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DIGITAL DIVIDES IN EDUCATION. AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON DISTANCE AND ONLINE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON DISTANCE AND ONLINE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Adapting "face-to-face" education to distance and online education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a massive challenge for countries around the world. Online education reignited older debates about inclusive education, such as hoped-for universal access versus current digital divides, prompting the public to reflect about the past, the present, and future of the educational system. This article analyzes the Romanian public discourse, both scientific and non-scientific, on emerging distance and online education in Romania during the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to understand how public communication functioned as feedback for school digitalization. The paper charts the advantages and challenges of distance and online education experienced by various actors (teachers, students, and the members of civil society) or identified through scientific research, focusing on the way online education has spotlighted and reshaped social inequalities. We use thematic content analysis of 152 online articles published from March to June 2020 and eight scientific studies and reports. The results showed that public discourse about distance and online education was largely consistent within and across multiple stakeholders; also, the scientific reports were aligned with the other public opinions expressed and promoted via online channels. The general perspective of the emerging online education during COVID-19 is that it deepens the educational gaps and create new forms of exclusion. On the positive side, some of the teachers have improved their teaching methods and educational content.

Keywords: online education; distance learning; digital divide; digitization.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many aspects of our social realities in areas such as working, shopping, social activities, and education. Many governments decided to close schools from the beginning of the pandemic, acting on the assumption that they are an environment for viral contagion. The change was unexpected, and most countries were unprepared. Moreover, prior to the current crisis, in many areas of educational systems, digital instruments were hardly or not at all integrated into daily educational activities.

Who could have imagined one year ago that school classes would move into the online space and schools would become empty buildings? By the end of March 2020, nearly 1.6 billion learners (90% of all students worldwide) had been affected by the partial or total interruption of offline classes, with 191 national states closing the schools at the national level. By the end of May 2020, 143 national states' schools remained closed, with a total of 1.2 billion students affected (UNESCO, 2020).

Transforming the offline education paradigm into online education from one day to the next has required many logistic efforts, and it has brought to light the challenges the educational systems already had: "The Covid-19 pandemic has added new layers of exclusion related to accessibility of distance learning opportunities, which also affect new categories of the population" (UNESCO, 2020). According to a report published by UNESCO in June 2020, 1 in 10 students from disadvantaged schools do not have an internet connection at home, and "only a minority of countries have the basic infrastructure to focus on the pedagogical challenges of online approaches to teaching and learning" (UNESCO, 2020).

This article considers Romania's way of dealing with online education during the pandemic crisis, and its public reflection. The Romanian case is not singular around the globe; its challenges and methods can be seen in other countries, too. Still, the results of this study should be understood in the specific context of Romania.

Romania has many challenges in terms of its educational system in relation to EU benchmarks: high early school leaving rates (16.4% in 2018), high proportion of 15-year-old students underachieving in reading, science, and math (approx. 40%), and low investment in education (2.8% of the gross domestic product [GDP]) (European Commission, 2019). The existing challenges in education influenced the process of moving from offline to online education in a short period of time and resurrected older debates about reforms in education: school digitalization and digital competences, teacher training, adapted curriculum, school infrastructure, educational gaps, unequal access, and quality of education.

This article presents the Romanian case of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and aims to analyze the Romanian public scientific and non-scientific discourses about distance education. The scientific discourse on distance

education includes surveys and systematic studies conducted by researchers in Romania aimed at improving existing knowledge on the subject. The non-scientific discourse primarily comprises opinion and journalistic articles published in online channels illustrating the perspective of four main actors: students, teachers, the government, and civil society, and it is used in this article as an umbrella term for journalists, educational experts, non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives and other actors expressing their opinions and concerns regarding education during the pandemic in Romania. The massive effort directed toward commenting, addressing worries and questions, promoting a better understanding of the realities in the involved fields, and identifying solutions reflects public preoccupation with improving the functionality of the educational system.

Our study highlights how public communication functioned as feedback for the massive digitalization effort of education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania and the main strengths and weaknesses identified through various forms of feedback – from students and professors' experiences, scientific studies/ assessments, and other stakeholders' reports – with a focus on the reduction, amplification, and/or transformation of social inequalities. For this analysis, I relied on thematic content analysis of 152 non-scientific online articles (press and blogs) posted from March 12 to June 10, 2020 in Romania and eight scientific reports/studies.

The terms *distance/remote education* and *online education* have been used interchangeably in public and private discourse during the pandemic, but there are a few differences between them. Some educational experts believe the education provided for students during the lockdown was not online education, but rather distance (or remote) learning (Craig, 2020; Stauffer, 2020).

Holmberg (1989, p. 2) defined distance education as "covering the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and teaching of a supporting organization." Thus, one of the main distinct differences between distance and online education is the location/proximity of the students and the educational mediator; while online education can take place at school or in a place with both actors (learners and educators), this is not possible in distance learning. Online education (or e-learning) is more about using digital devices, no matter the space (Guri - Rosenblit, 2005). Certainly, the two concepts overlap at some points, but they also imply different characteristics.

The education activities organized at home during the COVID-19 pandemic are rather a hybrid model that involves both distance and online learning because some of the learners received materials and homework but did not have any interaction with the teacher, while others used information communications technology (ICT) to learn from home. In this article, we will use the phrase "distance and online education" in order to describe the hybrid model.

Promises and challenges of distance and online education before the pandemic

In the era of what has been called the "information society," access to the internet and ICT has become fundamental for the quality of one's life. The internet and its connected devices are instruments for professional activities, education, socialization, accessing health facilities and information in general. Thus, "Internet use suddenly becomes a precondition for participation in today's society, that is, a new dividing line between social success and exclusion" (Lupač, 2018, p. 1).

The concept of the *digital divide* captures the existing or possible gap between groups who have appropriate access to digital technologies and those who have insufficient or no access at all. The digital divide is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as "the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the internet for a wide variety of activities" (2001, p. 5).

The digital divide encompasses two layers of digital exclusion: (1) lack of digital devices and connection (or slow connection) to the internet – this divide usually is connected to an urban–rural development gap, and (2) inequalities in digital competences and skills or access to adapted content according to specific needs (e.g., people with disabilities) (European Parliament, 2015).

Blank and Dutton (2014) highlighted that internet use is no longer primarily linked to the use of computers: it is more about different devices such as smartphones, tablets, etc., meaning that users have entered a "post-PC" era where multiple devices are used complementarily. The internet and digital development are dynamic phenomena that change constantly to create novel, emerging forms of the digital divide.

The development of the internet and digital devices was a factor which influenced the evolution of distance and online education in the beginning of the 1990s (Sun & Chen, 2016). Sun and Chen (2016, p. 170) concluded after a literature review that online education will evolve over the next years, and "will continue to increase its presence and influence higher education through a vigorous process of reshaping, refining, and restructuring," but, certainly, it cannot displace face-to-face education. According to their analysis, creating the sense of community for learners and educators remains the biggest challenge when implementing online education. Online students usually have a lower level of belongingness to a group than traditional students (Rovai, Wighting, & Liu, 2005, p. 372) and "there is a need for these individuals to recognize that socialization is as important as instruction in online learning environments." Even though both actors have to struggle to create this sense of community, the role of the teacher is vital for the success of the distance and/or online education (Sun & Chen, 2016) through the

quality of the educational content, teaching methods, and instruments, and ways of approaching the communication with the learners.

The advantages and benefits of distance and/or online education have been recognized and intensively studied, including, among others:

- Limited costs and access for all – Distance and/or online education would imply lower costs for both actors—the educational institution (reduced building maintenance costs, supplies, etc.) and the beneficiaries of the education (reduced transportation and food costs; in the case of higher education classes, the tuition fees are also lower). Thus, the marginal cost for a student in distance/online learning is insignificant compared to face-to-face education (Nguyen, 2015) on the condition that students have internet connections and digital devices. Distance and/or online learning were also seen as means for achieving education for all, taking into consideration that the costs for higher education are quite high: "there is the hope that online learning will be able to provide a world class education to anyone, anywhere, and anytime as long as they have access to the Internet" (Nguyen, 2015).
- Flexible schedule and comfort – Studying at home may be more comfortable than studying in the traditional ways. One can participate in the online activities from their own bed or desk, drinking coffee or their favorite tea. Also, one can avoid traffic jams (especially in big cities) and gain extra hours for their personal time without going to the educational institution. Moreover, when it comes to distance learning, the education takes place asynchronously, which means that the student can decide when to do the educational activities according to their own schedule (Gilbert, 2015). The study done by Gilbert (2015, p. 22) revealed that most of the students prefer studying at their own pace: "I like being able to move at my own pace through the course work. If I understand a topic I can move on, and if I don't understand the topic, I can spend more time on it" (Gilbert, 2015).
- The use of a wide diversity of online instruments and methods, providing a wider choice of tools than in offline settings – In regular/traditional classes, teachers do not frequently use online educational resources due to the lack of an internet connection, digital devices, or teachers' specific ICT competences (European Commission, 2015). In an online educational environment, students have unlimited access to the internet and online tools (only if they have these facilities at home; otherwise, they are excluded from online education). Gilbert (2015, p. 22) also emphasized that the "structure of online learning expanded the students' use of technology and surpassed the technology used in the students' traditional classroom settings."

Most of the extant studies have analyzed online and distance learning at higher education levels, which implies a previous implementation of many years in traditional school structures. There are also a few evaluations regarding the benefits of introducing online education in primary or gymnasium schools which are similar to the ones for higher education—that improved collaboration and communication

skills, increased media literacy skills, enhances "authentic learning" (Lee, 2006; Maher, 2014).

The challenges of distance and online learning were however acknowledged by researchers even before the pandemic of 2020. The most notable shortcomings of online and distance education may refer to:

- Limited socialization and impoverished interpersonal contact between learners and educators (Maher, 2014);
- Inappropriate digital content (Maher, 2014);
- Developing a sense of community (Sun & Chen, 2016); and
- Maintaining motivation and the lack of self-motivation and discipline (Gilbert, 2015).

Also, according to Sun and Chen (2016), we still do not have sufficient insights from the students' perspective—what their experience with online education is, and how it impacts their ultimate learning outcomes. Future research should focus on the learners' perspective and their experiences with distance and online learning.

Distance and online education during the COVID-19 pandemic

Including online education in traditional mainstream education has been a desideratum in recent years, aiming to develop students' digital skills and competences as these became more and more valuable to the labor market. This process has evolved constantly, but the gaps and shortcomings are still significant in terms of both access and quality, especially when comparing developed with developing countries (UNESCO, 2020). In OECD countries, only 50% of the teachers declared in 2018 that they were frequently or always using ICT as learning methods, while approximately 65% of the teachers believed they could use digital instruments and methods for supporting traditional education (OECD, 2020).

The unexpected urgency for social distancing demanded by the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a rapid transformation of the offline/traditional education to distance and online learning. Zimmerman (2020) has stated that the current situation of education presents a great opportunity for testing how online education works in large-scale applications and to observe the outcomes, but also its challenges. Thus, it is much like a social experiment. However, Guzdian (2020) has argued that exposing children to what amounts to a mandatory online education experiment is unfair and unethical: "How can we possibly compare face-to-face classes that have been carefully designed, with hastily-assembled online versions that nobody wants at a time when the world is suffering a crisis".

For some countries, the extent of the changes made in terms of digitalization during this pandemic crisis have been immense and most probably would have been impossible under other circumstances. For example, Egypt's prime minister

stated that they "made more progress with digital and distance learning in the past 10 days than in the past ten years. Without a doubt this crisis will change the way we think about the provision of education in the future" (UNESCO, 2020).

National states have reacted according to their context, resources, and capabilities; some of their actions were the following: investing money in the acquisition of electronic terminals (laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc.), creating higher-quality digital educational content, developing apps and platforms for facilitating distance education and teacher training (Mojib, 2020).

Governments have used mixed delivery channels for distance learning depending on their national resources and context. Table 1 summarizes the four main channels used for delivering distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 127 countries responded to UNICEF's request (Dreeseni et al., 2020), and 86 of them declared that they use some combination of digital and non-digital channels. However, further research should be done regarding the effectiveness of individual and cumulative channels.

Table 1. Distance learning delivery channels

Internet	Most of the countries used the internet as the main transmission channel for distance education through different platforms or specific designed apps. In 2020, only 60% of the world population is now using the internet (Clement, 2020); thus, for the rest of the population complementary channels are needed.
Television	According to UNICEF data, 75% of the national states also used TV to deliver lessons; some also use it for children in primary schools or have adapted the content for children with disabilities (Dreeseni et al., 2020).
Radio	Almost half of the countries use radio to deliver lessons. The access to radio is unequal from one region to another. Latin America countries seem to have the higher proportion of households owning a radio (Dreeseni et al., 2020).
Take-home packages and home visits	Half of the countries are using take-home packages for children who do not have access to any of the devices already mentioned. Few of the countries have recourse to home visits as a last resort (Dreeseni et al., 2020).

Research regarding the effects of and opinions on distance learning are quite limited (at the time of writing this article), most probably because the phenomenon is still developing. State-of-the-art articles have focused on good practices, and they consider a variety of smaller pieces of the larger puzzle. Markus (2020) found in a qualitative study on Indonesian higher education students that learners' perspective on online education is positive, and they understand its usefulness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another study analyzed the shift from offline to online education in a private school in Georgia (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020) and

concluded that the transformation was successful and could aid future development of e-learning outside of pandemic contexts.

Methodology

Analyzing online discourses about education during pandemic times offers a valuable insight about general perceptions on education. Online platforms have become the perfect environment for expressing opinions about distance and online education during the COVID-19 socio-medical crisis. The online space includes the points of view of various actors willing to express their thoughts (positive, neutral, and critical) about the transformation of traditional, face-to-face educational activities to distance and online education. This subject brought to light old frustrations and complaints about the Romanian educational system. Our analysis has two pillars, as described in *Table 2*.

Table 2. Methodological approach

Thematic content analysis for the public (non-scientific) online articles	Thematic content analysis of scientific studies/reports
- Identification of distinctive themes in public communication, depending on the social actors involved; - Identification of strengths and weakness perceived by public actors on distance and online education.	- Description of recurrent themes and angles of research; - Comparison of data and methodologies.

The non-scientific sample included 152 online articles about distance/online education in the Romanian COVID-19 context. The articles were selected from 18 online *(Table3)* news and opinions platforms based on three criteria:

- Articles that were written from March 12 to June 10, 2020; In Romania, schools were closed starting with March 11 until the end of the semester on June 12, 2020. We decided to include in our database only articles written until June 10, 2020 in order to capture the discourse about online education leaving aside the topic of organizing school ceremonies and national exams.
- Articles that presented opinions, not limited to narrating the news or press releases; and
- Articles that referred to online or distance education during the COVID-19 crisis (articles about schools reopening for national exam preparation or articles about the national exam results were not included in the data base).

At the beginning of the process (first phase), we used the following keywords in searching the articles: “online education”, “distance education”, “distance learning”, “remote learning”, “education during the pandemic” (in Romanian language). We centralized all articles that appeared in the Google search engine

and which respected the three criteria mentioned above. Afterwards, we continued an in-depth search with the same keywords on each platform that appeared in the first phase, using their own search engines. We concluded this process after we stopped finding new articles.

Table 3. Description of online platforms

Online platform	Description	No. of articles
Edupedu	Online publication that exclusively hosts articles in the field of education and research. https://www.edupedu.ro/	34
Scoala 9	Independent publishing project dedicated to pre-university education. https://www.scoala9.ro/	22
Europa libera	News website. https://romania.europalibera.org/	21
Republica	News online platform. https://republica.ro/	17
Ziare.com	News website. https://ziare.com/	12
Adevarul	News online platform. https://adevarul.ro/	10
Contributors	Civic platform of opinions and analyzes https://www.contributors.ro/	7
Libertatea	News website. https://www.libertatea.ro/	7
Vice	International Group Media. https://www.vice.com/ro	5
Active news	News website. https://www.activenews.ro/	4
Tribuna invatamantului	Romanian Education Portal. https://tribunainvatamantului.ro/	3
Baricada	Independent left platform. https://ro.baricada.org/	2
DOR	Independent publication. https://www.dor.ro/	2
Qmagazine	Online magazine. https://www.qmagazine.ro/	2
EVZ	News website. https://evz.ro/	1

Hotnews	News website. https://m.hotnews.ro/	1
Recorder	Online publication. https://recorder.ro/	1
Scena 9	Online publication https://www.scena9.ro/ro	1

Four main groups of relevant actors for distance and online education were established and the number of articles for each category is presented in Table 4 (seven of the articles had multiple perspective):

Table 4. Distribution of articles according to authors' perspectives

Authors as stakeholders	Number of articles
Students	24
School representatives	32
Authorities' representatives	12
Civil society	75

In the initial phase, parents were also included as a relevant group for the analysis. After all articles were centralized, we determined that the parents' perspective was not displayed in the online articles about digital education in Romania. Most of the articles had been posted in May 2020 (76), which is the month when distance and online education became mandatory throughout the country; the decision was controversial from many perspectives.

The scientific perspective was identified in eight studies/reports launched from April to July 2020 that applied quantitative and qualitative methods for a better understanding of the challenges and experiences of distance and online education in Romania. Part of the studies and reports were already known to the authors, given our previous interest in the subject, and the rest were found on Google search by using keywords (in Romanian language) such as: „online education", „study", „report"

Table 5. Description of scientific studies and reports

Author(s)	Title	Methodology/ description
UNICEF Romania	Evaluarea rapidă a situației copiilor şi familiilor, cu accent pe categoriile vulnerabile, în contextul epidemiei de covid-19 din românia, Faza 1, Runda 1.	Rapid assessment using qualitative data from 4 counties (Brasov, Bacau, Ilfov, Dolj) in Romania.

Expert Forum	Scoala virusata. Cum arata educatia online din Romania si Moldova in viziunea profesorilor?	Questionnaire applied to 260 teachers from Romania and Republic of Moldova.
Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie (IRES)	Scoala in stare de alerta. Accesul copiilor scolari din Romania la educatie online	National survey (representative) Questionnaire applied to 1319 parents.
Florian, Bogdan și Sebastian Țoc.	Policy note: Educația în timpul pandemiei. Răspunsuri la criza nesfârșită a sistemului educațional românesc	Policy paper.
Botnariuc, Glava, Ilie et al.	ȘCOALA ONLINE - ELEMENTE PENTRU INOVAREA EDUCAȚIEI - Raport de cercetare evaluativă	Evaluation report based on 6436 questionnaires applied to teachers. The study is not representative.
Salvati copiii	Analiză impactul crizei COVID 19 în educația copiilor	Quantitative study based on a survet which included 513 families (the study is not representative).
World Vision	Bunăstarea copilului din mediul rural în perioada pandemiei	Mixed approach: questionnaire applied to 1769 parents and interviews with school principals.
Ureport	Educatia online	Consultation mechanism for children and youngsters developed by UNICEF

For a better understanding of the online education timeframe in Romania, we mention here the main events:

- March 10, 2020 – the Ministry of Education in Romania announces all schools will close for at least 10 days (with the possibility of extending the period). The authorities did not establish clear regulations for continuing education, but they encouraged the teachers to realize supporting educational activities.
- April 21, 2020 – The Ministry of Education in Romania announces that online education becomes mandatory for everyone.
- June 12, 2020 – The 2019-2020 school year ends for pre-university education.
- June 12 – September 14, 2020 – Summer vacation for all children.

Content analysis of Romanian public non-scientific discourse about distance education

Students' experiences and opinions on distance learning

The pre-university students described distance education within two temporal phases established by official government regulation on April 21, 2020 when distance education became mandatory. The students distinguished the differences between the *no regulations phase* and the *mandatory online education phase*. The analyzed articles included mainly opinions from the 12th graders, probably because they face multiple pressures and anxieties due to exams.

In the first phase (no regulation), according to the students, only a few teachers continued education after the schools closed and were sending homework via WhatsApp or other communication platforms: "Before the law was passed, only one teacher had the initiative to have classes via Zoom. Otherwise, we had the WhatsApp class group with many teachers, but there was not much movement in the group" (12th grade student).

During the second phase (mandatory online education), things changed for students and teachers. Many teachers started doing real online classes, not just sending homework, and they became stricter: "At the beginning of the quarantine, homework and classes were rare, their character being rather optional. Now I wake up with essays on drawing and music and hours of videos with sports exercises" (12th grade student).

Generally, the online education was perceived as chaotic by the students. The schedule was not clear, and it changed from one day to another. Moreover, the students received much homework in order to replace the time they were missing in traditional classes. The unsystematic school program led to generally disorganized days for the students with many hours spent surfing the internet and going to sleep in the morning: "She fell asleep in the morning, at sunrise, and woke up in the afternoon, when she was disappointed to see that it was sunny outside. She wanted it to be dark all the time, not to see the beautiful weather she couldn't enjoy" (story told by a journalist about a 12th grade student).

Students stated that there are two categories of teachers: (1) those who make an effort to implement the online classes, even asking help from the students if they do not how to use the online devices, and (2) other teachers who do not want to use ICT at all and refuse to engage in online activities: "There are many teachers who refuse teaching online" (high school student). Some of the students were frustrated by the fact that all classes had to be done online because some they considered useless: "One thing that bothered me was that, after the law that teachers have to do online classes mandatory, I started to waste time at some classes, where, in high school, teachers would have let us study for Baccalaureate" (12th grade student).

The students felt the burden of self-discipline and motivation during distance learning when they had to learn by themselves and were more or less coordinated by the educators: "The so-called online school is sometimes done, sometimes not. Attendance at online classes is incomparably weaker than at school, and concentration is very difficult to achieve when sitting in bed in your own bedroom." (student)

One of the voices most heard has been that of the National Students' Council President which is taking action on behalf of the students. She (the president) argued in the press about the students' need for digital devices and that more than 900,000 pre-university students in Romania do not have access to online education in Romania. The pre-university students council also criticized (and filed a complaint) the Ministry of Education's decision for compulsory online education, considering it a discriminatory and abusive ruling against students lacking internet connections or digital terminals: "Truncated, superficial communication, lack of transparency (even the fact that this Ministerial Order, which impacts students, parents, teachers, has not been subject to public consultation) denotes a total lack of professionalism. It is necessary to urgently withdraw this Order of Minister without foundation and explanations" (President of the National Students' Council).

The students also mentioned feelings and emotions caused by the schools' disruption: panic, irritation, loneliness, lack of motivation, ineffective, fear, anxiety, and tiredness. Moreover, they stressed that have had to deal with public opinion that characterizes them as the lazy generation, wanting too many things without engaging in sufficient effort and work.

Some positive aspects of the distance education were revealed by the students. One of them was that students in the terminal year (12th grade) had more time to study for their final exams: "This quarantine helped me, in some way, to have more time to learn, because I felt that at school, I was no longer efficient". Others realized they actually enjoyed school more than they thought, missed it during distance learning, and felt they had started to appreciate human contact more and did not take it for granted. The online education was a good experience for some of the students because the atmosphere was more relaxed; for example, waiting for all the colleagues to log in was an opportunity to talk among themselves or with the teachers about anything, even things not related to school. One of the students remembered they were impressed when a teacher sent a TikTok video about their online group: "The online courses seemed much more relaxed, the teacher could also joke, and we felt at ease. A much more pleasant environment than in the classroom" (12th grade student).

Distance education from the educators' perspective

Thirty-two articles presenting the schools' perspective (teachers and principals) were analyzed. Some of the teachers were already using digital instruments in their daily education activities (pre- pandemic), so the change from offline to

online education was not that difficult. The articles presented rather a picture of the exceptional type of teacher: one who understand the power of including digital instruments in education, who exceeds their limits and responsibilities, and who is appreciated by students and parents, becoming a model for other teachers. For example, one of the teachers has delivered Romanian lessons for any students of the country on different platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and even TikTok, reaching thousands of students.

Also, the teachers portrayed in these articles already had basic or above basic digital competences that were acquired through different training and project work. NGOs organized projects and programs for improving teachers' abilities needed for online education; two examples of such projects are *Scoala pe net* (Online School, a platform which supports teachers for continuing educational activities at distance [Școala pe net, 2020]) and *Profesor in Online* (Online Teacher, free national program for accelerated digital training and training in online teaching for teachers in Romania [Digital Nation, 2020]).

According to the teachers, the most challenging part of the online education was adapting the traditional content to the online delivery. Even if most of them were already "friends" with technology, they did not know how to teach online. The teacher's role is no longer only to deliver information, it has to be more than that; it must facilitate education: "Our role, as teachers, is to engage our students in learning," said one of the teachers. Teachers used different platforms according to the subject they were teaching and the characteristics of the target group. Preparing the online lessons took more time than preparing for the traditional face-to-face lessons, and it required a lot of work, creativity, and motivation: "In order to have a quality online lesson, you need to prepare it for 2–3 days. And you still can't be sure it will be the way it should be" (math teacher), and "It's not easy, because you have to prepare a lot more for a lesson: you have to send the materials to the students in groups, you have to focus a lot on what you have to say, because you can't sit on the platform for a long time and I don't know for how long the students can be attentive" (math teacher).

Overall, efficient school management helped teachers to organize the online lessons and other administrative activities in an effective manner; however, this was not the case for all of the schools. Thus, the efficiency of online education at the school level was dependent on the quality of the management. Some principals managed to organize the transfer very quickly from offline to online education, and to even offer guidelines for teachers regarding the platforms they should use and how to organize their schedule. As one of the Romanian language and literature teacher said:

> *On March 11, all the teachers gathered at the school. We put on the board what ways of online communication and collaboration we knew, and we decided together that we would go on Zoom and Skype to communicate with students; then, I said that if the schools remain closed in the long run, we will find another common and coherent*

solution at the school level. The next teachers' meeting was in the Virtual Chancellery at the end of March, using the Microsoft Teams platform.

The students' evaluation with grades was highly debated by many actors especially after the Ministry of Education issued an order saying that teachers can grade the students only with the agreement of the student or the parents, if the student is a minor (Ministry of Education, 2020). The teachers were concerned about the possible involvement of parents in the students' evaluation: "The proposal for parents to agree on the student's grade is dangerous because the grade becomes negotiable. Moreover, the parent can give his consent only for the grade he wants. In this way, the evaluation is no longer done by the teacher, the specialist, but by the parent," said one of the teachers. Another teacher mentioned the "elephant in the room" in this debate—lack of common standards for students' evaluation—and noted that this is the reason why there are so many differences between students' grades from one school to another.

The inequalities in students' access to online education was frequently commented upon by the teachers. They noticed some of their students lacked basic digital devices (phones) for participating in online education, and they noted that the most vulnerable children are the ones not taking part in these distance educational activities. The "Tele-school" (delivering lessons on TV for 8th and 12th graders) was one of the Government's measures for ensuring all students have access to some kind of education. Some teachers said they appreciated the initiative, but they did not believe this represents an efficient solution as the students cannot intervene when they do not understand, and there is no connection between the presenter and the listeners.

Teachers said they believe that online education might increase gaps between students, especially between rural and urban areas ("Online platforms deepen to a considerable extent the inequalities between children with resources, who can access such learning tools, and those who do not have access to the internet or who do not have laptops or telephones that allow them to connect") or that is even leads to discriminatory actions ("How many students have the infrastructure to participate in online education? Isn't there a lot of discrimination here?"). Some of the teachers argued that the Ministry of Education's decision on mandatory online education is not respecting the right for free and non-discriminatory education.

The educators themselves have faced difficulties in combining their personal and professional lives at home. In fact, one of the teachers related a story about three children with no laptop in their house; this meant four persons needed to connect online from different devices and to have different home infrastructure in order not to interfere with the others (desk, chair, headphones etc.).

Lack of feedback and real connection between learners and educators were the main deficiencies of online education expressed by the teachers in the online articles: "I miss the interaction. I don't see them. I don't feel them. I don't know who to encourage, who to tell to read" (history teacher).

According to one teacher, the higher the students' grade, the greater the chances they are not using their cameras or microphones; one of the teachers named this phenomenon the "black windows" to describe when they cannot see real faces. Talking to some black screens can cause anxiety for the teachers: "The methods that usually work in class, the jokes that you usually do, here you either can't use them anymore or they don't work anymore. You're kidding and you have 14 closed monitors with no answers" (social sciences teacher).

However, the teachers observed many advantages of the online education. This period offered to some of the teachers the time to reflect and "get out of the box," where the box is the traditional school class where the activities become repetitive: "Digital education is the spark that helped me reinvent myself" (primary teacher). Also, the need for finding solutions gathered the teachers around a common goal and strengthened their school community. According to teachers, some of the students felt more comfortable in online education, and the introverted children became more active and spontaneous in online than in offline activities. In some cases, the digital interaction also improved the teacher–student connection because students felt the teachers were closer to their world by using the ICT.

The teachers expressed quite an optimistic perspective on the future of education. They expect this online experience will lead to a blended learning mechanism where online will be integrated into traditional lessons: "Digitized learning is the school of the future. The two types (face-to-face and online) will work together. We must use that desire of children to surf the Internet and to know as many things as possible." (teacher).

Authorities

The voice of the central authorities was mainly expressed by the Minister of Education and Research in Romania. In the first phase of the online education (until online education became mandatory), the Minister recommended to the teachers to somehow continue education using digital resources. At that time, it was not clear how to transform from one day to another the offline to online education: "This is a recommendation, but at the same time, it is about how each teacher understands to be close to students in this rather difficult period that Romania is going through today" (Minister of Education, March 24, 2020). At that time, the Government did not know how many students did not have access to online education due to lack of digital devices or internet, thus, the Ministry started to collect data from the field about these numbers. Data were collected by each County School Inspectorate without any common methodology: "The School Inspectorates are analyzing to see how many of the students actively participate in these courses, how many teachers hold online courses, so we cannot do this analysis from the ministry, we need the help of the county school inspectorates" (Minister of Education, March 24, 2020).

The information circulated by the Minister of Education was that 250,000 students did not have access to online education in Romania. For these students, the Government approved the allocation of 150 million euros for the purchase of tablets through September of 2020. Some solutions were identified by the Government for reducing gaps between students participating in online education and the ones not having access: (1) Tele-school for 8th and 12th graders; (2) the curriculum for national exams would not include the lessons from the second semester of 2019–2020 school year; and (3) the recovery plans for the students left behind will be implemented in the next school year.

In many interventions, the Minister of Education denied speculations about cancelling the school year. She transmitted encouraging messages, aiming to support teachers, students and parents and to ensure them everything would be fine: "I would like to urge the students to continue learning, to prepare and with confidence we will pass the exams, and, when we are safe, we will return to school" (Minister of Education, April 16, 2020). Monica Anisie, the Minister of Education, promoted the concept of mutual "trust" among the authorities, students, and teachers: "I trust students and teachers and I know that we will get through this period as well" (Minister of Education, May 4, 2020).

The Minister of Education did not offer many clarifications on her decision that students or parents have to agree if a teacher wants to grade him/her for the activity during online education. She compared the situation with previous experiences in the educational system when grades obtained in simulations were entered into the catalog only with the student's consent. The Minister wanted all grades to be for the students' benefit and she even asked the teachers "to make friendly assessments for the end-of-semester theses" (Minister of Education, May 30, 2020).

Besides the Minister of Education, the President of the National Council for Combating Discrimination was noted in the online articles. He expressed an opinion on cancelling the National Exams for 8th and 12th graders and using GPA for entering high school or university, arguing that it would not represent an act of discrimination for the students in the previous generation "because this year's graduates are not in a comparable situation, but in fact, they are in a different situation compared to the graduates from previous years." As a result, the National Council for Combating Discrimination received letters of concern regarding vulnerable groups' lack of access to online education. The President responded to this:

> *The discrimination would not result from the fact that you do not organize the national exams due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The discrimination would result from the fact that there is no unitary grading system, in practice, and this would generate inequalities and distortions in the calculation of the Baccalaureate average and the National Exam for 8th grade*.

Civil society as critical mass

Many educational experts, NGO representatives, and journalists contributed to the public debate about the challenges of distance and online education in Romania during the COVID-19 lockdown.[1] One of the main topics addressed by these authors was regarding the Government's decisions and actions related to education. The Ministry of Education was harshly criticized by the civil society for (1) shifting the burden of responsibility in education from the state to the parents and non-compliance with the principal of free education; (2) poor management of the students without access to online education due to lack of digital devices or limited internet connection; and (3) poor communication between state institutions and the general public, confusing messages, and lack of strategy. The main criticisms are synthesized below.

(1) The Ministry of Education put pressure on the parents for ensuring their children access to education.

According to the Romanian Constitution, public education is free for every child. Various members of civil society pointed out that this principle was not respected during COVID-19 pandemic as a large number of students did not have the necessary resources at home for doing online activities. Moreover, the official order adopted in April 2020 stipulated that parents have "the obligation to take all necessary measures to ensure the student's access and participation in online educational activities" (Ministry of Education, 2020). Thus, the civil society asked what happens if the parents do not have the means to ensure their children participate in online education? Should not the state take responsibility in this case? The former Minister of Education noted:

> *I'm sure everything parents can do, they do: I don't think they have the internet and they don't let their children take their lessons online. It is a way to dispel responsibility, to consider that responsibility is shared and to consider that we, as a state and a ministry, are not so responsible for what happened*.

(2) The Ministry of Education did not know how many children do not have access to online education.

Many voices raised the problem of the state not knowing how and where to intervene for ensuring access to education. Everyone said there were students without digital devices and internet, and there was persistent uncertainty on how they all could be identified. The Ministry of Education started a data collection about students who did not have access to online education using the County State Inspectorates without a clear methodology, and they came up with the approximation of 250,000 students who needed a digital device. A study representative at the

national level contradicted the data and concluded more than 900,000 students did not have individual access to a digital device (IRES, 2020). As one journalist noted:

> *It turned out, in fact, that the Ministry had no idea how many students had access to the Internet, a computer or a tablet […]. Finally, the Minister admitted that more than 250,000 students do not have access to online courses, but that about 60% attended these courses. However, "participation" was sporadic.*

(3) The Ministry of Education's messages were perceived as lacking an evidence basis and decisiveness, amplifying confusion and distrust.

The Ministry of Education discourses and messages were blamed, especially regarding the lack of decision: "I think the worst decision is indecision," said one of the former ministers. In the first phase of the lockdown, the Ministry of Education declared that they supported continuing education from a distance without any clear regulations, but after one and a half months, an order regulating the online education as mandatory was published. Also, it was not clear if the online activities should consist of teaching new lessons or just maintaining some sort of educational connection between school and students.

"The Minister did not excel in terms of communication. The press conferences she held had the great 'quality' of leaving the audience even more confused," a journalist stated. Some of the experts and journalists admonished the Minister for trying to maintain the appearance of everything going just fine with online education and for continuing to assure everyone that the school year would not be cancelled. A common opinion among civil society was thatn the Minister was preoccupied about "forms without substance" (an old saying in Romanian language meaning that the substance does not matter, but rather only the appearance). One educational expert expressed it this way:

> *Ever since the pandemic began, it seems to me that the Minister has really only one concern: not to be ashamed of freezing the school year (a solution that would have deserved at least an honest public debate). In the end, everything must seem fine. Yes, I said right, to seem fine. Because none of the official papers will reflect the desolate reality on the ground.*

Besides criticizing the Government's decisions and messages, the educational experts and journalists also analyzed the transformation of education from offline to online**.** They stressed that teachers cannot become "overnight" experts in using online methods, and students cannot adapt with such urgency to distance learning. Furthermore, they noted, each actor has their own fears and anxieties related to the socio-medical crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic. They asked an essential question: How can the teachers be creative and efficient in developing and teaching online in such an unstable context? One of the educational experts proposed returning to the origins of education and asking other crucial questions: "Who

are the people when they are not obliged to teach, to learn by force, or to submit to authority? What motivates them? And what could online school actually be?"

Many of the analyzed online articles suggested that this is the time for reflecting on the future of education in Romania while understanding its challenges and the current opportunities. The dissatisfaction with the educational system is not a new topic, but the need for online education has brought to light many of the shortcomings in education that have existed over the last 30 years. One of the educational experts mentioned there is no vision for the further development of education in Romania and the state is not assuming the mission of inclusion and quality education for all, but has a "meritocratic" approach: "In the Romanian context, we could define a successful school as one that serves a disadvantaged area and reduces school dropout […]. We award the one that takes 10 children to the Olympics, not the other one, and that means that we are not so interested in the role of the school as a provider of social inclusion services."

Some members of the civil society expressed dissatisfaction toward the educational curriculum that is not adapted to the current changes and social realities: "Compare only the current curriculum with that of 1970 and you will see that despite the endless 'reforms' the curriculum has remained the same." (NGO representative)

Previous reforms in education aimed at digitization of the school, but the measures had not been put in practice comprehensively, and the COVID-19 lockdown had caught the government with no e-learning platform, teachers with minimal digital competences, and students using the internet for social media rather than educative activities: "Obviously, if all the governments after the revolution had dealt with reducing the gap between rural and urban, things would have been completely different today" (journalist).

The inequalities in education attracted diverse reactions and opinions from the civil society. Part of the civil society expressed the belief that online education is deepening the educational gaps which already exist in Romania. Also, it was pointed out that students who cannot participate in any educational activity (either provided by the school or enhanced by the family) will experience severe deficiencies, especially because they were already the most vulnerable ones: "Online education will not be a solution even for slowing the growth of educational disparities in Romania" (educational expert), and "Material deprivations, lack of access to essential minimum services, lack of staff specialized in education and social protection were not enough, now everything is doubled by the technological gap" (educational expert). The students with special educational needs and/or with disabilities cannot benefit from the online education either because they lack adequate devices for their needs or because the educators are limited in adapting the online content to their specific needs; thus, "for the child with disabilities, this interruption of school life and daily routine is a catastrophe because he regresses," said one of the activists for children with disabilities. If the online education will

continue into the next school year, experts consider the students lacking access to education will become *functionally illiterate* and some of them will leave school before finishing the compulsory education. The good side of all these debates about inequalities in education is that the topic has now reached the public agenda, and "we are searching for solutions" (journalist). There were also a few opinions about how the exclusion of the vulnerable children was already there and that nonparticipation in online education is not going to change anything and the gaps will remain the same.

Another negative side of the emerging online education expressed by some of the civil society through non-scientific online articles is that children are spending many hours in front of the screens, amplifying a pre-existing problem, and that they are missing real socialization among their peers and with the teachers, feeling a loss of the school community. Moreover, online education cannot substitute as kindergarten for pre-scholars as they are not capable of doing the activities alone and, because of this, the parents take over the role of the educator: "The affective, socializing and caring component of the nursery and kindergarten are at least as important as the cognitive development of children" (civil society representative).

The privacy and security issue in online education was raised by the civil society as video and pictures with teachers and students appeared on social media. According to some of the NGO representatives, most of the schools do not have procedures regarding this issue; thus, there is a high probability that there is no agreement from the parents about posting certain pictures of their minor children. The Ministry of Education does not seem preoccupied by the subject, as one participant observed:

> *Do you think that the Ministry provided information on children's personal data? The subject of personal data protection is somewhere at the end of the queue for the Ministry of Education. The Ministry is not sufficiently aware of the level of the problem and the risk.* (NGO representative)

Few articles have tackled the online education at the university level. The academic environment gave the impression their adaptation to distance and online learning was less complicated than in the pre-university education. One of the educational experts mentioned the university students became more involved in the online activities. Still, some noted that there remains a need for more technical support to more efficiently implement online education at universities.

The positive view on the online education stresses the rapidity of learning in the forced context of online education with students, teachers, and parents collaborating for better educational outcomes. There is also more autonomy for the teachers and for the students, but each group has to decide how to use this autonomy:

I think that this pandemic gave back to teachers their didactic voice, to those responsible, to those in the area of good spots in education. More student autonomy, more relationships, and emphasis, and public attention to school. (journalist)

Moreover, the blended learning approach now seems to be perceived as the future of education, a mix between the advantages of analog and digital education, "because it corresponds to the way the mind of the current digital generation of children who are in school and who have grown up permanently with these digital means works" (former Minister of Education).

Scientific diagnoses on online and distance education during COVID-19

The scientific part of the public discourse regarding online education during the COVID-19 pandemic captures and documents many of the ideas considered in the non-scientific discourse. NGOs and research organizations have collected quantitative and qualitative data on online education from multiple perspectives (students, teachers, and parents). Also, one of the public criticisms of the Government is the lack of accurate data on the actual number of students and reasons for not participating in online education. Thus, the transversal theme approached by the scientific studies is the access to online education from both students and teachers' viewpoints; the access is mainly understood as conditioned by the possession of digital device and/or internet connection.

Data regarding access to digital devices vary from one study to another depending on the methodology used for collecting data and on the definition used for access. For example, in online consultation conducted mainly via internet and without specifying if the access is individual, the percentage of students and teachers owning a phone, tablet or PC is quite high—90% (UNICEF Romania, 2020). On the other hand, according to one of the representative studies (IRES, 2020), 32% of the students in Romania do not have individual access to a digital device, which translates to 900,000 students in absolute numbers. The teachers' limited access to equipment and internet connections was also an obstacle in realizing online classes: some of the teachers do not have the necessary devices for delivering online education while others had to share their device with the children in their own families (Cezar, Grama, & Pârvu, 2020). Scientific studies (Cezar, Grama, & Pârvu, 2020; Florian & Toc, 2020; IRES, 2020) have drawn attention on the imbalance between rural and urban areas to the detriment of the population living in the rural zone: lower proportion of children having digital devices and internet connection, limited support from the parents, limited digital competences, and other factors.

Florian and Toc (2020) analyzed the inequalities of opportunity already existing in the Romanian educational system, focusing on the rural–urban educational gap:

students learning in urban areas have a greater opportunity to receive a quality education (qualified teachers, better infrastructure, and better socio-economic situation at home). The authors further highlighted that the current situation of online education in Romania has to be understood in the social and educational context of the country before the COVID-19 pandemic: that a high percentage of the population is at risk of poverty, social exclusion, and/or material deprivation.

Another layer of analysis in the scientific discourse is the quality of online education and the challenges in adapting offline to online education. Teachers encountered technical difficulties in implementing online activities, especially regarding the platforms they had to use, but also the lack of instruments for monitoring and managing the online activities (Botnariuc et al., 2020). Some of the teachers did not have the ability to create digital content and did not know how to select from the multitude of online resources. Teachers also expressed that preparing online lessons required more time than the regular ones (Cezar, Grama, & Pârvu, 2020). Moreover, the abundance of online platforms and resources caused tiredness and confusion among the teachers (Cezar, Grama, & Pârvu, 2020). In order to substitute for the normal school hours, some teachers gave more homework which meant more hours spent by students in doing homework and also more hours for the parents spent in supporting children's educational activities (IRES, 2020).

The teachers felt the lack of official regulations by the Government, and they had to rely only on the school leadership which was not always successful (Cezar, Grama, & Pârvu, 2020). Another factor that was noted as having an influence one the success or failure of the online education was the teachers' ability to work as a team aiming to identify the best solutions for the good of the children.

Some of the studies have captured the positive aspects of the online education from the teachers' perspective. During COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have had the opportunity of redesigning traditional ways of teaching, and they have also seen the value of integrating digital content in day-to-day educational activities (Botnariuc et al., 2020). They also mentioned that students were motivated and interested (especially in the beginning of online education), and this made the transition from face-to-face to online easier, and that for some of the introverted students, the online education was an occasion for overcoming some of their fears as they felt more comfortable participating via screen (Cezar, Grama, & Pârvu, 2020).

The scientific side of the public discourse also made some recommendations for the Government in order to improve the online education in Romania. One of the recommendations was to ensure access to digital devices and internet connection for all students who were missing it during the first phase of the online education (March–June 2020). Even though the Government announced they allocated funds for purchasing 250,000 tablets, the IRES (2020) suggested there is a need for 900,000 tablets in order to cover the requirement at the national level. Also, the Government should identify solutions for cases where distance education is not

possible, such as remedial education, when schools will reopen, or supplementary support for the disadvantaged families (Botnariuc et al., 2020). Another set of recommendations consisted of clear regulations on implementing distance and online education regarding evaluation, exams, teaching platforms, etc. (Botnariuc et al., 2020). Cancelling the National Exams for 8th and 12th graders was also a recommendation (Florian & Toc, 2020) due to the possible stress for the students and the authorities' incapacity of organizing the exams in safe conditions. Florian and Toc (2020) also suggested that the National exams could be replaced by the students' GPA for entering high school and that this would be a more just solution because using the four years' mean instead of a National Exam would lead to a radical redistribution of chances, with top-performing students at classroom level obtaining equal chances for admission to a prestigious high school independently of the level of their school in a national ranking. These long-term recommendations harken back to the old debate issues about reforming the educational system: adapting the educational curriculum, investing in school infrastructure, teachers training for improving digital competences, and school digitalization (Botnariuc et al., 2020; Florian & Toc, 2020; IRES, 2020).

Conclusions

The public discourse, both from scientific and non-scientific sources, about online education in Romania is quite diverse depending on the stakeholders involved (teachers, students, public authorities, and civil society), interests, and experiences, but it also has strong commonalities. The emerging distance and online education during the pandemic have been strong catalysts for mobilizing actors for the common goal of education.

Table 4 summarizes the challenges and advantages perceived based on their own mediated experiences (in a non-scientific way) by three categories of actors: students, teachers, and civil society.

Table 6. Challenges and advantages of online education from three perspectives (students, teachers, civil society) in the general public

Group	Themes in public debates concerning distance and online education	
	Challenges	Advantages
Students	Chaotic program and communication More homework Lack of access for students without material resources	More time to study for the exams (National Exam for the 8th graders and Baccalaureate for the 12th graders) Discovering new hobbies School participation is more comfortable from home School became more enjoyable

Teachers	Difficulties in adapting traditional content to online education More time needed for preparing online activities Lack of unitary standards for students' evaluation Lack of feedback and real connection Online education is deepening the educational gaps	Time to reflect and "get out of the box" Introverted children became more active and spontaneous
Civil society	Shifting the burden of responsibility in education from the state to the parents and non-compliance with the principal of free education Poor management of the students without access to online education Poor communication, confusing messages, and lack of strategy Online education is deepening the educational gaps Privacy and security issues	Rapidity of learning More autonomy for both the teachers and students Better collaboration among students, teachers, and parents

One of the common themes articulated in both scientific and non-scientific discourse is lack of universal access to online education for children without material resources. Even though it is not very clear as to the magnitude of the issue (the numbers varied from 250,000 to 900,000 students), all groups acknowledged the unfairness of the situation for children who cannot participate in online education because they do not have a computer or internet connection at home. Moreover, the discourse about lack of access opened the debate about previous inequalities in education that were brought to light by the pandemic crisis: rural–urban gaps, socio-economic gaps, limited quality of education in disadvantaged schools, and lack of teachers' digital competences. This discourse does not belong to the ones most affected by the problem—vulnerable students and parents—because their voices were not included in the analyzed public articles. However, other actors are speaking for the students in need, and most of them are educational experts, NGOs or journalists. From the students' perspective, the National Students Council is the only entity tackling this issue. A common fear expressed by the teachers and civil society concerns the increase of educational gaps due to traditional school disruption (more students will drop out school, more students will have gaps in reading or writing, etc.).

Adapting the existing educational content to online education created many difficulties for students and teachers. There was a common perception of chaos, revealed by the online articles, especially in the first phase of online education when the Ministry of Education transmitted unclear messages. From the students' perspective the program was not clear, and it was changing from one day to the

next; thus, their whole program was disorganized. The teachers, on the other side, were not prepared for online teaching and preparing the online lessons took more time than the regular ones. Both groups felt the absence of real human connection and experienced a variety of feelings from anxiety and fear to lack of motivation and tiredness.

The civil society was active and present in the online articles expressing their critical opinion on online education in Romania. It is obvious that their discourse is the most critical when compared with that of the other actors, and their attention is directed mainly at the Government. Thus, many online pages are covered with comments and opinions about the Government's decisions or lack of decision. From the scientific perspective, recommendations were made for the Government based on the research results, and they are in line with the non-scientific solutions.

The privacy and security issues involved with online education were analyzed in a few articles by experts. They raised the issue that schools do not have clear methodologies for using online platforms for evaluation and monitoring of the activities. Moreover, the Ministry of Education did not take any specific measures in this regard.

Even though the discourse about online education has often dominantly critical overtones, there are also advantages that have been pointed out. For example, the students perceived the school closure as an opportunity for more preparation time for the National Exams, while others acknowledged the online education is more comfortable than the traditional one as you can stay in bed longer and do not have to waste time with transport. Some of the students said they appreciated online education because school was more enjoyable and relaxing, they could laugh with their colleagues and teachers, and they could talk about the pandemic and how everyone is handling it.

A number of teachers also saw this moment as an opportunity for making changes in their teaching methods. They observed that some of the students became more active in online education. Additionally, the civil society noticed a few positive sides of the online education such as the improvement in student–teacher collaboration or the increase in autonomy for both teachers and students.

Overall, the Government representatives were perceived as not being very involved in transmitting messages, and they appeared to be avoiding transmitting public information. The few public interventions (besides press releases) included encouraging messages for teachers especially about their significant role in continuing education and the need for them to stay close to the students and parents. Moreover, the Government debated some of the solutions to the challenges they also encountered in implementing online education, including purchasing tablets for the students not having access to online education, involving the parents when teachers grade the students, etc.

The online public discourse, as observed in press articles, about online education included substantial perspectives from civil society: 50% of the analyzed articles

were written by journalists, educational experts, and NGO representatives. Even though students and teachers also have had their space for expressing opinions about how they experienced online education, there remain unheard voices—for example, vulnerable students, parents in general, and even teachers without digital competences or resources. Future research should include the perspective of these unexplored groups in order to complete the image of the perception toward online education in Romania.

The COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated intense public reflection and change in the Romanian educational system, highlighting systemic vulnerabilities and opening opportunities for reform. It is important to continue the monitoring and public reflection on the direction of this transformation, in order to ensure a fair distribution of losses and gains across all stakeholders in the school system, to protect vulnerable categories and to ensure that digitalization brings value to education in Romania.

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Note

[1]This section includes only non-scientific/non-systematic opinions included under the umbrella term "civil society" (journalists, NGO representatives, educational experts, etc.).

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