public agency]

"Young people may comprise a major part of the group that temporarily lost a job, e.g. those who were given compulsory leave. Students work in fields that were affected by the pandemic..." [Representative of public agency]

In the context of challenges related to employment, one of the respondents identified a separate sub-category of *young people living in urban areas*. According to main point of this respondent, as the majority of employed youngsters live in urban areas and the pandemic negatively affected the employment rate, young people living in cities ultimately fall into a sub-category severely affected by the pandemic. As believed by this respondent, unlike urban areas, the pandemic had a less severe effect on self-employed young people living in rural areas, as they not only had a right to continue agricultural activities, but were also given the privileges of movement as an exception (e.g. they could drive from one location to another to sell products). However, over the course of the youth study, it was noted that restrictions set on movement hindered the process of agricultural work for self-employed youngsters in the field of agricultural. As a result, a certain portion of spring work remained unfulfilled, which will directly impact the socio-economic condition of citizens.

"Practice also showed that rural residents, including young people who were involved in agricultural activities, had privileges to continue their work regardless of restrictions. Furthermore, as an exception, they even had the right to move around including in so-called 'red municipalities', such as Marneuli, which was closed. This exception allowed citizens to move around if it was necessary to exercise agricultural activities. I mean that young people were allowed to commute, including for this purpose". [Representative of public agency]

"The impact [of the pandemic on agriculture] was tremendous because at that time [spring], village residents cultivated strawberries, took care of vineyards, and things like that. Lots of citizens were not allowed to cultivate land and take a harvest because regulations were too strict. More than two passengers were not allowed in a vehicle, and the curfew was also a hindering factor". [Woman, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

The discussion with key informants also emphasized that the loss of a job and increased unemployment rate significantly boosts the probability of *drug and alcohol use*. As assessed by one of the respondents, this reality is already in place among young people. It is worth mentioning that such an assessment is respondent's perception of the reality and is not based on study results or statistical data that would confirm or deny the fact that due to various stresses and pressures related to the pandemic, alcohol and drug abuse has increased among young people living in Georgia. However, in this direction it is interesting to view international experience, which points out increased alcohol sales during the pandemic.⁹⁸ For instance, as confirmed by the results of a study conducted in the USA, the use of alcohol increased by 14% when compared to the previous year.⁹⁹

As the circle of employed people is very wide and various age categories fall into that circle, measures exercised by the state in terms of employment were not targeted to any specific age range. As assessed by one of the respondents, if the anti-crisis plan developed special measures tailored to employed/unemployed youth specifically, this would be considered as a "discriminatory approach" by the state to other age groups. Accordingly, we should presume that the negative impact this pandemic had on jobs/unemployment would also cover young people, while measures taken by the state to mitigate these effects also reflect on youngsters.

In the context of employment and labor relations, the study revealed challenges in the frame of **labor rights**. Particularly, if study participants talked about restrictions in terms of other rights, significant challenges were revealed in the context of labor rights. It is also worth mentioning that both discourses were presented by young study participants. According to one position, *similar to the case of all other rights, employers were forced to limit this right* and specific cases were less often perceived as a violation of rights.

"I can't say [that rights were violated]. On the contrary, every company did their best to keep the number of employees that was adequate and possible. From what I know, the majority of employees are not angry with their employer. No one was ready and expected this; not only us but the whole world appeared in this situation where we needed to find a solution. I cannot say that my rights were violated; the company just had to cut orders..." [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Kakheti]

"[My rights] were not violated. Had it been just me [who was fired], I would think that my rights were severely violated, but because of the situation, everyone in my company was left without a job". [Man, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

⁹⁸ <https://www.eurocare.org/cares.php?sp=alcohol-and-health&ssp=alcohol-consumption-in-times-of-covid-19>

⁹⁹ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2770975?resultClick=3>

According to another discourse, the *labor rights of young people were violated by their employers, which mostly implies being fired from work, giving compulsory leave or termination of contract without compensation*. It is worth mentioning that young respondents of the study do not speak about efforts to take legal steps to defend their rights, which could be related to a cultural factor. Despite having such practices, an employee filing a claim against employer is not widely exercised practice. Respectively, only a handful of people have applied legal mechanisms to defend their labor rights during this crisis. This also includes cases in which citizens who remained unemployed during the pandemic did not receive the compensation envisaged in the anti-crisis plan of the state.

"I was supposed to get 200 GEL during the pandemic, but I did not get it. My company did not send the proper documents to the state and I lost that compensation in addition to my income. I was severely affected financially". [Man, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Imereti]

"Labor rights were violated; they fired 1 300 employees. I woke up to an e-mail telling me I'm fired. A 9-month period passed and we have very "poorly" drafted contracts in Georgia, so our labor rights are completely unprotected. They just fired 1 300 people". [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"It was probably not very smart of me [when I did not file a claim to defend my rights], but I somehow still cared about the company where I worked not to damage their image..." [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Kakheti]

Certain citizens not receiving state compensation was connected to the existing practice of informal employment. As key informants participating in the study noted, employees may have thought that the state would use the practice of informal employment as some kind of "punishing measure", and this is why they did not provide employees with the relevant references. This is why many citizens who lost their jobs were left behind on the measures taken by the state.

"Lots of citizens are unemployed informally, and for many of them it was actually very problematic to submit a certificate stating they were employed, self-employed or informally employed. To their credit, it was hard for employers who hire informally to provide such certificates, and even though it is not a punishing measure taken by the state and none of the employers would be punished for this specific goal, I believe this fear actually prevented employers from providing such certificates". [Representative of public agency]

Representatives of public agencies as well as NGOs participating in the study focused on the violation of labor rights. They mentioned that many employers used the existing reality "dishonestly" and fired employees. According to one of the respondents, it is hard to say how this issue could be addressed legally, because the interference of the state in matters of business "*is not reasonable and good indicator*" for the country. However, as noted by study participants, it would be useful to have certain regulations that would prevent employers from firing employees so easily.

"There should have been specific conditions to prevent firing employees so easily. To not have income and go home should have been regulated in some way, because unfortunately, there were so many cases of companies taking advantage dishonestly" ... [Representative of public agency]

"During COVID-19, many companies misused records and the situation and started saving money, which is not legitimate. When you stop functioning and have economic problems this is understandable, but it won't be a justification that you cannot foresee what's coming and want to conserve money. This is not a legitimate grounds [to fire your employee]" ... [Representative of non-governmental sector]

As assessed by representatives of the NGO sector, multiple categories can be identified in terms of violating labor rights during the COVID-19 crisis. One is the *massive termination of contracts to employees*. Second is *giving employees compulsory leave*. Third is a *failure to pay debt accumulated before the pandemic to employees*, and fourth is the *negligence of COVID-19 regulations by many companies that endangered employees*. Regarding the fourth category, it was stressed that problems emerged at the initial phase ("*this referred to supermarkets, where crowds of people would visit and people called us, they were scared because recommendations and rules were neglected...*"), however, these problems were eventually fixed.

"Giving compulsory leave to employees was a widely used practice, and unfortunately the Prime Minister justified it when he said they could help those who were given compulsory unpaid leave. This situation happened in so many companies between employers and employees so that employees would keep their jobs, but in some cases it was compulsion. Employees were threatened that the contract would be terminated, and in some cases, it happened without prior notice". [Representative of non-governmental sector]

As noted by participants, force-majeure is not sufficient grounds for an employer to terminate the contract without compensation. The company is obliged to provide evidence that it has financial problems, which

leaves no room but to terminate the contract. However, as noted by the respondents, what's most important here is to submit the case to the court so that the employer is imposed with the liability to present proper evidence. The problem is that similar cases do not reach the court for a number of reasons, including how busy courts are, expenses related to the process, as well as the absence of financial interest of the employee. The reason could also be revenge on the part of the employer.

5.1.3. Impact on Social Connections and Health

In addition to challenges related to education and employment, the study also revealed other challenges the COVID-19 pandemic created for youth.

As believed by young respondents of the study, another important challenge they have to deal with is **limited social connections** during the pandemic. According to one of the main discourses, young people are far more inclined to social interactions than older generations, and the practice is much more frequent for them. Regulations that came in force minimized social connections, which was assessed as a serious challenge for everyone in general, but it was emphasized that the situation particularly affected the psycho-emotional state of young people, and that this effect will continue to occur.

"We young people love to spend time together more, we love to meet new people; older generations have other concerns and things to do. Respectively, this situation has affected young people more. Older generations have already seen a lot and I don't think this was something new for them. It was new for us and we did not react so well". [Woman, 18-24 years old, representative of ethnic minority, rural settlement, Kvemo Kartli]

In the context of limited social interaction, the assessment of study participants is worth mentioning. Regarding the assessment, many rights of citizens were restricted under the lockdown, and the **right of movement** was predominantly mentioned by respondents. Young respondents as well as key informants believe that even though the restriction of this right affected every age group, this regulation appeared to be particularly difficult on young people – again, because of “special importance” of social interactions.

"The right of free movement [was limited] first of all. The majority of human rights were limited and we depended on regulations". [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"I think mobility and movement concern young people more than older residents, who spend the majority of their time at home. I believe that the deprivation of this right would affect young people. I would not say their rights, but their comfort – definitely". [Representative of public agency]

Apart from limited social interactions that negatively affect the psycho-emotional state of young people, restrictions introduced on movement were named among the reasons that negatively affected the **physical activity** of youth. As noted, the “stay home” order and less physical activity made young people even more “addicted” to the screen, which has caused several health problems (e.g. problems related to eyesight).

"We were forced to obey these regulations. We stayed home for 2 months, we did not go out, and physical activity was minimized". [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"I already have problems with my sight, and now I noticed that what I used to see before the pandemic and before the end of February, I can't see anymore because I am forced to be focused on the screen all the time". [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

Young respondents participating in the study did not go into the particulars of other challenges that became topical during the pandemic, apart from cases in which physical activity was vitally important. To this end, any substantial differences among age groups were not stressed. As assessed by discussion participants, those for whom physical activity (for instance, following daily routines, regular swimming sessions, etc.) is vitally important were particularly vulnerable to challenges created by the pandemic regardless of their age.

Young participants of the study did not focus on challenges emerging in terms of the accessibility of medical services. They stressed that neither they nor their family members had any need to use particular medical services during the lockdown, but in case of such need, they were confident that it would not be a problem to receive the needed medical service. The only challenge pointed out in this context was the restriction on movement. Moreover, as pointed out by young respondents, issues related to the arrangement of travelling abroad for medical purposes could be easily addressed. They mentioned that restrictions set in force on international flights were a hindering factor, but under the coordination of the relevant agencies and clinics, arrangements were easily made to ensure a patient’s departure.

"It was allowed [to take a patient abroad], we just did not think it was reasonable because Turkey had a far worse situation in terms of COVID-positive patients and we decided not to go. Had it been an urgent necessity, I would arrange a departure, they did not make such patients wait at the border and quarantine was not required, I just did not risk going there when the situation was so severe". [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

As for key informants, it was stressed that the issue of providing lots of medical services, as well as medications for various groups (for instance, delivering medications to various groups, arranging online therapy courses, etc.) was tackled in a timely manner.

It is worth mentioning that when speaking about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health, young people mostly focused on challenges emerging in the field of **mental health**. They pointed out that limited social connections are a main factor in the possible deterioration of young peoples' psycho-emotional states. Study participants predict that the situation will deteriorate even more in the future because the pandemic is not over yet. Problems caused by the pandemic (primarily the economic crisis and unemployment) will complicate the reality even more. It is noteworthy that when discussing impacts on health of young people, young participants did not go into particulars of other issues aside from some of the challenges related to physical activity and the special importance of mental health issues. In this context, young respondents considered their age group as the most vulnerable group. The main point stressed by youngsters was the "particular importance of social connections". Key informants participating in the study also stressed the importance of young peoples' mental health.

Young participants of the study found it difficult to speak about vulnerable groups, but it was noted that vulnerable groups may include all of those people who, due to health-related problems, needed/need to be involved in various sporting activities (routine walks, swimming, etc.), but it was stressed that this concerns every age group and focusing on young people in particular is "wrong".

The only group that was deemed particularly vulnerable to facing severe challenges was the category of **working mothers**, who were and are forced to combine work and household chores. As this task was not easy even before the pandemic due to all the responsibilities imposed on women, it has become even more difficult to fulfill since the space for being an employee, a mother and a housewife is the same. This significantly affects the quality of performing all of the abovementioned roles.

"Those who have small children were severely affected [by the pandemic]. No school, no kindergarten, and it became so difficult to leave your children with someone... moreover, so many family members are abroad that it became so difficult to find someone to babysit your children". [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Kakheti]

"I'm talking about the entire process of working. The lifestyle has changed because it is difficult to have a small child, teach online and try even more, because you have more responsibility to teach better and doing all this appeared to be very hard. My routine has changed and teaching online became more difficult because my child was at home and it was a hindering factor". [Woman, 25-29 years old, representative of ethnic minority, urban settlement, Samtskhe-Javakheti]

As for key informants participating in the study, the main vulnerable groups particularly affected by the pandemic, apart from employees who lost their job, were athletes, disabled people, and children without parental care. The latter category had to endure severe psycho-emotional effects related to the pandemic. According to respondents, children without parental care already have to deal with so much trauma, isolation and stress that a lockdown makes their life even more complicated. As for athletes and disabled persons, it was particularly stressed that due to regulations, representatives of these groups were unable to perform their routine activities, (for instance, work out, therapy courses in a traditional regime, etc.) which negatively affected their physical as well as mental state. However, it was also emphasized that these challenges concern not only 18-29 year-old youngsters, but a much wider group of citizens. In order to respond to their needs, as noted by participants, the state took specific measures that will be discussed in the following sub-chapters of the given report.

5.2. Information

5.2.1. Sources of Information

When asked about sources of obtaining information about regulations as well as other decisions made by the government regarding the pandemic, respondents named various sources. Namely, young people participating in the study were informed about regulations through the following sources:

- TV;
- Internet portals;
- Social networks;
- Family members;
- SMS notifications; and
- Work.

As the study demonstrated, together with various news portals, mostly *Facebook* from **social networks** and www.stopcov.ge from **internet portals** acted as sources of information. It is worth mentioning that as believed by key informants participating in the study, with high probability, the main source of information for young people would be social networks. However, focus group discussions and interviews conducted with young people participating in the study clarified that **television** was one of the most important sources for obtaining information on regulations or decisions made regarding the pandemic. They note that a lot of fake news is disseminated on the internet and on social networks, which raises questions about the credibility of information. As believed by young people, information disseminated on the television is much more reliable as it undergoes a certain filter before it airs, and the chances of fake news appearing on television are small. This is the reason why respondents named www.stopcov.ge – the portal developed by the government – as a credible source of information.

"I admit that I was addicted to Facebook and obtained all kinds of information through that channel, but after the epidemiological situation got worse, my TV was on all the time and I often watched morning programs, news programs... I mostly obtained information through TV". [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"Exactly for that reason... there was so much fake news and absolutely scary headlines that made me very depressed... I preferred to visit official government sites, like stopcov.ge". [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

It is worth mentioning that study participants stressed the need to improve www.stopcov.ge so that citizens can be better informed. Namely, as stated, the webpage is not very user-friendly and users cannot easily find information. As suggested by one of the respondents, it is recommended to provide a separate block of regulations on the page, which will be easily noticeable. In addition, the newest regulations should be highlighted so that users will easily understand what new regulations are in force and since when. Young participants see the necessity of these improvements – as declared by them, when multiple regulations went in force simultaneously, it was difficult to catch up with all of them and be informed on the exact dates when a specific rule would come into force. Another challenge was that sometimes the time gap between drafting and enacting the specific regulations was so small that citizens were unable "to prepare properly". In addition, young respondents deem it necessary to not only inform citizens about regulations or decisions, but to provide an explanation in "language they understand".

"I know that information is uploaded on a specific site [stopcov.ge], but the site is designed in a way that it is hard to find information... not very user-friendly". [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"The time gap was too short between the dissemination of information and the enactment of rules. Take the example of brides. Brides were left in their gowns, I mean there should be a time gap between announcement and the enactment of regulations so that companies and establishments have time to prepare"... [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Kakheti]

"We were provided with verbal information, but some [regulation, decision] was unclear and not defined properly... we needed unclear regulations to be explained, not those that the passenger could not sit in the front seat". [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Kakheti]

One of the main sources of information for young people was the **workplace**. In addition, important actors were **family members**, for whom the main source of information was television ("they were constantly updated on information via TV"). As assessed by young people, they did not have problems in terms of being informed. The most important thing was to know where to obtain credible information with the overflow of news ("information is available; the most important thing is that young people should not feel lazy and find it").

5.2.2. Level of Awareness

Regardless of the accessibility of information and diversified sources, which was pointed out by young respondents as well as key informants, the study identified certain challenges in terms of the level of awareness. First of all, these challenges are related to **providing ethnic minorities with information**. As noted by representatives of ethnic minorities participating in the study, obtaining information was not problematic for those who know Georgian. But for those who find it difficult or even impossible to obtain information in Georgian, the challenge stands. As noted by study participants, even though leaflets and flyers in Armenian and Azeri languages were distributed in regions where ethnic minorities are represented, this was not enough for comprehensive awareness. As believed by young respondents, disseminated information materials included general information on hygiene rules, and this "was useful" even though the distribution process "might have been a little belated". However, daily updated information on statistics, regulations and decisions are still hard to find in the languages of ethnic minorities.

"[information] is accessible. This was stressed from the beginning. Including for those groups that receive information through traditional channels – particular focus was made on these groups, including disabled young people and young people who are ethnic minorities. We cooperated with local organizations and they ensured the dissemination of information locally in regions where ethnic minorities reside. It was a good campaign; leaflets were translated in respective languages, and it is important to note that young people widely have access to internet, which made it much easier". [Representative of public agency]

"I received information on the pandemic in general and specific regulations via internet media. This information was sufficient for me because I speak Georgian. What was written was sufficient for us". [Woman, 25-29 years old, rural settlement, Samtskhe-Javakheti]

"They distributed flyers in Armenian and I'm sure in Azeri too. This happened 1-2 months after the pandemic started, when we all knew about the pandemic and regulations. This information was a little belated. Yes, we young people use the internet but older generations and children do not use the internet that often. They also do not observe media, thus, to make it more convincing, this issue should have been fixed earlier in our village. It was quite belated". [Woman, 25-29 years old, rural settlement, Samtskhe-Javakheti]

Young people deemed the response to these challenges necessary. As suggested by one of the respondents, the Public Broadcaster should dedicate more time to the dissemination of information in the languages of ethnic minorities (Armenian, Azeri), so that this group of society receives constantly updated information.

As believed by one of the young respondents, another challenge in terms of the accessibility of information refers to *economic restrictions*. As assessed by this respondent, if information on general regulations was easily accessible, the reality was different when it comes to economic regulations.

"[information] on main regulations was available, as I watch over those legal acts that entered into force considering my profession, but it was problematic to obtain information on economic regulations. My friends had such problems, too. They tried to retrieve information from the webpage of the Ministry of Economy and the government's page, but neither of their Facebook pages provided comprehensive information. They tried to call a hotline, and it was very hard because lines were busy and did not provide full information. Even the Government of Georgia did not have final decisions made and retrieving comprehensive information was difficult". [Man, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

Challenges related to the dissemination of information were stressed by key informants, too. Namely, as assessed by one of the respondents, even though certain steps were taken to ensure the provision of information to citizens with special needs (for instance, the provision of information in sign language), these steps were not enough for those with mental health problems. In particular, the state should have ensured the provision of information in a simplified form for this group. Regardless of these minor problems, as believed by key informants, challenges in terms of the dissemination of information were not serious, especially for young people.

"The only thing we could have done was to provide young people with mental disabilities with information in a simplified form. For this purpose, we prepared printed information in cooperation with the UNDP and several videos explaining in general what Coronavirus is and how to protect ourselves... we could have done more, but otherwise, in terms of other information, I truly believe... especially young people had full access". [Representative of public agency]

"Before regulations came into force, every news program, every internet and news portal, everyone starting from the Ministry of Healthcare ending with deputies, Facebook, the Facebook page of Employment Agency, the Facebook page of the ministry, any news program, television, the internet – every media channel covered it... information was massively disseminated. Service centers of all agencies were informed and disseminated news. I mean, in this specific case, I don't see the blame of the state". [Representative of public agency]

"Information was quite disseminated, young people used hotline, it was useful that the government did this. It could have worked better but it was force majeure... in addition to this, young people have social networks and information was very well disseminated both in verbal and written forms, and I believe we did not have problems in this direction". [Representative of international organization]

Even though key respondents focused on the hotline as one important source of information for citizens, young participants did not include this source among other sources of information on Coronavirus-related regulations or other news.

5.3. State's Response to Challenges

5.3.1. Evaluation of Steps Taken by the State to Respond to the Covid-19 Crisis

When discussing steps taken by the government to fight the Coronavirus pandemic, specifically in terms of young citizens, key informants participating in the study highlighted several actions taken by the government. One group of measures taken by the government refers to **the field of education**, while another group refers to **social direction**.

As noted, the state's response to challenges emerging in the field of education for young people can be assessed as effective, such as *switching to online learning, decisions related to the payment of tuition fees and the departure/arrival of students from abroad*. Decisions made regarding switching to an online learning model and paying tuition fees, which mostly implied postponing payment dates, were positively evaluated by both young respondents and key informants of the study. Measures taken by the state to ensure the arrival of students from foreign countries or their departure abroad were evaluated by key informants only and their assessment was positive. When speaking about measures taken regarding education, respondents stressed the importance of steps taken to improve the accessibility of computer appliances or the internet. As noted by study participants (young people and key informants), in some cases universities or local self-government tried to tackle the aforementioned problem. Even though there clearly were problems, especially in terms of ensuring that everyone had access to online learning (for instance, there are still students who fail to receive a comprehensive education due to limited access to internet), the measures taken by the government were generally successful. To this end, respondents positively assessed the enrollment of **entrants living within occupied territories** into higher education institutions without entrance exams. The precedent before the pandemic implied that after graduating from school in the occupied territories, entrants were enrolled into bachelor's programs at various institutes and universities without passing entrance exams. This year, entrants were allowed to enroll into MA programs without exams. Challenges arising from regulations set in force because of the pandemic, especially regulations that implied restrictions on movement, could have been a serious barrier for entrants from occupied territories, but this issue was addressed through the decision made by the government. In addition, another important factor was that as decided by the government of Georgia, entrants from occupied territories receive a full state scholarship to cover their tuition fees. Thus, more entrants from occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions have the opportunity to study at different universities in Georgia.

Young respondents also stressed that among other measures taken by the government in this direction, postponing payment dates of tuition fees for students was an effective measure.

When speaking about measures taken in the field of healthcare, respondents stressed the importance of responding to the needs of **citizens with special needs**. As noted by participants, it was necessary to provide people under state care, including disabled persons, with services in a way that does not break rules vital to their life and health. Respondents stated that children with special needs (14-18-year-old youngsters) were offered educational services in a remote regime. Expectations were not high that online services provided

for children with special needs would bring drastically positive changes, but taking this step was deemed necessary so that every beneficiary would “have the feeling that we ensured the continuity of the process”. Respondents noted positive feedback, which was mostly related to the involvement of parents in the process and the study of specific manipulations they could use more intensively in the future. However, it was stressed that there are situations in which such an approach is ineffective and the reality of working with beneficiaries with particular diagnoses is rather complicated.

“Online learning is a different topic and there is a special segment of people who require special approaches... as explained by specialists, there is a certain range of diagnosis, especially for the autistic spectrum, in which it is practically impossible to have a child sit in front of a screen, so I can't tell you that it works perfectly with everyone, with every diagnosis or with every type of child”. [Representative of public agency]

Another direction that was deemed important for youth and in which specific steps were taken by the state were stressed, is **sport**. Respondents of the study stated that limitations on physical activity negatively affect the physical as well as mental health of young people. Respectively, it was deemed important for the state to take specific steps in this direction. In this context, respondents paid attention to several challenges and to the responses of the state to these challenges. In particular, and as noted by study participants, limitations on movement and physical exercise severely affected athletes. In compliance with professional sports protocol developed to this end, sports sessions started in June. It is worth mentioning that respondents emphasized the importance of sports and related protocols for every age group. As believed by one of the respondents, even though protocols for professional sports work equally throughout the entire territory of the country, the dissemination of information should have been more effective at the municipality level (“*citizens called the hotline and asked if they were allowed to exercise when it had been suspended for a month and a half*”). It was noted that even though decisions and relevant information were disseminated at the central level, this kind of information was not properly spread at the municipal level. In this context, it was stressed that the agencies responsible for sports-related topics at local self-governments should have worked better and provided stakeholders with comprehensive information in a timely manner.

“Local self-government should ensure the dissemination of protocols because it's directly their job and duty but they contacted us – sports schools – and told us that they had not been informed”. [Representative of public agency]

Three types of protocols have been developed in the field of sports. Namely, *protocols for sports, fitness, gymnastics and swimming pools*. All places that had been adapted for disabled persons before the pandemic continued functioning in the same regime for citizens with special needs. So, it cannot be said that during the pandemic, disabled professional or non-professional citizens who used the respective services (fitness, swimming pool) had different restrictions than every other citizen. Respondents of the interview declared that having an adapted environment for disabled citizens is problematic in general and the state needs to work on this topic more. The pandemic did not reveal anything new in this regard.

Speaking of protocols, it was also mentioned that a protocol has not been developed for sporting lessons at schools. Respectively, work in this direction was deemed important. According to one of the respondents of the study, as physical health affects the mental health of children, it is necessary to offer pupils in higher grades (VII-XIII grades) any kind of sporting activity, even if it is online since it was decided that they will continue attending classes from home.

It is worth mentioning that special rules in the field of sports have not been developed for young people specifically. Sports protocols were developed for every age group equally, and it can be said that regulations and enacted protocols included the target group of the study – 18-29 year-old youngsters.

Respondents suggested that one of the main future challenges in the direction of sports is that if the situation worsens and regulations become stricter, the state may have to prohibit exercise in enclosed spaces. For this case, it was declared that those kinds of sports, and specifically those athletes who have upcoming tournaments to attend will have a chance to exercise. In this case, an individual approach will work better than a general protocol.

In Tbilisi, it was also noted that as it was impossible to plan and implement sporting activities during lockdown, so it was decided to use this time to implement infrastructural projects. In particular, the construction of sports centers and the installation of various infrastructure did not stop during quarantine.

“We tried to minimize restrictions on infrastructure projects. Since we were unable to do activities, we accelerated infrastructure projects even more for a time when activities would be allowed... infrastructure is one of the main factors that helps carrying out activities in a specific space”. [Representative of local self-government]

Financial support envisaged in the anti-crisis plan for citizens who are temporarily unemployed or on unpaid leave, including young people, was assessed as a more or less effective measure. However, it is worth mentioning that as assessed by representatives of non-governmental and international organizations participating in the study, unlike the initial immediate response, when beneficiaries of financial support were united in large groups, at the given stage it is important to define specific groups, their needs and provide targeted support. In this direction, respondents noted that in order to tackle unemployment for young people who may represent one of the most vulnerable groups, the state needs to develop a special support package. It is noteworthy that for study participants, this support does not necessarily (or exclusively) imply financial support. Respondents stressed the importance of providing a competitive environment for young people and offering them more opportunities so that they can show their abilities.

"Young citizens who worked and lost their jobs because of this crisis in fact belong to a risk group, but there is no specific evidence of how they were identified and how targeted support was for them. It's a good thing that the state responds to these things, but what's missing here is an evidence-based decision". [Representative of international organization]

"Even though the state announces grant support competitions, such as "Produce in Georgia", which implies the support of ideas oriented on income, the state still does not understand that it is difficult for young people to compete with older generations. I am 35 years old and have a business idea, but the probability of me winning over a 21-year-old youngster is very high because I've tried multiple times to submit a project to Produce in Georgia and received relevant feedback. I know what problems my proposal had and I will make amendments and submit an improved project"

[Representative of international organization]

Another factor highlighted by international organizations participating in the study was **positive steps made by the Youth Agency** during the crisis. According to the respondents, this agency managed and transformed regional forums in an online regime. In addition, they did not suspend the certification of young workers, which was positively evaluated – respondents believe that by doing so, the organization (Youth Agency) which is tasked with working on youth issues, is actually getting stronger.

As for young respondents of the study, when assessing measures taken by the state to respond to the pandemic, they mostly focused on **regulations** – some of which were evaluated as effective and some of which were believed to be partially or completely ineffective. Namely, as believed by young respondents, *decisions promptly made by the state in response to the pandemic and the enactment of strict regulations were correct*, as these decisions ensured a “low contamination rate” in the country. However, young people assessed some of the regulations as ineffective, and the main point was the “illogical” nature of these regulations. The most frequently mentioned illogical regulation was the restriction set on the number of passengers in vehicles (“*why were not more than three people allowed in the car?*”).

One of the most frequently discussed regulations was a curfew starting from 9 p.m. It is noteworthy that positive as well as negative assessments were made by study respondents.

"If the virus spreads before 9 p.m., does not it spread after 9 p.m.?" [Man, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

"Older generations, 40 year-old men, used to gather and hang out in front of my house after 9 p.m. and this is when the majority of people have time and go outside... I believe the curfew started at 9 p.m. because people tend to hang out more during this time of day". [Woman, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

The most negatively assessed regulation referred to the *restriction of gatherings*. According to the main point, many people could not have a wedding because of regulations in this area, and along with financial damage, the regulations brought serious emotional discomfort and the feeling that the state should “have made certain exceptions”.

Another factor stressed by study participants was *increased prices on products*. As assessed by young respondents, this problem is even more painful for citizens when the unemployment rate is increasing and the state needs to take specific measures to prevent this.

"As far as I know, the state has the right to set a threshold on prices. Sellers would not be allowed to increase prices over the set limit. I think that would be the best solution, since prices wouldn't increase so much and goods wouldn't become so expensive – it would be the best solution to set limits for legal entities that increase prices so unreasonably".

[Man, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

The most important thing pointed out by young respondents did not refer to the enactment of tightened regulations, but to the enforcement of regulations. As believed by respondents, it was and still noticeable that *citizens do not properly follow regulations*. This appeared to be especially problematic in regions.

"You know what I noticed? I have to travel a lot in the cities, such as Tbilisi and Kutaisi, and I observed that regulations are fully followed only in the capital city. Neither Kutaisi nor Tskaltubo residents obey the regulations as well as in Tbilisi. The state sets regulations, but people do not follow the rules". [Woman, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Imereti]

As believed by young people, the state doesn't need to tighten regulations, but enforce existing regulations. Challenges emerging in this direction were stressed by key informants. Respectively, they agree that strict control over the enforcement of existing regulations is the challenge that requires a response.

5.3.2. Steps to be Taken by the State in the Future

Citizens **ignoring and violating** regulations was identified as one of the most serious challenges. Both young respondents and key informants identified copying with this challenge as one of the most important goals in the nearest future. Young respondents stressed that *strict state control on the enforcement of regulations needs to be intensified not only in the capital city, but throughout the entire country*. They also pointed out the importance of *trust*, which is related to the dissemination of information about infected patients via informal sources (word of mouth). Namely, as noted by young respondents, they know a few people who personally or whose relatives were sent (SMS or e-mail) COVID-positive test results even though these people did not take a test. Young respondents believe that similar facts and the dissemination of information act as an additional factor for neglecting regulations and the state needs to take measures against it.

"In general, they need to execute and control the enforcement of regulations. Otherwise, the regulations are useless... regulations need to be followed and more attention needs to be paid to other cities and not only the capital city". [Woman, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Imereti]

"I don't know how much people trust each other or the state and this will be a problem. There are many cases in which someone has a fever but does not go to hospital because s/he will definitely turn out infected. People do not trust either medical institutes or the state. It is disinformation that even if you do not have COVID, they will say you have the virus". [Woman, 18-24 years old, representative of ethnic minority, urban settlement, Kvemo Kartli]

"They need to tighten control. They should start from simple places because public spaces, even yards, shops, and other places where people gather, they do not wear masks. There is no way to protect yourself, since they do not keep distance and I believe that there should be someone appointed to inspect every district of the city. This is exactly where they should start control instead of large supermarkets and hospitals. It should have already been checked. They are obliged, but they miss the most important places". [Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Kvemo Kartli]

Key informants agreed that the enforcement of regulations is a serious challenge. As stated by one of informant, citizens not only disobey the rule to wear a mask or keep social distance, but the rule of self-isolation as well. Respectively, as believed by key informants, the enforcement of regulations and strict control over this process will be the ultimate challenge in the future and the state will have to cope with it.

"We can see that citizens have a high sense of responsibility when s/he tells us important details, is eager to support us, tells us they know our resources, is grateful for our service... such citizens realize how important the problem is. On the contrary, we have had many aggressive citizens and situations in which we needed to call the police. We have had cases where we needed the help of police in quarantine space... people attempting escape, damaging the environment in quarantine, rioting, shouting, etc.". [Representative of local self-government]

"The challenge that remains is that recommendations that are in place need to be followed precisely"... [Representative of public agency]

When speaking about self-isolation and regulations, key informants noted that it is necessary to have an active campaign in place that stresses the importance of general regulations, since the awareness of citizens is low. According to respondents, an active communication campaign will aid in the understanding of regulations, regardless of whether or not they are based on common sense. In this direction, it was noted that there should be a focus not only on the importance of following rules, but also an explanation of regulations and the provision of clear instructions.

"In fact, the number of people with aggressive position is almost three times higher, saying who are you, this is what Amirani told me¹⁰⁰ ... someone who is not familiar with the basis of the problem may have logical questions. You let an infected person outside and lock me in when I don't have the virus and I am healthy. This may look logical on one glance, but it has other explanation. They said those who are in self-isolation do not need a test on the 12th day. Today we have situation in which 6 out of 10 people in self-isolation test positive. After this decision, people refused to take a test... respectively, it should be reflected [in the study]. I don't have the right or competence to tell someone what to write in the protocol, but it should be said that regarding the campaign, it does not necessarily refer to self-isolation".... [Representative of local self-government]

¹⁰⁰ Note: Amiran Gamkrelidze, general director of National Center for Disease Control and Public Health.

Within the scope of the study it was also stated that a **lack of socialization and related stress**, which may cause many mental health problems, will be the ultimate challenge in the near future and society will definitely need to cope with these problems. Even though participants believe that these problems will affect every group of society, we consider children and young people to be particularly vulnerable.

"I have the feeling that I wasted 1 year of my life... I have the feeling that life slipped through my fingers and I got old".
[Woman, 18-24 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"Young people seriously suffer from a lack of socialization. This is stressful and they will have to deal with stress caused by social distancing..." [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Kakheti]

Speaking of mental health, key informants stressed not only expected challenges, but problems that the pandemic has already revealed. As noted by the study respondents, this pandemic made it clear that attitudes towards *programs dedicated to mental health problems* need to be changed at the political level. In particular, it is necessary to connect healthcare problems with social programs so that those with serious mental disorders will not automatically be transferred to psychiatric hospitals, but "we should be able to provide the respective service locally, in a small family house type of place".

Upcoming challenges the state needs to respond to in terms of the pandemic also include **education**. One challenge appeared to be young peoples' *low level of internet access and material-technical appliances*. As young respondents and key informants believe, it will be necessary to work more intensively on increasing internet coverage. The state may develop a strategy to handle this issue in cooperation with internet providers. Second, the state needs to start thinking about mechanisms to ensure that citizens have access to computers. As it was noted, limited access to computers is a challenge not only for students, but for academic personnel as well as citizens employed in other fields. In this direction, study participants consider employers as one of the main actors who need to take responsibility and provide their employees with computers.

"I would stress the importance of providing villages with internet coverage. The government may work with internet providers. One problem that concerns young people when using internet on their phone is that it is difficult for them to attend lectures. The quality of internet is really poor and the state may work with internet providers to tackle this issue."

In addition, the government should also take measures to provide socially vulnerable citizens with internet... Internet has become as important as other basic essentials, such as food and so on for young people... We cannot receive an education otherwise [without access to the internet]". [Representative of international organization]

"Not everyone can afford a computer to work online. In that case, the company should provide computer appliances".
[Woman, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

Another challenge in the field of education that needs to be addressed in the near future refers to the *technical skills and competencies of academic personnel* in higher education institutions, since their skills and competencies are currently not relevant for online teaching. Respectively, young respondents of the study as well as key informants deem it very important to take specific steps in this direction (e.g. to organize courses or trainings for academic personnel).

As assessed by representatives of international organizations, it will be important for the state to start thinking about involving young people as **volunteers** in various activities. As young people have innovative ideas, their approaches may appear interesting in many fields. Accordingly, study participants deem it interesting to mobilize young people, and understand their approaches and positions on how to tackle different problems. In addition to the fact that the knowledge and skills of young people can be used to create innovative products and services in different fields, another important effect of mobilizing young people is to demonstrate the importance of this group. As believed by study participants, it is necessary that young people feel that they are important part of society and can actively participate in processes.

"We know that as soon as young people have the opportunity to do something, they use this chance. For example, when the Red Cross made an announcement, they engaged actively, they stood at stands, collected products, and then handed them out to elderly and poor people. This clearly is a positive fact. If more organizations start doing similar activities, we have young people who take chances like this"... [Representative of international organization]

"Young people may come up with more innovative programs and based on their age they have more potential to create such things. We should encourage young people to become involved in developing mechanisms where we will become more active. Let's take the electronic healthcare system. Involving young people in this direction is interesting... they should be made to feel that they are important" [Representative of international organization]

It is worth mentioning that the study with key informants stressed the importance of recognizing not only the role of young people, but the fact that the agency working on youth issues needs more legitimacy. Actors

in the political field need to understand and recognize the importance of youth-related issues. As noted by one of the respondents, even though there is a Youth Agency that coordinates youth issues, thus acting as a reminder that youth issues are important for the country, the standing challenge is that this topic is still not recognized as very important topic.

[Youth] Agency still has to settle, first of all, on the government level... Youth Agency still has a lot of work in order to gain recognition of its importance on the government level. This does not mean that employees are weak or less proactive, but decisions that are made on the national level – those who make decisions in the country are not aware of the youth work at all. They do not appreciate it and deem it less valuable". [Representative of international organization]

As believed by study participants, another and one of the main challenges young people will have to cope with in the future is **employment** (both keeping a job and starting a new job). Key informants believe that steps taken by the state in this direction need to be consistent. One of the important measures to take in this direction was believed to be the development of a strategy to support youth employment, which should present a detailed vision on how to support the employment of young people.

"For me the biggest challenge is how to keep my job, because this pandemic demonstrated that companies and establishments in general can tackle problems with fewer employees and that they may cut the number of staff in case of switching online. They may give me leave, and this is my number one challenge as a young individual..." [Man, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Imereti]

"It's unfortunate that the country does not have an in-depth vision on how to support young people in employment". [Representative of international organization]

"A specific employment strategy needs to be developed that will present a detailed description of the current situation and existing gaps, and cooperate with the relevant experts to come up with steps that need to be taken. It could be presented on the government institutions' level". [Representative of international organization]

One of the important measures to support youth employment was believed to be *the strategy of recruitment agencies to include programs oriented on youth*. As suggested by one of the respondents, this may imply the formation of a youth support fund, which will provide funding for initiatives submitted by youngsters and "they will not have to compete with older generations".

Even though this does not only concern young people, one important measure to take in the future in terms of employment is to work on **labor formalization**. According to one of the respondents, the Coronavirus pandemic exposed the importance of labor formalization to the state and society. Respectively, readiness to begin this process is quite high now and the state needs to intensify work in this direction.

"I can't tell you exactly, but 25% or 30% wanted to formalize their work before COVID-19, but after COVID-19, this number went up to 80%. The number of people who want to formalize their work has doubled and tripled... self-employed citizens have problems. The main challenge for self-employed residents was that they did not receive the 1,200 GEL compensation for formally employed citizens and instead received only 300 GEL for self-employment. Additionally, they might have been fired without being given a chance to submit a claim to the court. I mean, these people started to see the importance of formalization, and we will see how the state will work on this". [Representative of non-governmental organization]

Another issue particularly stressed by one of the respondents referred to *labor inspection*. In particular, as assessed by this respondent, labor inspection currently has the important function of controlling the fulfillment of COVID-19 recommendations, but starting from January 1st, their functions will be expanded. Due to insufficient resources, primarily human resources, the labor inspection issue may be left behind in terms of protecting labor rights. Respectively, as believed by this respondent, labor inspection "*needs to be equipped with respective [human] resources to protect labor rights at workplace*". Another issue highlighted by the specific respondent of the study was that the state should understand issues of minimum wage and unemployment compensation.

In addition to this, as believed by a representative from the non-governmental sector, the state needs to start thinking about the *problems of homeless citizens*. This respondent suggested that during the Covid-19 crisis and especially in the time of quarantine, it became clear that the state does not have any specific vision in this direction. This is one of the vulnerable groups of society who do not have access either to a home or information, and respectively, the probability of them following important regulations related to the pandemic is unrealistic. As believed by the respondent, based on the lessons we learned, the state needs to start thinking about taking specific measures for homeless citizens.

5.4. New Opportunities Emerging During the COVID Crisis

Based on the study results, even though the Coronavirus pandemic made the country face so many challenges, new opportunities emerged. Namely, the following points have been made in terms of new opportunities:

- Increased demand on online shopping;
- Increased demand on delivery services;
- Increased interest in agriculture;
- Increased digitalization of older generations and the perspective that more people, especially older generations, will realize the importance of digitalization;
- More people discovering new talents and abilities in themselves; and
- Increased access to global education.

As assessed by young respondents of the study, the demand for **online sales** increased during the pandemic, which resulted in increasing demand for **delivery services**. Respectively, employment opportunities in the fields of online sales and delivery services increased. It was stressed that delivery service were already available in large cities and in this case we are speaking about an increased scale, while online sales with the respective services became available in small cities only during the pandemic.

Another field the pandemic positively affected is **agriculture**. As noted by young respondents, citizens in general including young people became more interested in agriculture. They became involved in activities that may bring positive outcomes from a long-term perspective. Namely, more people (including youth) may turn this field into a source of income.

The **digitalization of generations** is another positive effect of the pandemic, as stressed by study participants. It was declared that many services realized the importance of digitalization and accelerated this process. It became clear that digitalization is important not only for young people, but for older generations, too. Processes taking place in education partially responded to this challenge, but as believed by study respondents, the state needs to work more actively and help younger generations adapt to digitalization and the new reality.

"My friend had a clothing store and switched to online sales and now sells from home. Another friend of mine started crafting accessories and sells via Facebook... This is how she started working from home". [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Kakheti]

"Internet marketing has become very popular, so many people started e-commerce while online stores were not a thing in our region. Now people sell cows, rabbits, and chickens via the internet. This channel turned out to be very useful, but I don't think it is solely because of the pandemic – it just accelerated the process". [Woman, 25-29 years old, rural settlement, Samtskhe-Javakheti]

"I live in a region and I'm very much involved in agriculture. A lot of people I know started agricultural activities, some resumed what he had left; some bought beehives, some started growing corn fields, and some started crop growing during the pandemic". [Man, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Imereti]

One more opportunity named by young respondents was the increased **accessibility to different learning courses**. It was stressed that online courses or trainings that were not accessible before became totally free under the lockdown. Respectively, education has become much more accessible and global during the pandemic.

"I have trainings at the bank, and I get to meet people online that if not for this online learning, I may not even meet in my life". [Man, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Imereti]

"Now Harvard, Oxford, Stanford, every university has made online courses. They did not have online courses before and because of the pandemic, these courses are now free and anyone from any country can attend and learn". [Woman, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Imereti]

In addition, new opportunities in terms of **discovering new talents and hobbies** resulted from the pandemic. In addition to the fact that some discovered new talents and started developing these talents, for some young people this crisis has become a motivator to start a new business or transform an old one.

"I discovered a new talent in me – teaching – and I'm thinking about turning it into my profession. I plan on expanding and reaching larger scales in terms of teaching, and not remaining at the home teaching level". [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Kakheti]

"Now I can have 3 students instead of 1 because I don't spend time on the road. I can call them and even though teaching online is hard, we still manage it". [Woman, 25-29 years old, urban settlement, Tbilisi]

"People around me started making washable multi-use masks and it turned out to be the most profitable business during this pandemic and actually worked for everyone". [Man, 18-24 years old, rural settlement, Kakheti]

Key informants participating in the study stressed that the pandemic exposed certain fields or specific issues in which the necessity of alternative opportunities and the need to introduce innovative approaches is obvious. One such field is education, specifically the opportunity to work on a **hybrid education** model. As noted by respondents, challenges emerged during the pandemic and the response to them clarified that online learning has advantages that can be used in the post-crisis period. Considering that the full replacement of offline learning can be less effective, it is reasonable to think about a hybrid model, and as noted by one of the respondents, the state has already started working in this direction.

Speaking of new opportunities, it was also noted that even though we don't have evidence-based data so far, as a general tendency, it is noticeable that quarantine and lockdown made citizens see the importance of physical activity. Respectively, we can presume that healthy lifestyles and **sports** will become an important part of everyday life for more and more people.

Another opportunity that was exposed during the crisis refers to **medical students**, who worked as hotline operators. Namely, those students who speak Armenian and Azeri "helped the system", and the state may utilize their resources to respond to respective needs in the future.

The opportunity to offer modified services to **people with special needs** was one of the elements stressed by key informants. In particular, it was suggested that the practice of offering certain services in an online format may become more common in the future, and this way more people will have a chance to use services (e.g. therapy course for those with different special needs) that were previously unavailable because of geographic limitations.

"The first stage is to use this service [online therapy courses] during the lockdown, but if we manage to correctly construe the mechanism, including monitoring and funding principles, we can utilize it to ensure geographic accessibility or for cases in which beneficiaries cannot visit the center due to a health condition. Parents are usually afraid of viruses and flu, and avoid taking their children to the center. We are thinking about it, but we have not made any specific decisions yet". [Representative of public agency]

Key informants participating in the study identified **re-assessing education and employment opportunities** as a positive effect of the pandemic. They noted that the current reality made it clear and will make it even clearer in future that education and employment can be exercised in different formats. In this direction, the role of digitalization was emphasized, and it was suggested that employers as well as employees will try to develop specific skills to maximally utilize new opportunities. In this context, young residents are and will be much more competitive. Respectively, their chances of employment will presumably increase.

"You can physically be in Chiatura,¹⁰¹ own a laptop and get a job. You can create a digital product that you will sell and you won't need anyone to hire you to work somewhere physically. Digital employment and raising awareness on opportunities of remote work... emphasizes the importance of digital skills. Companies may invest more to develop this field, and young people may have more opportunities here because they know technology better". [Representative of international organization]

"The involvement of technologies in business, employment generation and so on will be accelerated because of the Coronavirus. Everything will be digitized and more knowledge and skills related to digital technologies – I mean young generations have more capacity to adopt to this... If they have to compete with older generations in terms of jobs, young people will have an advantage because they have more skills, knowledge and capacity to adapt, including to new technologies. This process has started and will forever remain a trend, it won't change anymore". [Representative of international organization]

The study with key informants highlighted the **importance of labor formalization**. As noted by one of the respondents, challenges related to informally employed citizens clarified the importance of labor formalization for employers as well as for employees. Continuing work on this topic and actively starting to think about a new format between the employer and employee relationship is what the state needs to become actively engaged. This is important for young people, especially for those who work in the so-called "gig economy".¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Note: Town in Imereti region

¹⁰² Note: Demand-based economy in which short-term contracts and temporary positions are common instead of temporary employment

"I believe that the demand for formalization will increase in the future and I hope we will see organized informal employment. Labor of those who perform household work will be organized, which will not be easy. This should also apply to young people involved in the gig economy – those working for Glovo, Wolt and so on, who are not considered employed but as service people... The Supreme Court of Spain recently adopted a rule that employees of Glovo are considered employees in labor legislation, they are not temporary service providers. They were given the same guarantees as other employees, and I hope we will head the same way, because we see so many young people involved in this field. We don't know their problems and nobody is interested in finding out, it's a fact that they are less protected than formally employed citizens". [Representative of non-governmental organization]

It was also noted that the crisis made it clear for the state that it is necessary to start **active work on social protection**, implying having unemployment insurance or a compensation system in place. Apart from the fact that having various mechanisms of social protection available will ensure the prevention of social risks at an early stage, the state will also be more prepared for a crisis. Thus, the state will not need to implement expensive intervention mechanisms. In addition, in case social protection mechanisms are available, probability of violating labor rights of employed citizens will be lower and for example, citizen who gets fired without legal ground "will be more willing to speak up and fight for his/her rights".

CONCLUSION

As clarified by the results obtained through the desk research and qualitative component of the study, similar to other groups of the society, the Coronavirus pandemic affected young people in different ways. Among those, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on education and employment was particular in Georgia. In addition, the impact on socialization is of special importance. While responses to challenges emerging in the field of education can be considered more or less effective and existing problems can be tackled relatively easily (e.g. fully ensuring access to internet and computers, training for academic personnel to acquire/improve necessary skills, specific steps regarding tuition fees, etc.), challenges in terms of socialization and employment are quite complex. Even though allowance packages envisaged in the state's anti-crisis plan are important for unemployed citizens and for those who lost their jobs, these mechanisms were not as focused on eliminating the problem (employment generation), which is natural at the initial stage of crisis. At that time, development of the abovementioned mechanisms aimed to promptly respond to the problem, while the following steps need to imply the development of a targeted strategy to minimize the problem. To this end, it is recommended to develop a youth employment strategy together with field experts that will aim to tackle unemployment in youth.

Problems of unemployment and related financial challenges, together with social distancing and isolation were related with a high risk of anxiety and stress in young people. As predicted by the WHO, the world will have to cohabitiate with the Coronavirus pandemic in the near future. In addition, experts foresee a global economic crisis and Georgia will be no exception. Considering that a lack of jobs and problems related to employment have been among the most serious challenges in Georgia for years and years, it's not difficult to presume that serious changes are set to happen in the labor market in the near future. Many companies won't be able to easily cope with an economic crisis, and crucially important sectors (e.g. tourism) for the Georgian economy will have to pass quite a long road to remain in business. Under these conditions, it will not be easy to keep a job or find a new one, especially for young people who typically do not have much (if any) working experience.

These problems can be added to cancelled relaxation or traditional leisurely routines (for instance, limited or no access to entertainment such as a cinema, theater, club, different types of gatherings, travel, etc.) and a limitation on opportunities for comprehensive development. All of those factors may significantly increase anxiety and stress levels in youth. Accordingly, taking care of mental health is crucially important. Even though this challenge is more or less important for every sub-group of youth, young employed mothers can be considered a special risk group. These mothers had to multitask even before the pandemic, but they appeared in a whole new reality during the COVID crisis. Now they not only have to combine the roles of a mother and housewife with the role of employee, but they have to combine the role of an online worker with other roles while kindergartens and schools are mostly closed or in an online teaching regime. These factors when added together make it very hard to fulfill all of the abovementioned roles.

In addition to this, it is important to keep in mind that various groups that were vulnerable before the pandemic may face particular challenges now. It needs to be taken into consideration that the majority of field work for the given study (focus discussions and interviews) took place at the end of September and beginning of October. At that time, the epidemiological situation was still relatively light in the country – new cases and death rates were kept low. Based on how things are going on in the world including in Georgia, it is obvious that the pandemic is getting worse. Taking this into account, we can conclude that apart from challenges in terms of education, employment and social isolation, various groups of the society (for instance, disabled individuals, young people living and/or working in the street, pregnant and single parents, drug-addicted youngsters, etc.) will face even more serious problems. Respectively, it will be necessary to keep an eye on the emerging needs of various groups, including young people, and to form the maximally relevant response to each challenge considering the available financial or human resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ When discussing challenges in the field of education, the readiness of academic personnel for online classes was identified as one of the most important problems within the study. This mostly implies that part of academic personnel did not seem to have the relevant skills and knowledge to teach remotely. Respectively, **in order to increase the effectiveness of online learning and to ensure the right of obtaining a quality education, it is recommended to train academic personnel**. The main actors in the training process should be higher education institutions, while state engagement can be limited to providing respective recommendations, supporting and monitoring the process.
- ▶ One of the problems hindering effective remote learning is limited internet access as well as a low number of material-technical appliances for some students. Even though this problem was solved for a number of students, in order to fully tackle the issue and ensure the effectiveness of online learning, it is recommended **to identify a group of students with no access to internet or computer appliances and come up with mechanisms to provide them with the respective services**.
- ▶ The obvious advantage of offline learning identified by the study participants was its social nature. In addition, respondents also stressed the special importance of practical courses for certain disciplines, which makes the full switch to online studies unrealistic and undesirable. However, the advantages of online learning are clear. As stressed during the study, those advantages include saving time and financial resources, and easily combining the learning process with other activities. The importance of this format for employed youngsters as well as young mothers was noted. A combination of online and offline formats of learning may positively impact the effectiveness of the learning process in general, so it is recommended that **the state and higher education institutes begin working on a hybrid education model**.
- ▶ As the study revealed, regardless of the accessibility of information on some of the recommendations or decisions regarding the Coronavirus pandemic, citizens often fail to understand them. Respectively, when providing recommendations, **it is recommended to utilize simple language that a wide audience understands**. Apart from official decrees, ordinances, or decisions announced by officials during briefings, it is recommended to create contents (e.g. in the form of info graphics) that will simply and clearly explain the recommendations. In addition, considering the fact that television is an important source of information for every age group including young people, it is recommended to actively disseminate visually and contextually easily perceivable content through this channel. In addition, the information should also be available in various languages (ethnic minorities, sign language).

- ▶ The webpage www.stopcov.ge was identified as one of the main sources of information on the Coronavirus pandemic. As noted by respondents, the webpage is not user-friendly and it is difficult for users to retrieve desirable information. **It is recommended to have a link of regulations as a separate block on www.stopcov.ge**, which should be easily noticeable and searchable for users. Every regulation related to the Coronavirus pandemic needs to be grouped in blocks, in which the newest regulations will be provided in bold so users will easily understand which regulations are currently in force in the country.
- ▶ As the study identified, in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic situation, representatives of ethnic minorities who do not speak Georgian have problems accessing daily updated information. Even though the webpage of the Public Broadcaster is available in Armenian and Azeri languages and news programs are transmitted four times a day (12:00, 15:00, 18:00 and 20:00) in both languages, considering the fact that accessing a webpage may be problematic for many citizens, while television is the most important source of information, **it is recommended to create TV content for ethnic minorities in their native languages (Armenian and Azeri), and to integrate this content into the program schedule of local TV channels** (such as those in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti).
- ▶ According to the study results, the practice of providing citizens with special needs with different therapy courses online appeared to be effective in some cases. On one hand, continuity of the process was ensured and the recipients of services felt that they were still being provided with care. On the other hand, the involvement of parents/guardians in the process increased, and they acquired knowledge and skills they can use more intensively beyond the therapy session. Online therapy courses are not equally effective for every diagnosis and turn out to be completely ineffective in certain cases. However, for many diagnoses, online therapy session outcomes were positive. Respectively, **it is recommended to start working with specialists and service providers to develop a strategy of providing certain services online to individuals with special needs. The systematic monitoring and evaluation of online services is also important**. This will increase the accessibility of services for those who cannot physically visit centers and obtain services for various reasons, such as geographic location.
- ▶ Since limiting social interaction and isolation is related to stress, and study participants expect that social distancing will still be on the agenda for the upcoming months, stress levels related to isolation will increase among young residents. Accordingly, **it is recommended to prioritize mental health and related issues**. The state should also involve specialists and start thinking about taking steps to ensure this. In this context, it will be interesting to modify and use the example of Lithuania. In order to enhance the mental health of students in Lithuania, universities made free therapy sessions available. A recommendation on introducing such services can be issued to universities in Georgia, as it would imply the support of mental health for students involved in the educational process. In addition, it is recommended to launch a program that will enable citizens who are dealing with a significant amount of stress during the pandemic to receive a free consultation with a therapist. It is important to enable citizens to receive an online as well as a telephone consultation. Experienced therapists as well as students specializing in psychology can be involved in the mentioned program. This program could also act as a temporary employment platform for young people.
- ▶ As revealed by the study, the pandemic made it crystal clear that attitudes towards mental health programs needs to be altered at the political level. **It is recommended to continue connecting healthcare programs with social programs more intensively and work with field experts to develop specific approaches for citizens with mental health problems so that instead of transferring them to clinics, they can be provided with services on-site** (at home, at different centers). In this context, it will be important to identify specialists and ensure their proper training (e.g. personal assistants with a therapy profile). Then they will be able to provide citizens with relevant services on-site and not at specific treatment centers.

- ▶ The necessity and opportunity of creating innovative products and services may emerge in the new reality. Ideas of young people are often innovative, and their approaches – interesting. Thus, **it is recommended to mobilize young citizens and involve them in the process of tackling problems or creating services and products.** It is also recommended to mobilize young people and involve them in various voluntary activities. This way, young people will not only be involved in activities, but they will feel as though they are an important group in the society, that their opinion matters, and that they can actively participate in processes. This will boost the self-confidence of young people and the belief that they can actually make changes.

Groups of volunteers can be formed for various purposes:

- Properly trained young volunteers may be willing to more actively engage with epidemiological studies (e.g. identifying contacts, making calls to those in self-isolation, etc.), which would give some fresh air to the specialists currently involved in the process, and increase the probability of retrieving information more quickly.
- In addition, groups of volunteers can be created in collaboration with local self-governments, and these groups could work to retrieve information on the needs of various vulnerable groups or to provide them with different products. Even though certain activities are currently carried out in this direction, it is important to give them a regular nature; to designate a specific group of volunteers that will collect relevant information on the needs of citizens and respond to them in a timely manner.
- Involving volunteers will be important not only to support vulnerable groups, but also to support the elderly and single parents. This is especially important for rural and highland settlements, where the accessibility of transportation, shops and pharmacies is limited. This will be even more important because of the regulations set in force for the upcoming months.
- Groups of volunteers can also be an important mechanism to support single parents, as it can be a particular challenge for them to move around and leave the house to buy essential products every day, especially if they are also working.
- ▶ Challenges related to employment were identified as among the most serious problems young people face. Since the state will have to cope with these challenges in the near future, **the creation of a state program with the appropriate financial support is recommended.** The main focus of the program will be young people, and only youth initiatives will be encouraged. Only young people should be allowed to participate so that they will not have to compete with older generations. This way, more young people will have a chance to turn their initiatives into real projects.
- ▶ According to the study, problems with informally employed citizens that were exposed during the pandemic clarified the importance of labor formalization for employers as well as for employees. Respectively, **it is recommended to intensively start working on raising awareness about the importance of labor formalization and switching the employer-employee relationship to a new format.**
- ▶ Tightening regulations and state control of the implementation of regulations was identified as one of the primary needs within the study. Respectively, it is recommended to **carry out an active campaign to raise awareness and tighten state control on the fulfillment of regulations in the capital city as well as (and especially) in regions.**

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