

WORLD SOCIETY: ACTUALITY AND CHALLENGE

THE CHANGING WORLD: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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Abstracts: The coronavirus pandemic is proving to be more than a medical crisis. The economic and social effects generate fears of the population about the future and due to the current context the behaviors will certainly persist for a long time.

This article results from the study of social dynamics in the current context, characterized by unique phenomena and processes, which began with the medical crisis and which will probably continue for a long time after overcoming it. Analyzes performed offer different perspectives for understanding the implications that extend from the medical dimension to the social and economic dimensions. The recording of some points of view regarding the coronavirus pandemic, available in the public media, was continued by conducting a sociological research in the online environment, where a number of 1356 people responded. The secondary analysis of the collected data allows the comparison of the opinions expressed by the population with the points of view expressed publicly, providing an image of the convergence between the measures adopted by the authorities and the expectations of the population.

This study includes references regarding the evolution of the pandemic, the consequences and measures in different societies which influenced the public perception and in the end we included opinions of citizens regarding the social and economic context due to the health crisis.

Keywords: public health, crisis management, public institutions, public opinion, coronavirus.

INTRODUCTION

The amplitude of the coronavirus infections, the lack of standard control procedures and their reduction, to which is added the lack of effective treatment has generated a general state of insecurity of the population. The hesitant measures with many contradictory elements have generated numerous globally controversies.

The successive corrections of the measures taken, the continuation of the infections and in the conditions of quite severe restrictions, accompanied by legal

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sanctions of a very high level had in some layers of the population an opposite effect: the anti-government attitudes intensified. In extreme cases we are dealing with the development of conspiracy theories with many followers. The existence of the pandemic is denied, and the measures taken by the authorities are criticized due to suspicions about their honesty. Fluctuations in a profit-oriented medical supplies market have fueled conspiracy theories, leading to the idea of a “health dictatorship”.

In such a context, the political manifestations were felt in the public space. The possibility of using it for electoral purposes in such states of tension, fear, suspicion and anger of the population has become attractive for public speculators. A first category of speculators was made up of people looking for notoriety. Anti-system stances and manipulations have generated irresponsible behavior in connection with the rules recommended by the authorities. Imposing them through legislation and with the help of law enforcement institutions has fueled public feelings of insecurity and circumvention of rules that are not considered fair and effective. In the Romanian society we can compare the behavior of a part of the population with the evasive resistance during the communism era. A number of people have adopted various public attitudes through which they have distorted reality by encouraging resistance. The second category of speculators is formed by people who work politically. 2020 is an election year, and the pandemic has overlapped with the electoral programs of parties and politicians. The approach of the elections influences the quality of the public discourse, which is oriented towards attracting the electorate more than towards solving the pressing issues raised by the pandemic. The aggressiveness of the discourse and the intensity of the political struggle are oriented mainly towards obtaining votes on the background of a discourse in which it is constantly stated “care for citizens and public health”.

The non-unitary nature of the measures adopted and the constant contestation from the opposition have radicalized the attitude of the population towards the rulers, and the vehemence of the positions is originated by the succession of harsh measures adopted following uncertain findings. The immediate consequences of the measures adopted have contributed to the aggression of citizens: social inequalities have intensified, and survival in the face of the health crisis has generated economic problems that have limited the opportunities of a large part of the population. Fears of purchasing power, payment of bills and loan rates, job losses correlated with the fear of an infection with a virus for which the authorities were unprepared.

In this context, we wanted to obtain information on the public’s perception of the measures taken and their confidence in the administrative ability’s to manage the economic and social effects of the pandemic.

THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT GENERATED BY THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

The emergence and spread of coronavirus infections illustrate the complexity of the interdependencies specific to modern societies. Globalization has multiplied connections of all kinds, and the free movement of people and goods has been the main factor in the evolution from epidemic to pandemic.

The disease started in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019. Suspicions of the causes led to the city's fish market, where live animals were also sold¹. Between December 8, 2019 and January 2, 2020, a number of 41 people were diagnosed with the virus called 2019-nCoV. The specific symptoms of this condition were fever, general malaise, dry cough and shortness of breath². These first cases were followed by an alarming increase in the number of cases. Subsequent cases have been reported in countries such as Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Macao, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the United States. Quarantine has been imposed in downtown Wuhan since January 23, 2020, and on January 24, 2020, five other nearby cities have been quarantined³.

The reports of the World Health Organization (WHO) from January 21, 2020, record that on January 20, 2020 there were 282 cases of infection with the new coronavirus. Of these, 278 cases existed in China, 2 in Thailand, one in Japan and one in South Korea. In the last three countries, cases of infection were exported from China⁴. Also, there were already 6 deaths in China⁵ WHO's second report⁶ records the existence of 314 cases of infection, of which 309 in China.

The report of 31 January 2020 mentions the conclusion of the meeting of 30 January 2020 of the Emergency Committee on the new coronavirus (Emergency Committee on the novel coronavirus), following which the coronavirus outbreak was declared *a public health emergency of international concern*⁷.

¹ David S. Hui, Esam I Azhar, Tariq A. Madani, Francine Ntoumi, Richard Kock, Osman Dar, Giuseppe Ippolito, Timothy D. Mchugh, Ziad A. Memish, Christian Drosten, Alimuddin Zumla, *The continuing epidemic threat of novel coronaviruses to global health – the latest novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China*, in "International Journal of Infectious Diseases", 91/2020, pp. 264–266, available at [https://www.ijidonline.com/article/S1201-9712\(20\)30011-4/pdf](https://www.ijidonline.com/article/S1201-9712(20)30011-4/pdf), accessed on 12.07.2020

² *Ibidem*.

³ *** The Straits Times on 23 January 2020, visible at <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-locks-down-two-more-cities-huanggang-and-ezhou-after-wuhan>, accessed on 15.07.2020

⁴ For details, see World Health Organization, available at https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200121-sitrep-1-2019-ncov.pdf?sfvrsn=20a99c10_4, accessed on 13.07.2020

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Idem*, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200122-sitrep-2-2019-ncov.pdf?sfvrsn=4d5bcbca_2, accessed on 13.07.2020

⁷ *Idem*, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200131-sitrep-11-ncov.pdf?sfvrsn=de7c0f7_4, accessed on 13.07.2020

In the first six months since the beginning of the pandemic, the number of cases has increased exponentially: worldwide, they have reached 13,150,645 cases and 574,464 deaths⁸. According to the same document, Romania reached 33,585 confirmed cases, with a number of 637 new cases and 1931 deaths. In terms of the total number of confirmed cases, Romania is on the 17th position in Europe. In the European hierarchy, on the first place is the Russian Federation with 746,369 cases, on the second place is the United Kingdom with 291,377 cases, and on the third place Spain with 256,619 cases⁹.

In Romania, according to the *Agency for the digitization of Romania*¹⁰, which centralizes the internal data on the evolution of the coronavirus pandemic, were registered until July 15th, 2020 at one o'clock a number of 34,226 confirmed cases, of which 22,049 cases cured (64% of the total) and 1952 deaths (6%). The average age of confirmed cases is 46 years. Most of the registered cases were in the age group 40–49 years, with a percentage of 22% of the total, followed by those in the age group 50–59 years holding 21% and those in the age group 30–39 years by 15%. The most affected counties are Suceava (6.62 cases per 1000 inhabitants), Braşov (3.88 cases per 1000 inhabitants) and Vrancea (3.77 cases per 1000 inhabitants). The statistics collected show that most cases are cured, accounting for 64% of all cases. Given the specificity of the disease, which mainly affects people with comorbidities and the elderly, we can also explain the large number of cures.

The main effects of the increasing trend in the number of infections are the burden on the medical system, the removal from the usual circuit of some medical units and the impossibility of treating other diseases in the medical system whose resources have been directed to cases of COVID-19.

The economic downturn allows for short-term calculations given that the pandemic is ongoing and it is not possible to estimate when its effects will cease. Long-term calculations are affected by many variables that can permanently change the initial conclusions. Currently, the markets for goods and services are troubled by uncertainty about the evolution of the pandemic, and global connections mean limiting any local success to the evolution of the situation in other countries. Most citizens postpone expenses that exceed certain values, such as durable goods, and industrial activities are affected by the slowdown in transactions. The predominant trend is towards security, and people fear the future and the risks of economic collapse. In such a context, attempts are being made to restore economic activities to a level that will counteract the fears caused by the health crisis. According to public statements, the costs of the pandemic could reach up to 9.7% of global GDP, which is about \$ 8.8 trillion¹¹.

⁸ Idem, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200715-covid-19-sitrep-177.pdf?sfvrsn=b1a193f3_2, accessed on 16.07.2020

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ For details, see <https://datelazi.ro/>, accessed on 16.07.2020

¹¹ For details, see <https://www.zf.ro/business-international/costul-total-al-pandemiei-economia-globala-poate-pierde-8-800-de-19145906>, accessed on 16.07.2020.

European Commission estimates¹², in the case that there will be no second wave of contamination, reveals that the European Union economy will shrink by 8.3% in 2020 and grow by 5.85 in 2021, while the European economy will shrink by 8.7% in 2020 and will increase by 6.15 in 2021. According to these estimates, both the decline and the recovery of economies will be different from state to state. Although the pandemic has affected most countries in the world, the effects due to declines and economic recovery are different, being significantly influenced by the measures taken by the rulers of each country. Each government is in a position to manage the effects of the pandemic and limit its spread, on the one hand, and on the other hand is put in a position to support the economic recovery as soon as possible. Success depends on the ability of governments to manage existing resources in each society.

Measures have been developed at European level to support businesses and protect jobs. The European Commission's main priorities are "saving human lives and supporting the means of subsistence"¹³. In response to these risks, a € 100 billion solidarity instrument, called SURE, was proposed¹⁴. The funds are to be targeted at businesses, employees, farmers, fishermen and disadvantaged people¹⁵. These measures are estimated due to calculations based on the current situation. Depending on the evolution of the pandemic and the multiplication of social and economic problems, it will be possible to make more accurate assessments of the needs that may exceed the current estimates.

A document on good financial practice in supporting consumers and entrepreneurs in the context of the COVID-19 crisis was prepared on 14th July 2020¹⁶. A first set of good practices concerns the moratorium on the payment of bank loans, the availability of cash payments to support companies and individuals in need of immediate financial support, the provision of new loans and guarantees in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁷. These measures have significantly contributed to the maintenance of many companies and the necessary financial flow in the economy.

It is found that in the current context there is a conflict between the sanitary control needs of COVID-19 infections and the economic needs. In many cases, public health policies affect the economy with major effects on household incomes, jobs, sales markets, economic partnerships and quality of life. The costs of the

¹² For details, see https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/jobs-and-economy-during-coronavirus-pandemic_ro#previziunile-economice-ale-comisiei-din-vara-anului-2020, accessed on 16.07.2020.

¹³ For details, see https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ro/IP_20_582, accessed on de 16.07.2020

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁶ For details, see https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/business_economy_euro/banking_and_finance/documents/200714-best-practices-mitigate-impact-pandemic_en.pdf, accessed on 16.07.2020.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

pandemic are not limited to medical costs, but have extensions throughout the social and economic life. The radicalization of public opinion and the reactions of citizens in various countries are due in large part to the day-to-day fears of an uncertain future. Doctors cannot announce a specific time horizon for the disappearance of the pandemic, and governments cannot estimate the overall economic and social consequences. The measures taken are targeted for short and medium periods of time, and the total losses are only suspected. Protection rules do not provide total security, which provides a state of mistrust on the part of the population.

In the case of Romania, we face a lack of responsibility of a part of the population that neglects the protection measures recommended by the authorities and fully contributes to the spread of COVID-19 infection. For such reasons, the pace of relaxation has slowed down and, implicitly, the moment of society's return to normal life has been prolonged.

EXAMPLES OF STRATEGIES ADOPTED IN PANDEMIC CONTROL

The skepticism about public actions to control the pandemic is due to different approaches and adverse effects on the population. Insufficient data and ignorance of all aspects of coronavirus have led to different approaches by states, which revealed that the perception of danger is different depending on each state. Two main directions of action have been adopted: that of harsh control measures and that of total relaxation¹⁸.

China has taken harsh measures, which were criticized in the first phase of the epidemic, being considered specific to an autocratic government. But the spread of the epidemic and its transformation into a pandemic led to the export of authoritarianism. Following the Chinese model, the world's cities have been laid into a state of siege to the defense of a virus that has naturally followed its path¹⁹.

A different model was adopted by the South Korean government: the population was massively tested, contact maps were made, schools were closed, and public health information was centralized to block the chains of infection. The economy was not blocked, and the quarantine measure was imposed depending on the occurrence of outbreaks. As a result of these measures, there were only 240 deaths out of about 10,000 cases of infection at the end of April 2020. Cases of infection were detected in the early stages, which increased the effectiveness of medical intervention²⁰. Germany followed a similar path, by mass testing the

¹⁸ Carlo Caduff, *What Went Wrong Corona and the World after the Full Stop*, available at https://www.academia.edu/42829792/What_Went_Wrong_Corona_and_the_World_after_the_Full_Stop (Paper accepted for publication in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

population once the first case of infection was detected and resorted to systematic follow-up of contacts and early hospitalization. In the case of Germany, the health system and a complex network of laboratories have helped to test about 500,000 people a week²¹. Thus, the two countries have developed a model of good practice, while most countries have adopted the Chinese approach to limit the spread of coronavirus.

However, it should be noted that the quarantine of Wuhan City and the surrounding area meant the total isolation of 56 million people, but in relation to China's total population (1.4 billion people) it means about 4% of the total, which suggests that the Chinese approach is personalized according to the coronavirus outbreak, and the negative socio-economic impact has been minimized²². Unfortunately in many countries the measures taken have been generalized by adopting the legalized state of emergency. Italy was the first country in the world to adopt a national quarantine. His example was followed by more emotional than rational impact. The large number of infections in the UK generated a huge political pressure to take action and after forced comparisons with the flu in 1918. Thus, quarantine was imposed by ignoring the economic, social and political implications, and the recommended duration even reached 18 months²³. From this point of view, it is clear that the Chinese approach has become an international norm, choosing to close the company until the emergence of appropriate treatment²⁴.

In the cited article, it is considered that the application of equal measures in conditions of unequal risks based on emotional principles has had the opposite effect. Social inequalities have intensified and vulnerabilities have been due to age, social class or pre-existing medical conditions²⁵. We believe that ignoring vulnerabilities has favored the public assertion of egalitarian principles for political purposes, but they have not been pragmatic enough to limit the undesirable effects of the pandemic, which has spread with unpredictable consequences in the near future and with effects that cannot be fully evaluated.

CITIZENS' OPINIONS ON THE EFFECTS OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

This section of the article results from the processing of data from a sociological survey conducted between June 23rd and July 5th, 2020. 1356 questionnaires were collected and are being processed, and the final study is to be published in full.

²¹ *Ibidem.*

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

Partial data processing revealed that information on coronavirus infections is considered worrying depending on the age of the respondents. Thus, the older the person, the more worried people are about the information they receive. Being one of the vulnerabilities, age becomes a benchmark for analyzing the risks of coronavirus infection, while young people are mostly neutral about this risk.

From a gender perspective, women are more concerned about the information they receive than men, who tend to be more indifferent.

Depending on the level of education, the level of concern decreases significantly with the level of schooling.

Depending on the occupation, the most worried people are retirees and those who have intellectual activities: doctors, engineers, teachers, etc.

Most respondents were affected by reduced wages and reduced working hours, which in fact leads to lower incomes and which can lead to greater fears than those related to the risks of coronavirus infection.

Older people (56 years and over) have less confidence in the methods of protection proposed by the authorities compared to other age groups, where confidence generally tends to be high. But in each age group there is also a category of people who do not trust at all the measures proposed by the authorities, especially young and middle-aged people (18–45 years).

The same attitude exists in relation to the rules applied by the authorities: those up to the age of 35 consider that they are too harsh on the existing risks. The proportion of those who do not agree with the sanctions applied is increasing, especially among young people, but the proportion of disagreements expressed by those in the other age groups is also increasing.

Depending on the level of education, it is found that as the level of education decreases, the share of those who have been affected by reduced salaries or job losses increases.

Depending on the level of education, the level of confidence in the measures proposed by the authorities also increases. The same trend is observed in terms of confidence in the capacity of the health system: the decline in education illustrates the lack of confidence in its ability to meet the challenges.

The severity of the economic consequences is reported more by those with a high level of education and less by the other categories of respondents.

Respondents' opinions can be reduced to three factors that have an explanatory power of 82.91%: fears due to the coronavirus epidemic, activities to adapt to the conditions of the pandemic undertaken and the number of family members.

The main fears of the respondent population are related to COVID-19 infection, followed by reduced purchasing power, inability to pay installments and job loss. Also, those who were forced to adopt a certain behavior during the pandemic have converging opinions: the cancellation of trips to the country, the fears based on which they made food supplies, the cancellation of vacation leave

and the reduction of certain expenses are elements that explain the opinions expressed by the respondents. A final factor that determines the opinions expressed is due to the number of family members.

Analyzing the current infection trends in Romanian society, we find that one of the main causes of their growth is due to people who do not follow the rules of protection, do not trust the recommendations and consider that the severity of the coronavirus pandemic is exaggerated by the authorities. The answers collected following the application of the questionnaire allow adraw of a possible profile of those who tend to ignore the protection rules. In terms of appreciation of the protection rules imposed by the authorities, they are most likely men, aged 18–25 or 26–35, usually married, high school graduates, who can be pupils, students or workers, who live in families of 3–4 people, from urban areas, who are afraid of reduced purchasing power, the impossibility of paying installments and utility bills. During the pandemic, most of them canceled their holidays and certain trips to the country.

The disagreement with the sanctions applied reveals the following profile of the respondents: men, probably between 18–25 years old or 26–35 years old, most likely married, graduates of higher or secondary education, who can be students, workers or doctors, engineers, teachers, etc., who live in families of 2–4 people, who are afraid of reduced purchasing power and the impossibility of paying installments and bills. They canceled certain trips in the country, rest leave and certain trips abroad.

It is noted that forms of protest, resistance and indiscipline are developing among those affected by the pandemic in terms of plans established before its outbreak, which fear negative economic consequences, which have certain responsibilities and are trying to plan for the future. It is found that in both cases it is a significant proportion of young married people, people who are at the beginning of the road and live with two or three people in the same home. Beyond the government commitments made, economic recovery programs must take a less general form and be focused on the fears of the population, jobs, facilities to pay installments, utilities, etc. Medical limitations must be correlated as much as possible with economic and social consequences. For example, measures to control the prices of medical products during this period would reduce the public's suspicion of the authorities' decisions. In Europe there are countries that have reduced the costs of protective masks while implementing the obligation to wear them. Conversely, the increase in price conditions will favor the idea that occult economic interests are hidden behind the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

The coronavirus pandemic affects contemporary societies in different ways, depending on the internal factors of each society. From this point of view, the support measures adopted, in particular those specific to the European Union, will

have an effect depending on the internal policies adopted by the government. The ability to direct financial flows where support is really needed is a condition for the success of the economic recovery as soon as possible. The regression has affected the population, but the return to normal will occur in the rhythms dictated by the intervention of the rulers.

In the research that concludes this article we find that there is an area of translation of opinions: for example, there are a higher proportion of those who support the imposed rules, but which decreases in relation to the sanctions that accompany these rules. The fears of these people, especially young men up to the age of 35, are due to the negative economic consequences. The fears related to the risks of infection with the new coronavirus are mentioned mainly by the other categories of respondents, which also indicated the tendency to comply with the rules. However, regardless of the evolution of medical scientific research and the identification of effective treatments, we expect the pandemic to lose its effects in the future. Radicalization will intensify as negative economic consequences outweigh the consequences of the pandemic. The translation zone, where the imposed public health rules are no longer perceived as useful compared to the negative economic effects uncontrolled or out of control by the state, will favor the change of opinions of a large number of people in other categories, who are currently afraid more than COVID-19 infection or worsening of pre-existing medical conditions.

We can speak of a “shear” effect in which the medical and economic objectives act in opposite directions, if the authorities do not pay attention to the correlation of the two categories of objectives that can be easily put in contrast. We believe that the balance of decisions taken, avoiding secondary goals, such as political and electoral approaches, will reduce the time required for economic and social recovery.