



A SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE CHALLENGES
AND PROSPECTS OF ALBANIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS
AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

of

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected world economies by increasing poverty levels, job losses, business closures, etc.¹. All societies were challenged to cope with the situation and control the spread of the virus, regardless of their ability to handle the requirements posed by the emergent situation. The measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus resulted in the deterioration of the economic situation and the impacts of this situation resulted long-term on people, businesses, societies, and especially on vulnerable groups². The spread of the virus was not stopped or affected by the stage of development of society, living conditions, or economic progress. It was also not influenced by one's level of education, economic income, gender, or nationality. Besides them, it cannot be said the same for the consequences of the pandemic, which were more severe on vulnerable groups³, youth being one of them. As the United Nations study (April 2020) points out, "[...] although the virus does not discriminate its impacts do [...]", The pandemic was more difficult to cope with for the most vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, people with other health issues, as well as those social groups or individuals who had economic issues because of low income or the lack of in-

¹ World Bank. *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune*, Washington, DC: World Bank. doi: 10.1596/978-1-4648-1602-4. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO, 2020 (a).

² International Labour Office (ILO). *COVID-19 and the world of work*, Fourth edition, Geneva 2020. <https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_745963.pdf>.

³ OECD, *The Impact Of Covid-19 On Education - Insights From Education At A Glance 2020*, 2020. <<https://www.oecd.org/education/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-insights-education-at-a-glance-2020.pdf>>.

come. Thus, some groups of the population were more affected and suffered loss of life and added difficulties compared to others. According to this study, the pandemic and the measures taken to prevent it showed how endangered the most vulnerable groups in society were, as well as how the states and governments were not able to cope with such a situation⁴.

The safety measures took a significant toll, especially on individuals and families facing economic challenges. The shutdown of various public services, such as schools, directly impacted vulnerable groups. Many families lacked the means to provide their children with the necessary tools and equipment for remote learning. Similarly, teachers often faced challenges in conducting online classes due to a lack of appropriate tools and conditions. Additionally, economically vulnerable individuals, those in informal employment, the self-employed, and other marginalized groups experienced the pandemic's effects more intensely and with greater difficulty⁵. One of these groups affected in many dimensions of their lives by the situation created by the pandemic was young people, who are also labeled as the "lockdown generation"⁶.

Young people, being one of the most fragile yet crucial age groups in our society, faced significant challenges during the pandemic years. Even before the pandemic, they were dealing with economic and social issues like unemployment and poverty, as highlighted in "The Global Survey on Youth and COVID-19" Report. This report reveals that the pandemic has not spared young people from its economic, social, and cultural impacts across different sectors and societies. The report indicates that one in six individuals aged 18-29 lost their jobs due to the pandemic. The closure of schools and universities meant that one in eight young people missed out on attending classes, particularly affecting those from lower-income countries and deepening the digital divide between regions. Globally, the study reports that one in two young people aged 18-29 may be susceptible to anxiety or depression, emphasizing the widespread emotional impact on this age group⁷.

Examining how the pandemic affects young people in Albania is crucial because the country has a relatively young population. Around 23.2% of the

⁴ United Nations, *COVID-19 and Human Rights We are all in this together*, April 2020, pp. 10-11. <un_human_rights_and_covid_april_2020.pdf>.

⁵ United Nations Albania, *UN ALBANIA COVID-19 SOCIO-ECONOMIC RECOVERY & RESPONSE PLAN*, June 2020, Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org.al/sites/default/files/Socio%20Economic%20Plan%20Albania_0.pdf>.

⁶ International Labour Office (ILO). *COVID-19 and the world of work*, cit.

⁷ Decent Jobs for Youth, *Youth and COVID-19 impact on jobs, education, rights, and mental well-being*; Survey Report 2020. See <www.decentjobsforyouth.org>, pp. 2-46.

entire population falls within the 15-29 age group⁸. This figure was reported to be 24% in 2015⁹. We should consider that the relatively young population shows its vitality, but on the other hand, it increases the demand for expenses by the family and the state, putting the Albanian society in front of numerous challenges¹⁰. Likewise, it seems that the issues of young people are not treated as a priority by the government structures, although they make up a dominant group in numbers. Also, it results that young people seem to have a weak organization or a lack of action to protect and demand their rights¹¹.

This study aims to thoroughly investigate students' experiences in dealing with consequences of the pandemic period and how the situation has affected their lives and future plans. The research questions of this study are related to the impact of the situation created by the pandemic on the main issues that have challenged young Albanians for a long time, such as employment, emigration, pursuing studies, economic issues, career-related issues, etc.¹².

2. Methodology

To conduct this study, various research methods were employed, including a review of relevant literature and the collection of qualitative data.

Firstly, the literature review involved analyzing reports and studies focusing on young people and the pandemic's impact. Secondly, 40 open-ended interviews with 20 students from the Faculty of Education at "Aleksander Moisiu" University and 20 students from the Faculty of Social Sciences at

⁸ CRCA/ECPAT, *Raporti Kombëtar "Rinia në Shqipëri 2020"*, Shqipëri 2020. <https://www.crca.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/RAPORTI-TE-RINJTE-NE-SHQIPERI-2019-2020_0-1.pdf>, pp. 5-7.

⁹ Ministria e Mirëqenies Sociale dhe Rinisë. *PLANI KOMBËTAR I VEPRIMIT PËR RININË 2015-2020*. 2015, Tiranë 2015, p. 7. <https://www.arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/plani-kombetar-i-veprimit-per-rinine-2015-2020_Shqip.pdf>.

¹⁰ I. Gedeshi, E. Jorgoni, *Social Impact of Emigration and Rural-Urban Migration in Central and Eastern Europe*, Albania 2012, p. 4. <<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=8818&langId=en>>.

¹¹ F. Berisha, A. Hazizaj, I. Shtraza, *Pjesëmarrja e të Rinjve në Politikë dhe në Vendim-marrje në Shqipëri 2011-2015*, Tiranë 2015, p. 9. <<https://www.crca.al/sq/publikime/pjesemarrja-e-te-rinjve-ne-politike-dhe-vendim-marrje-ne-shqiperi-2011-2015/>>.

¹² INSTAT, *TREGU I PUNËS 2020 (Labour Market 2020)*, Tirane 2021(a). <https://www.instat.gov.al/media/9360/tregu-i-punes_2021.pdf>. INSTAT, *SHQIPËRIA NË SHIFRA 2020*; 2021(b) <<https://www.instat.gov.al/al/publikime/librat/2021/shqip%C3%ABria-n%C3%ABshifra-2020>>. R. King, I. Gëdeshi, *Migrimi aktual dhe potencial i studentëve nga Shqipëria: një "Brain Drain" i mundshëm?*, Botues Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Tiranë, Nëntor 2020. <<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/17259.pdf>>. World Bank, *Western Balkans Labour Market Trends 2019*, Washington DC. Banka Botërore, 2019.

the University of Tirana were conducted. These interviews aimed to gather detailed information about the experiences of young people and how they dealt with the challenges posed by the pandemic. Students who agreed in advance to participate shared their insights on the new reality they were suddenly confronted with.

Thirdly, two focus groups were conducted, with 8 and 11 students respectively, discussing the pandemic and their coping experiences. Focus groups provide a platform for participants to freely express their opinions, allowing for the collection of valuable information. As noted by Albanian sociologist Zyhdi Dervishi, in such conversations, participants are often more open in sharing their experiences and expressing their opinions in greater depth¹³.

The interviews and focus groups took place from November to February 2023. Students who agreed to participate were randomly selected for the study. The interviews, lasting an average of 30 to 40 minutes each, involved a total of 40 students in the initial research stage. Among these students, 24 were female, and 16 were male. They were aged between 18 and 24 years, distributed as follows: 18 years old (7), 20 years old (10), 21 years old (8), 22 years old (7), 23 years old (4), and 24 years old (4).

These students were enrolled in Social Sciences and Education programs: 30 at the bachelor's level and 10 at the master's level. In the second stage of the research, two focus groups were conducted with master's level students. Nineteen students participated, including 10 women and 7 men, with ages ranging from 23 to 29 years old. Each focus group discussion lasted 60 minutes, fostering a positive atmosphere and cooperation in sharing personal experiences and thoughts on the discussed topics. Respect for the right to speak and giving each participant sufficient time were key considerations during the discussions.

3. Results and Discussions: Social Dimensions of youth study and pandemic impacts

Below will be presented some of the main findings from the analysis of interviews and focus groups regarding the experiences of young people during the pandemic and the impact that the situation has had on their lives and their plans after.

¹³ Z. Dervishi, *Vështrime të kryqëzuara në det. Sociologji kulture 1*, Jerusalem, Tiranë 2013, p. 13.

3.1. *Economic Challenges and Unemployment*

During discussions with students and in the focus groups, one significant topic was the economic challenges brought about by the pandemic. According to them, our society has been facing economic difficulties for quite some time, with issues related to the affordability of living becoming increasingly common and appearing to worsen. The pandemic situation not only exacerbated the economic struggles of many families but also emerged as a major source of heightened concern for both families and individuals.

Families faced additional financial burdens during the pandemic, and the loss of jobs added to the challenges. The situation was particularly worrisome because even basic healthcare became expensive for Albanian families. As a result, the young people interviewed and those participating in focus groups regarded economic issues and job losses as significant pandemic challenges. They expressed the belief that these challenges have persisted and potentially deepen over time.

Information from different studies and reports indicates that unemployment is a challenging problem impacting many young Albanians, leading them to consider leaving the country.

Additionally, youth employment is intricate, with data revealing a high level of informality. Young individuals often work without proper job contracts, in positions lacking social and health insurance benefits, with low wages, or in family-related activities where they aren't paid. These factors contribute to the vulnerability of young people, further complicating their situation and position in the workforce¹⁴.

Conversely, it appears that having a higher level of education does not necessarily make it easier for young people to secure employment. The data indicates that unemployment rates are higher among individuals with higher education levels (14.7%) compared to those with basic or 9-year education (10.2% and 14.2%, respectively)¹⁵. It's crucial to note that challenges linked to poverty and high unemployment are ongoing struggles for Albanian society. These challenges intensified due to the aftermath of the November 2019 earthquake and further exacerbated by the pandemic. According to the 2018 INSTAT report, approximately 23.4% of Albania's population is at risk of poverty. Amid the pandemic, these challenges became more acute due to in-

¹⁴ Ministria e Mireqenies Sociale dhe Rinise, "AFTËSI MË TË LARTA DHE PUNË MË TË MIRË PËR TË GJITHË FEMRAT DHE MESHKUJT" STRATEGJIA KOMBËTARE PËR PUNËSIM DHE AFTËSI 2014-2020, Tirane 2014, pp. 40-71.

¹⁵ INSTAT, *Shqipëria ne Shifra 2014*, Tirane 2014; <<https://www.instat.gov.al/al/publiki/me/librat/2015/shqip%C3%ABria-n%C3%AB-shifra-2014>>.

creased unemployment, rising poverty rates, business closures, and various other socio-economic issues¹⁶.

Examining the unemployment rates based on educational levels in the Albanian labor market for 2020, it is found that the rate is higher for individuals with upper secondary education (13.6%), followed by those with tertiary education (12.6%). According to recent INSTAT data, the unemployment rate for youth aged 15-24 is 26.5%. Compared to the previous year, there has been a slight decrease of 0.7 percentage points in the youth unemployment rate. In 2020, young people aged 15-29 who are neither employed nor continuing their education or any training make up 27.9% of the total youth population¹⁷. Within this group, 35.1% are currently unemployed. The percentage of those not participating in the workforce or feeling discouraged is 15.2%, whereas 16.6% are engaged in domestic and family responsibilities, and 33.1% have other reasons for their current situation¹⁸.

In 2019, the informal employment sector in Albania continued to stay consistently high, making up 36 percent of the total employment rate. Other official data also support these figures, indicating that despite small improvements in recent years, the unemployment rate among young people (aged 15–24) in Albania remains at 27.3 percent¹⁹.

According to a study by CRCA/ECPAT Albania, not having enough income is a major worry for Albanian youth both during and after quarantine. In the national report “Youth in Albania 2020,” approximately 33.8% of the young men and women in the study identified insufficient income as their main concern during both quarantine and the post-quarantine period. This concern ranked higher than fears related to the virus and protective measures (29.4%) and health-related worries (22.1%). Furthermore, around 66.2% mentioned that the quarantine significantly led to an increase in the prices of food and essential items, that did not drop even after. Almost half of the young people, about 48.5%, reported negative consequences of the quarantine, including the loss of jobs for their family members. Another concern highlighted by approximately 17.7% of the young participants was the fear of losing their own jobs during the quarantine²⁰.

Based on the information gathered from interviews and focus groups, the most significant worries for young people in this study during the pandemic

¹⁶ INSTAT, *SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS. 2020*. <<http://www.instat.gov.al/media/6871/sdg-web.pdf>>, pp. 5-11.

¹⁷ INSTAT, *SHQIPËRIA NË SHIFRA 2020* cit., pp. 40, 92.

¹⁸ INSTAT, *TREGU I PUNËS 2020 (Labour Market 2020)* cit., pp. 13, 17.

¹⁹ World Bank, *Western Balkans Labour Market Trends 2019* cit.

²⁰ CRCA/ECPAT, *Raporti Kombëtar “Rinia në Shqipëri 2020”* cit., pp. 5-6, 11.

relate to economic challenges, especially losing a job or struggling to find one. According to them, economic concerns and job availability have been ongoing issues for young people in Albanian society, and the pandemic has only made this situation worse. The young people interviewed explained that the demands for economic resources among youth are consistently high: for covering study expenses, daily living costs, travel expenses, participating in courses or activities, pursuing further qualifications, or even engaging in recreational activities. They noted that the youth phase is a time filled with desires and things they want to do, but economic challenges often prevent these desires from becoming a reality. *“No matter how many economic incomes young people have, it seems that they are never enough. It is an age that requires continuous investment to pursue professional qualifications or even to enjoy life before being fully involved in the world of adults. But nothing can be done without money and young people don’t have it”* (M. S. 22 years old). Given the economic challenges in Albanian society, young Albanians primarily focus on covering essential expenses such as food and rent. Many of them work to earn some income, but the pay is often very low, and they frequently work in the informal sector, which makes them more susceptible to exploitation. The pandemic has intensified economic issues and increased unemployment levels, adding to the difficulties faced by vulnerable groups, especially young people.

Amid the pandemic, numerous students went back to live with their families as classes shifted online. The students we interviewed mentioned that residing with their relatives for an extended period heightened their awareness of the difficulties, particularly the economic struggles their families were experiencing. Previously, living independently during their university studies had somewhat disconnected them from their family’s challenges, but this changed as they spent more time together. *“Living away from our family, we seemed to see nothing but the things we needed and lacked, returning to our family in a situation like the pandemic made us understand even more how deep the social and economic issues are and how many challenges our families are going through”* (E. H., 23 years old).

The students shared that spending time with their families made them more aware of daily challenges, the hardships of life, and the limited alternatives available. According to the data, the respondents expressed that witnessing their parents, who have worked their entire lives, struggle with the situation and feel as threatened and worried as they did, indicated how concerning their future was. The respondents stated that they wouldn’t want to be in the position of their parents and families, who had worked hard for decades but couldn’t afford even basic expenses. The respondents noted that

the lack of savings in many families and the absence of income for some had a significant impact on their plans. *“My parents are on the verge of retirement and have a life of working to fulfill the living requirements. During the pandemic, they were very stressed because of the increasing expenses, which they were not able to afford. Seeing my parents, like many others, be in these difficult conditions makes me think that you should get out of here as soon as possible. I don’t want that when I’m their age, and I’ve gone through all those difficulties, to not be able to afford even the most basic things. The difficulties of my parents are indicators of the impossibilities in this country”* – states I. H, 26 years old.

The young people interviewed say that for the young people who could work online, the pandemic was a very suitable situation for them, many of them even neglected the attendance of online classes, focusing more on their work. However, the number of young people with this opportunity was limited. Some youth lost their jobs during the pandemic, while others had to go to work in stressful and scary situations. *“Young people who could work did not have the luxury to stay home and go to work especially at the beginning of the pandemic felt like you were going to a battlefield”* states F. A., 20 years old interviewed student.

3.2. Youth and migration

One of the concerns of Albanian society for decades is the high level of migration, especially of young people. During the interviews, but also the focus group discussions, it turns out that young people see migration as a way to improve their lives and not to find themselves *“so vulnerable and helpless as they felt during the pandemic”* (Xh. H, 20 years old). Migration is a phenomenon with multifaceted, developmental, inhibitory, and often contradictory consequences in all areas of social, economic, political, and psycho-cultural activity²¹.

It seems that the high level of migration has become an associated characteristic when talking about Albania. The rates of migration since the fall of the regime rate Albania as one of the countries with high levels related to the population number. Social developments after the fall of the communist regime have only deepened this phenomenon. According to the young people interviewed and the focus groups, the increase in the level of migration is a very concerning challenge for our society that worsened even more during the pandemic. According to them, especially during the pandemic, they and

²¹ Z. Dervishi, *Vështrime të kryqëzuara në det. Sociologji kulture 1* cit., pp. 1-2.

their families felt vulnerable. More importantly, they realized, “*experienced in their skin*” (E. H., 23 years old), how few opportunities they have to face such challenges, which in the case of the pandemic resulted even in the loss of lives. “*It is not that the issues that were challenging us were that new, but when you risk losing your life they hit way harder*” – stated L. K., 21 years old.

Since 1990, the emigration rate for the Albanian population has been among the highest in Europe and globally. Due to challenging living conditions, high unemployment, political instability, and other factors, migration in its various forms will remain significant in the future²². In the year 2000, based on estimates from INSTAT, around 600,000 Albanians, equivalent to 18.0 percent of the population, had left Albania. The majority of them were young males aged 20-30²³. As of the end of 2011, approximately 1.4 million people, roughly one-third of the Albanian population, were estimated to be residing in other countries, with Greece and Italy being the primary destinations²⁴. The scale of this emigration was significant, leading to Albania being ranked as the top country in Europe and the ninth globally in 2010, considering the stock of emigrants relative to the resident population. The migration potential rate was highest for individuals aged 27 to 30 years, while in the 2007 survey, Albanian migration potential peaked for the age group of 18 to 25 years old²⁵.

Economic factors continue to be the primary reasons for migration. Net migration, the difference between people arriving and leaving, remains negative. In 2020, approximately 16.7 thousand people left, surpassing the number of arrivals²⁶. In a different study conducted by the Mary Ward Loreto Foundation on migration in Albania, it was found that 83.86% of participants expressed a desire to leave the country. The data also revealed that both employed and unemployed individuals share this aspiration, with the primary destination being developed countries. When asked about the reasons moti-

²² INSTAT, *Të rinjtë në Shqipëri, sfidat në kohët që ndryshojnë*, Tirane 2015. <<https://www.instat.gov.al/al/publikime/librat/2015/t%C3%AB-rinjt%C3%AB-n%C3%AB-shqip%C3%ABri-sfidat-n%C3%AB-koh%C3%ABt-q%C3%AB-ndryshojn%C3%AB>>.

²³ Unicef Shqipëri. *Vleresimi I situates sociale dhe ekonomike ne rajonet e shqiperise*, Tirane 2000.

²⁴ World Bank, *Migration and Remittances*, Washington DC 2011. <<http://hdl.handle.net/10986/2522>>.

²⁵ R. King, I. Gëdeshi, *TENDENCAT E REJA TË MIGRIMIT POTENCIAL NGA SHQIPËRIA*, Botues Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Tiranë, Dhjetor 2018. <<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/15271.pdf>>.

²⁶ INSTAT, *SHQIPËRIA NË SHIFRA 2020* cit., p. 7.

vating their desire to leave Albania, 84.9% cited socio-economic factors, including unemployment, insufficient basic services, and a poor quality of life²⁷.

Research indicates a growing trend where an increasing number of young people in Albania aspire to leave the country for work and education, with many having no plans to return. According to the National Report “Youth in Albania 2020,” a substantial portion, approximately 30% of respondents, expressed an intention to study abroad. This significant figure highlights the concerning phenomenon known as “brain drain”²⁸. As per the survey by King and Gedeshi (2020), the findings are as follows:

- The number of Albanian students studying abroad is considered high and continues to increase annually.
- Approximately 69.9% mention that they view their studies abroad as a preliminary step to living in another country.
- Around 79% of students (average age 22 years old) studying in Albania plan to move abroad.
- The data reveals that those with higher education are more likely to intend to emigrate from Albania.
- The primary motivating factors for leaving Albania include the opportunity to secure a job and a higher income (61.1%), with better education and training opportunities (22.2%) being the second most chosen reason²⁹.

Based on the information gathered from interviews and focus groups, it seems that young people inclination to leave grew stronger during the pandemic. They believe that the challenges posed by the pandemic, coupled with the inability of both families and state structures to handle the situation effectively, served as additional motivation for them to contemplate their future elsewhere. *“It’s like being in a difficult situation and realizing that those you thought would protect you have neither the power nor the means to do so. This happened to all of us during the pandemic, we felt alone in facing the situation”* (E. H., 23 years old).

According to the students’ expressions, the pandemic situation and challenges made them realize how vulnerable they were and how unprepared to face the hardships of life. Not only them but also their parents, who had a life

²⁷ Fondacioni Mary Ward Loreto, *PËRTEJ KUFIJVE, Raport Hulumtues Analitik mbi Migracionin, Rasti i Shqipërisë*; Shtëpia Botuese GEER, Tiranë 2019, pp. 44-49. <<https://www.renate-europe.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-study-report-Albanians-and-Migration.pdf>>.

²⁸ CRCA/ECPAT, *Raporti Kombëtar “Rinia në Shqipëri 2020”* cit., pp. 5-6.

²⁹ R. King, I. Gëdeshi, *Migrimi aktual dhe potencial i studentëve nga Shqipëria: një “Brain Drain” i mundshëm?* cit., pp. 23-72.

that struggled to make ends meet, were not able to cope with the demands they faced during the pandemic. According to them, the situation of their parents and the difficulties they faced made them feel more scared for the future and more motivated to think about how not to be in the same situation again. Migration seems to be one of the first solutions that come into students' minds.

M. S., 21 years old states – *“I think that after all this difficult period, we are going to face a major economic crisis, the consequences of which will be hard on us. Because of them, young people will be even more pushed, motivated to leave in search of a better future”*.

According to the data analysis, it appears that young people believe one of the effects of the pandemic situation is related to making specific plans for their future. The pandemic seems to have served as a motivation for them to *“not waste time on wishes but start taking steps to achieve what they want”* (F. A., 20 years old). As per the data, our country has been facing challenges for an extended period, and despite ongoing changes, the pandemic simply eliminated excuses for the youth not to make plans and take tangible steps toward their future. This is identified as one of the most significant impacts of the pandemic on them. They aim to leverage the momentum gained to actively pursue their aspirations rather than just discussing them. According to them, whatever their future plans may be, the pandemic situation heightened their awareness of life's fragility and their own vulnerability, prompting them to act decisively towards realizing their goals and shaping their future. *“Although we are challenged continuously, the pandemic situation hit us differently. You cannot afford after experiencing the pandemic to stay passive, we need to move. There is no time for words but for action”* – stated B. Xh., 22 years old.

3.3. *Stress and emotional struggles*

One of the challenges faced during the pandemic has been the reported stress and severe emotional states. The unfamiliar situation, coupled with an unknown disease for which even science lacked answers on how to combat, intensified the stress. Daily media reports of escalating infection numbers and loss of lives, along with unclear medical treatment strategies from doctors, contributed to the heightened fear and widespread panic.

According to interviews and focus groups, stress and a fragile emotional state were identified as significant challenges during this period.

“I think that many of us have felt threatened by the loss of life, and those increasing numbers of deaths and infections terrified us” (M. S., 22 years old). Meanwhile, D. L., 21 years old, states – *“Death seemed to be every-*

where. We lost loved ones due to Covid-19 in hospitals, beyond the pain of losing them was also the pain of not being able to stay close to them in those moments. This has been a very terrible situation that has caused a lot of pain to all those who have lost their loved ones during the pandemic. My grandmother used to say that if she got sick, we should not dare to take her to the hospital. If she was going to die, she would prefer to die with loved ones around and not alone in a hospital room". As information about the virus was unclear and a lot of false information circulated, people were constantly in a state of panic. The overall uneasy situation contributed to heightened anxiety levels and a decline in everyone's emotional well-being.

3.4. Increase in the level of violence within the family

Many studies talk about the increase in the level of violence in the family during the pandemic, and it seems from the data of interviews and focus groups that young people have felt this too. They expressed that even they have felt very irritated and often the answers and their reactions in different situations "*have been rude*"- as L. K., 21 years old, states. Moreover, data from the National Report "Youth in Albania 2020" reveals that approximately 63.2% of interviewed young people indicate that quarantine has contributed to a rise in family violence. Similarly, about 82.4% of young people believe that psychological violence within families has significantly increased during the quarantine period³⁰. The reports especially talk about increased violence during the pandemic against women, on whom the heaviest burden of care and domestic duties also fell during that period.

Many of the interviewees stated that not only did they see and hear about the increase in the level of violence within the family but also noticed nervous reactions in themselves. It seemed as if all the accumulated stress, anxiety, and worries about what would happen and how we would cope made all the people somewhat more irritated in their behavior and responses to others. In addition, the increasing numbers of loss of life, the unknown situation, and the fact that it was not known how long it would last and how it would go further increased the fear and irritating behaviors. This situation was more problematic for families that already were facing economic and other issues inside the family. In these families the level of stress was high and the chance of behaviors turning into one form of violence was bigger. This situation was even more disturbing for those families who were experiencing violence even before the outbreak of the pandemic.

³⁰ CRCA/ECPAT, *Raporti Kombëtar "Rinia në Shqipëri 2020"* cit., pp. 5-6.

3.5. *Coping with isolation*

One of the initial challenges highlighted by young people during the pandemic was navigating the imposed restrictions, particularly the limitations on movement, which became more distressing for them during the quarantine. According to those interviewed, the mere idea of being confined to their homes impacted their emotional and psychological well-being significantly. They mentioned that facing the inability to go out, especially to meet friends and relatives, posed a considerable challenge. This struggle was even more obvious for children who found it challenging to comprehend why they couldn't play with others, or for grandparents, considered at higher risk, who remained isolated without meeting their children or grandchildren for an extended period.

“Just the idea of being locked inside the house for so long was very difficult for us” (H. N., 19 years old). *“It was harder for our grandparents, who had not left the house for a single moment. We could not meet them and mostly they were alone. This had a big effect on their psychological and emotional state”* – states D. L., 21 years old.

The students expressed that it was difficult for young people to stay isolated during quarantine, and often they did not respect the rules and many times they did go out and meet with friends and relatives. *“Who was not living with their family but with friends instead did go out more. Although it seemed that the virus infection did not have serious consequences for young people, they were afraid to be the ones to pass it on to their family members”* (Dh. I, 19 years old). *“To be young means to explore so isolation was not easy for us. We did experience a lot of stress and anxiety and we did break the rules of restrictions many times”* – stated H. M., 22 years old.

3.6. *Stigmatization and concerns about being carriers*

One worry that troubled young people during the pandemic was the fear of being carriers or transmitting the virus to others. In the early stages of the pandemic, it was suggested that young people experienced milder symptoms or were often asymptomatic. Additionally, reports indicated that some young individuals were not adhering to pandemic rules. This information about young people potentially being carriers and rule-breakers had a dual impact on them.

Given the belief that infections might go unnoticed in young people, many felt anxious about unknowingly carrying the virus and transmitting it to their family members.

On the other side, the students stated that they also felt prejudiced and stigmatized as they were “*the black sheep*” (A. M., 22 years old), not only the ones that were mostly spreading the virus but also the ones that were not following the rules. They felt that they were the ones spreading the virus around. Television advertisements aimed at raising awareness and promoting virus prevention often featured young individuals breaking the rules and transmitting the virus, adding to the perception that they were irresponsible.

The students carried a sense of being doubly burdened during this period, characterized by the prevailing view of them as the main carriers of the virus. The media portrayal further intensified, depicting them as irresponsible for not following the rules and attributing them as the primary source of the virus transmission to their family members. “*It was often said in the media that most young people had no symptoms and could be carriers of the virus, and they were the ones who mostly did not respect the rules of isolation or hand disinfection and wearing masks*” stated J. K., 24 years old. “*We felt that we were being considered guilty as the one spreading the virus every time we heard about new infections*” (K. S., 19 years old). “*When my family and I were infected by the virus, I don’t know why I directly thought about my movements and if it could have been me who brought it home*” – stated I. D., 19 years old. Based on interviews and focus groups, it appears that young people have faced significant challenges due to being labeled as irresponsible and primary carriers of the virus. They expressed feeling judged and frequently held responsible for the virus’s transmission, harboring concerns about potentially being the cause of infection for their loved ones.

3.7. *Challenges and Coping Strategies*

According to the young people interviewed, the pandemic brought out, even more, the severity of the social and economic issues that our society has been facing for a long time, such as poverty, unemployment, the weak support of state structures, and even the lack of their functioning, also being the main reasons that have pushed Albanians to seek and build their future elsewhere.

Statistical data from various reports show that the level of migration continues to be a worrying issue for our society, which has been facing this phenomenon since the fall of the communist regime. In expressing their sentiments, students shared a feeling of being “*very vulnerable and at the mercy of fate*” (E. M., 24 years old). In these circumstances, the students conveyed that they believed their only solution to avoid facing a similar situation again was to leave the country as soon as they could and establish their future else-

where. According to their perspective, government institutions were unable to handle the situation, compelling many people to spend everything they had to try to save the lives of their loved ones. *“We were hearing bad things about hospitals and how the ones hospitalized are dying more than recovering”* – states B. Xh., 22 years old.

Moreover, in other cities, the hospitals were completely unprepared to treat the cases of those infected by COVID-19 and people had to be transported to Tirana. On the other hand, many families lost their jobs and others were experiencing economic issues before the pandemic, the possibilities of the respective state institutions to support them *“left much to be desired”* (B. C., 20 years old).

All this worrying atmosphere has made them feel very scared and somewhat pessimistic, with an increasing desire to leave the country. *“We felt abandoned, and the state structures were not able to cope even with emergency needs. The families seemed to be left in the hands of fate in the face of a risk like this with big expenses and big issues both personal and social.”* – states R. D., 21 years old. *“The struggles faced, the weak responding from institutions brought out even more clear the severity of the problems of our society and this has influenced even more the plans and ideas of young people”* (M. S., 22 years old).

3.8. *Challenges of online learning*

One of the first measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 was the closure of educational systems and the transfer of the development process online. Similar to numerous other countries, this posed a significant challenge for the Albanian education system, which was not ready for such a transformation³¹. The shift from onsite to online did reveal the deep digital divides that exist, especially for youth in lower-income countries, as well as the gloomy outlook that young people hold as regards learning outcomes³².

The study, which explored the experiences of 150 students in online classes and the challenges they encountered, revealed a substantial impact of the pandemic on the online learning environment. Students approached online classes with a sense of stress and fear induced by the pandemic, viewing it as a mandatory response to home confinement and other restrictions. Many

³¹ United Nations, *UN ALBANIA COVID-19 SOCIO-ECONOMIC RECOVERY & RESPONSE PLAN* cit., p. 18.

³² Decent Jobs for Youth, *Youth and COVID-19 impact on jobs, education, rights, and mental well-being* cit., p. 45.

students did not fully engage in online classes, considering them a temporary measure that might end abruptly.

Economic, technological, and logistical issues significantly hindered student participation in online classes. Factors such as lacking proper technology, internet access issues, unfamiliarity with software, and inconsistent electricity supply contributed to increased dissatisfaction with online classes and reduced commitment to them³³.

In this article, the focus was not on exploring the students' experiences with online classes but during the focus groups, it was discussed briefly how they felt about the experience now that it has ended, and they have returned to the onsite process.

According to the data, the concern of "*not having learned much from the online experience*" (A. Sh., 20 years old), was one of the main students' concerns. "*We did return to the auditoriums, and it seems we did not take much from the online experience but the frustration and the idea that it does not work*" – stated J. D., 19 years old. According to students, the circumstances in which they were faced with the online learning experience were not favorable to not say that "*in those circumstances, everything was doomed to fail*" (B. C., 20 years old). "*It feels that we did not learn much from the online experience and that is such a shame*" – stated M. S., 21 years old. According to the results, the concern of not having benefited much from the online learning experience and the gloomy outlook regarding the experience as being ineffective and difficult to do is considered "*a shame*" (E. H., 23 years old), as a loss for them as digital media and online networks seem to be the most lately and the skills to have.

4. Conclusion

The study's findings reveal that, similar to numerous other nations, the challenges induced by the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly burdened people, particularly those in vulnerable groups. Economic hardships, the challenges of adapting to the situation, job losses, heightened fears and anxieties, social isolation, and restrictive rules seem to have been the main concerns for everyone. Additionally, similar to many other regions, government institutions faced considerable challenges in effectively managing this crisis, underscoring their limitations and operational difficulties.

³³ E. Cenaj, *Online classes and students experience the new reality brought by the pandemic*, the TEAVET Project. Conference Proceeding Book, cur. E. Cipi, M. Meminaj, León, Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de León, 2021, pp. 96-106.

But in Albania, the situation in which the pandemic found the society was delicate due to the challenges which the society has entered since the fall of the communist regime, where despite all the progress made, it continues to have issues that make this country still, for more than three decades, one of the countries with the highest levels of migration. While the earthquake of November 2019 shocked society and its economy, the pandemic that followed made the issues even sharper. Conversely, Albania possesses a relatively youthful population that appears to be transitioning into a characteristic of the past each year. Meanwhile, the average age of the population is on the rise, and the count of immigrants remains substantial.

Analysis of the data reveals that young people believe one of the primary effects of the pandemic is a heightened focus on making concrete plans for their future. The pandemic served as a motivating force, prompting them to take action toward realizing their aspirations. Respondents consider this impetus as one of the pandemic's most significant impacts on youth. They hope to benefit from this impetus they have received to follow their desires concretely and not simply fall into a situation where they only talk about what they think they will do.

In conclusion, considering the results of the study, it can be said that the pandemic and the situation created by it have had an impact on motivating young people to be more active in taking specific steps to achieve their plans. The study indicates that the situation for young people in Albania was challenging even before the pandemic, but the pandemic appears to have spurred them to take more active and tangible steps toward their future plans. Additionally, as per the insights from the interviewed young people, there is a concern that the motivation triggered by the struggles and challenges of the pandemic might fade away, leading them to adapt to the situation and become passive. Recognizing passivity as a significant obstacle to the progress of young people toward their future, they aspire to harness this momentum to actively shape their lives and pursue their future goals.

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic lasted for more than three years and brought about various challenges worldwide, affecting economies, public health, politics, and education systems. Although young individuals seemed less likely to get seriously ill from the virus, the impact of the pandemic on their lives was significant. This study investigates how the pandemic influenced the lives and future goals of young people, focusing specifically on university students in Albania. To delve deeper into the subject, we conducted 40 in-depth interviews and organized two focus groups with university students.

Our research highlights the widespread stress and anxiety experienced by young people about their future and the scrutiny they faced for their behavior during the pandemic. The data analysis reveals that one of the most notable effects of the pandemic on young people is the motivation it provided them to develop specific strategies to achieve their goals. The challenging situation compelled them to recognize life's fragility and their own vulnerability, inspiring them to take proactive steps toward their envisioned futures. This study sheds light on how global events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, shape the aspirations and actions of young individuals, offering valuable insights into their resilience and adaptability during challenging times.

La pandemia da COVID-19 è durata più di tre anni e colpendo l'economia, la salute pubblica, la politica e i sistemi educativi, ha richiesto in tutto il mondo di affrontare alcune sfide. Sebbene la salute dei giovani sia stata meno colpita dal virus, l'impatto della pandemia sulle loro vite è stato significativo. Questo studio indaga come questo periodo abbia influenzato la vita e gli obiettivi futuri dei giovani, concentrandosi, nello specifico, sugli studenti universitari in Albania. Per approfondire l'argomento sono state condotte 40 interviste in profondità e due focus group con studenti universitari.

La ricerca evidenzia lo stress e l'ansia vissuti dai giovani riguardo al loro futuro e le restrizioni che hanno dovuto affrontare. L'analisi dei dati rivela che la motivazione è stata per i giovani di notevole supporto durante la pandemia, perché gli ha aiutati a sviluppare strategie specifiche per raggiungere i propri obiettivi. La difficile situazione li ha costretti a riconoscere la fragilità della vita e la propria vulnerabilità, ispirandoli a compiere passi proattivi verso il futuro da loro immaginato. Questo studio evidenzia come gli eventi globali, quale la pandemia da COVID-19, possano modellare aspirazioni e azioni dei giovani, offrendo preziosi spunti sulla loro resilienza e adattabilità durante i periodi difficili.