**Study on the Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights of**

**young people**

**-Response by the Republic of Croatia-**

1. **What are the main challenges that young people face in your country in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic and the response to it? If any age-disaggregated data has been collected in this regard, please include it in your response.**
* **General overview -**

The negative impact of the pandemic on the lives of young people depends on their age and some other features and we still lack comprehensive research on the subject. Some recent data provided by Institute for Social Research in Zagreb showed that almost 60% of high school graduates and 40% of students in the final grades of primary school have experienced some sort of negative impact of the pandemic.

It is important to stress that young people in Croatia are not affected by the illness Covid-19 itself, but with the “safety measures” and lockdowns. Restrictions on free movement and long-term isolation of young people affected their physical and mental development, their education and work, sport and other activities, their leisure time. Unfortunately, the full consequences of the pandemic are still unknown. The most affected area is certainly the one concerning education due to the lockdowns, home schooling or distance learning.

Some other data show trend of declining motivation to engage in physical activity, especially in young men, and increased number of consumed meals per day for students which could lead to health problems in the future.

The pandemic affected young entrepreneurs who suffered a reduction in their income during lockdowns and restrictions. Some of them did not “survive” the first year of the crisis despite governments’ efforts to support firms and provide some compensation.

The youth sector reported on project delays, difficulties in their work, negative impact on youth employment, restricted movement and travel and adherence to epidemiological measures. Some youth organizations claimed that some of them were forced to close their work and premises, but there is no evidence to prove such claims.

When regards to youth mobility and Erasmus+ programme in 2021 there is a quite small influence of the COVID19 pandemic on the realization of applied activities. In 2020 only 18 youth mobilities have been realized in Republic of Croatia, while in 2021 77 of them was realized until 29th October. With possibility for the beneficiaries to apply exceptional costs (COVID tests) majority of beneficiaries decided to continue with the implementation of the program. National agency did not face any problematic situation in realization of given activities. There was a greater interest and opportunity for realization of live implementation of youth mobilities.

Regarding mental health issues of young people, assessments of the impact of the pandemic on students are worrying. The most affected are girls of excellent school performance. The generation of high school graduates feels the most deprived. Feelings of deprivation are much stronger for girls and students of better school performance (Institute for Social Research in Zagreb).

* **Challenges in area of education –**

Opening and closing of schools in Croatia for school years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 has been based on local epidemiological situations, right down to school level, with coordination across the country. This approach has resulted in 98% of primary school education (1st–4th grade) in school year 2020/2021 being delivered face-to-face (in class bubbles). The proportions for lower- and upper-secondary education were 85% and 71% respectively, although 90% of those in their last year of secondary education, who were about to sit the state exams, attended face-to-face. Students with disabilities had access to assistants (all of whom were vaccinated) for support. This approach showed great benefits to child health, well-being and educational outcomes during these pandemic years.

The Institute for Social Research in Zagreb in collaboration with the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education conveyed a research-developmental project titled *“National monitoring of the effects of the COVID-19 disease pandemic and the 2020 earthquake on the organization of educational processes and the well-being of pupils and educational workers in the Republic of Croatia”[[1]](#footnote-1).*

In the project, there were 161 primary and secondary schools examined, from all parts of Croatia. Some of the thematic areas included in the project are as follows: the ways in which the coronavirus pandemic influenced the lives of pupils in Croatia; aspects of lives of children and youth that were particularly affected; how pupils view classroom teaching and learning in comparison to remote teaching and learning; how teachers assess pupils’ educational losses since the beginning of the pandemic; how educational workers see the psychological and emotional state of pupils.

While students reported that their relationships with close friends and family members had not been badly affected (if anything, the effect was positive), negative impacts had been felt in relation to physical activities and playing sports, their plans for the future and out-of-school activities and hobbies. The greatest perceived negative impact, however, was the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on their mental health, with more than half of 18-year-olds claiming its effect was negative or very negative.

The voices of young people and educators in the survey have confirmed that schools are crucial not only for young people’s education, but also to their personal and social development.

Furthermore, the Agency for Science and Higher Education conducted research on the impact of pandemic circumstances on the study experience in the academic year 2020/2021, such as online and/or hybrid teaching and various restrictions in social life. Almost 4,300 students of all levels except postgraduate, answered questions about how they assess the quality of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, how satisfied they are with certain aspects of student life, how they assess their mental health and how the pandemic affected freshmen students and their adaptation to higher education.

The results of the research showed that the transition to online forms of teaching during the pandemic significantly affected the mental health of students, their social inclusion, study experience and quality of life.

It proved important to return to the contact method of teaching, while respecting epidemiological measures during the pandemic, and in accordance with the issued permits, where all good experiences in the application of online teaching can continue to be developed and used as a supplement to classical teaching.

* **Challenges in area of employment –**

The share of young people in the total number of registered unemployed is always between 26% and 30%. The data show that the average number of young people (15-29) in 2013 was about 113.000, while in 2021 it decreased to about 34.000. At the same time, according to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, the number of employed young people (15-29) in 3rd quarter of 2021 was 282.000, which is around 53.000 more than in the same quarter of 2013 (229.000).

**The coronavirus pandemic has indeed affected young people, and in 2020 the number and share of young unemployed people increased. However, through timely implementation of measures to preserve jobs, and later, to create jobs, the number and share of unemployed young people has even fallen below the 2019 level.**

Despite the challenges caused by the pandemic, and compared to EUROSTAT data from 2018, when 15.6% of young people were in NEET status (Not in Employment, Education or Training), in 2020 we had a lower share of 15-29 young people in NEET status, or 14.6% of young people in this age group were not employed in full-time or in regular education or in adult education. Thus, in 2020, we came even closer to the EU average of 13.7%, which is better than as many as 8 EU members.

Regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic, young people are characterized by a longer duration of institutionalized education, uncertain employment opportunities (especially in secure and well-paid jobs), difficult socio-economic independence, and a delay in starting a family.

From the unemployment and employment point of view, there are several characteristics related to young people. These are the following: limited access to first work experience, willingness to accept a job outside the place of residence, and motivation to engage in additional education and acquire new knowledge and skills through adult education (not exclusively related to young people but to the total population).

1. **What measures is your government taking to support young people and ensure the full implementation of their rights during and after the pandemic? Please provide examples of policies and programmes adopted to this end, in particular regarding right to work and social security, right to education, right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.**
* **Right to work and social security -**

During and after pandemic, Republic of Croatia did not change its labour legislation. All labour rights, including wage, working hours, and procedure for dismissal, stayed unchanged. Employers were required to apply all provisions of labour legislation without any exception.  In order to preserve jobs, the Government introduced numerous measures and incentives.

Croatian Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (MLPSFSP) and the Croatian Employment Service continuously encourage the inclusion of all unemployed persons in the labour market, with special emphasis on young people entering the labour market for the first time. This is achieved through the **implementation of active employment policy measures**, which were revised in 2017 and strongly focused on the employment of young people, thus ensuring them social security and a decent salary.

The measures are aimed at different groups of employed and unemployed persons as well as employers, and in this sense the aim is to facilitate business by granting employment subsidies, support employers in expanding their business with the same measure, speed up finding jobs for young people through internships and simplify self-employment of people with good business ideas, who are considering entering entrepreneurship and their main obstacle is lack of funds.

According to the data available to us, most of the young people involved in self-employment support or employment support (including internships) were still employed 18 months after the end of the measure.

Employment retention is also encouraged. Through education and training measures participants are enabled to acquire competencies for new employment or job retention, and employers are enabled to employ workers with competencies needed in the labour market, similar to training support for workers already employed by the employer.

Part of the ALMP measures also refers to the implementation of the **Youth Guarantee**, i.e., the implementation of measures that seek to involve young people in work or education within 4 months after the registration with the Croatian Employment Service. From the data related to the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, about 60% of young people included in the measures enter them within 4 months of registration with the Croatian Employment Service.

The Republic of Croatia has been implementing the Youth Guarantee since 2013, in accordance with the Recommendation of the EU Council. The Youth Guarantee is a comprehensive and multi-stakeholder approach to tackling youth unemployment. One of the elements of the Youth Guarantee is the provision of job search support and the implementation of active employment policy measures implemented by the CES.

Measures under the Youth Guarantee include support for employment, internships, self-employment, but also measures for education in accordance with the needs of the labour market. Part of the support in preparation for job search also refers to the procedures of lifelong professional guidance and counseling on career development that are carried out in specialized CISOK centers (Career Information and Counseling Centers). A number of free self-assessment tools are available at CISOK centers, which are also available online (<https://cisok.hr/usluge-u-cisok-centrima/alati-za-razvoj-karijere-samoprocjena-kompetencije/>), through which young people can test what jobs might me suitable according to their knowledge, skills and interests.

Young people in the Republic of Croatia are **primarily faced with the problem of lack of skills required in the labour market,** and the majority of unemployed young people have completed secondary education (more than 60% of them). Therefore, the reforms implemented in the past few years are primarily aimed at **improving the secondary vocational education system** in order to harmonize it with the needs of the labour market, which includes, among other things, the strengthening of work-based learning and reforming the apprenticeship system which is under the competence of the Ministry of Science and Education and The Ministry of economy and sustainable development.

At the same time, in 2019 the MLPSFSP started implementing the ESF **project "Implementation of the CROQF and development of tools in connecting education and the labour market**", which aims to harmonize all educational programs with the real needs of employers in the market, as well as the development of the Labour Market Portal as a central place for informing about career choice and development.

Within the Youth Guarantee itself, in 2018 a data exchange system was developed that enables **mapping of persons in the so-called NEET status**. In this way, we can determine from which educational programs young people enter more often into inactivity and work on the development of prevention measures and measures to reach inactive young people and include them in the employment support system or help them return to education. Some of these measures are being implemented in the framework of the **open ESF call "Find me"[[2]](#footnote-2)**

In relation to the future plans of MLPSFSP, young people are high on the list of policy priorities, which is highlighted in the adopted National Plan for Labour, Health and Safety at work and Employment for the period from 2021 to 2027, based on which measures for the new Youth Guarantee implementation plan (YGIP) the for the period 2022-2023 years will be developed. The focus will be on the inclusion of young people who are far from the labour market, i.e., the long-term unemployed and inactive young people, as they are the most vulnerable in the labour market.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NPOO), within the component "Labour Market and Social Protection", will encourage the creation of new jobs in the green and digital industry. With the help of available funds, we plan to encourage employment in those branches of the economy that will develop the most in the future and will thus be sustainable in the years to come.

One of the most important new measures related to the transition to digital / green economy that will be implemented within the NPOO is the implementation of education through the **voucher system**, in the period from April 2022 to June 2026. Of the planned 30,000 vouchers to be awarded to employees and the unemployed, at least 40% of the vouchers will be awarded to young people, the long-term unemployed and the inactive.

Furthermore, **new measures of active employment policy** will be implemented, through which employment, internships and self-employment will be supported, and which is also related to the green and digital transition of the economy. By the end of 2025, a total of 26,400 people is planned to be included in the measures, with special attention in the implementation being focused on young people and the long-term unemployed.

Also, within the NPOO, the Croatian Employment Service plans to **improve the work of CISOK centers** (Career Information and Counseling Centers) and ensure the availability of services to all citizens, as well as expanding and reorganizing the existing network of CISOK centers with emphasis on their role in attracting NEETs. With the aim of making the services of CISOK centers available to NEETs, by 2025 the CISOK network will be extended to those Counties where it does not currently exist. In addition, individualized services tailored to the needs of all users will be developed. Emphasis will be placed on a preventive and proactive approach to working with beneficiaries, especially young and inactive NEETs who need to be supported in developing appropriate skills which will enable them to adapt to the changing demands of jobs brought by the transition to a digital and green economy.

Within the ESF project "**Improvement of the system of lifelong career guidance and career development in the Republic of Croatia"**, in the period from the end of 2022 to 2024, national models of provision and career guidance services will be developed for pupils and students, young unemployed people, young employees who want to change careers and NEET groups. The purpose of the national model is to ensure an integrated and equal access to services for all target groups, as well as to provide uniform quality of service.

* **Right to education –**

Three models were planned for the implementation of classes in the school year 2020/2021. These are: (1) model A: education in school, (2) model B: mixed education (partly in school, partly distance education), (3) model C: distance education. Which model and at what point it is going to be applied depends greatly on health recommendations related to the epidemiological situation in Croatia at the national and local level. This approach has resulted in 98% of primary school education (1st–4th grade) being delivered face-to-face and is also implemented in school year 2021/2022.

To support the distance learning process, the Ministry coordinated the development of a document entitled *Annual Curriculum Implementation*. The document covers the main learning outcomes defined per subjects during one school year that have to be achieved. Annual Curricula Implementation serves as a reference point in the process of video lectures/video lessons preparation.

In addition to the above, students use digital materials in electronic textbooks and digital educational resources. Croatia has provided free textbooks to all primary school students (and those who belong to vulnerable groups in secondary schools). Each textbook has a digital part that student uses in the process of self-directed learning and evaluation.

Equipment and Internet access and development of distance learning

All mobile network operators in Croatia have provided free broadband internet and SIM cards for all students of primary and secondary schools, as well as university students with lower socio-economic background. Publishers and proprietors of educational applications have granted free access to educational content. More than 200,000 tablets were distributed to students and around 54,000 computers for teachers and school staff.

Technical support to primary and secondary schools has been successfully provided by the Croatian Academic and Research Network (CARNET). Higher education institutions also received guidelines for the transition to distance learning, while University Computing Centre (SRCE) provided software and support through its distance learning centre.

*Distance learning of national minorities in Croatia*

Education of members of national minorities is an integral part of the entire system of education in Croatia and distance learning in schools that provide education in the language and script of national minorities takes place from the very beginning of the introduction of this type of teaching, using various sources and digital materials and making and sharing it between teachers and educators. Distance learning during school year 2019/2020 was organized for the Italian, Czech, Hungarian, Serbian national minority via television channels, virtual classrooms, YouTube channels, and digital materials and content was provided.

In order to facilitate the teaching, examples of annual performance curricula have been developed, and all video lessons as well as annual performance curricula are available free of charge through the platform of the Ministry of Science and Education, <https://i-nastava.gov.hr/>

A bigger challenge required addressing the inclusion of vulnerable groups of students in distance learning such as Roma students. Due to the difficult living conditions on the margins of society, an adapted approach was needed: Roma helpers, whose usual task is to help students in teaching, visited students during distance learning and physically brought them teaching materials. The Roma Child Support Network, with the support of the Ministry of Science and Education, conducted a survey on the involvement of Roma students in distance learning activities with the aim of detecting difficulties. Furthermore, from a UNICEF donation, 100 tablets and 500 SIM cards for Internet access were distributed.

In order to mitigate the consequences of the COVID 19 pandemic, Directorate for National Minorities of the Ministry of Science and Education supported the program *Learning amidst COVID-19 and Earthquake* – improving the learning of Roma students, organized by the UNICEF Office in Croatia and the Roma Youth Organization of Croatia. The main goal of this program is to provide additional targeted support through assistance in learning and mastering the material of primary and secondary school students belonging to the Roma national minority who are at risk of dropping out of school due to inability to overcome obstacles and challenges faced by students and their families.

In addition, the Ministry of Science and Education co-financed the Roma Community Education Program with the aim of improving the material conditions of Roma students in the field of education and ensuring the monitoring of online teaching.

*Distance learning in VET*

VET students are in more challenging position than students in general education. Distance learning in VET is organized in several levels. *Virtual classrooms* were set up by each school and for each subject. Regarding VET contents, preparation of digital materials was shaped and run by AVETAE (Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education). During the period of distance learning individual work of all students was completely guided and supported by subject teachers. Digital contents on online portal, several thousands of different digital materials including video lessons, video/voice over PowerPoint, e-courses, webinars, research projects, etc., have been prepared. AVETAE prepared Recommendations for assessment and grading during distance learning in VET (with practical examples).

Most important impact was on implementation of work based learning (WBL) in all its formats. Vocational schools are recommended to plan special possibilities for the realization of practical part of classes and professional practice. Practical classes, regardless of whether they are conducted only on school premises, combined in school premises and in a business entity or only in a business entity, must, above all, enable students to complete the annual prescribed number of teaching hours.

Additionally, we consider it important to note that during the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquake in the city of Zagreb, the Ministry of Science and Education provided psychological support and counselling for students, teachers and parents. The Ministry, Education and Teacher Training Agency and the Society for Psychological Assistance organized several webinars on *Psychosocial support in crisis situations* for interested teachers, professors, associates and principals. Also, The Ministry in cooperation with the Team for Psychological Crisis Interventions in the Education System continuously provides psychosocial support to schools and in cooperation with the Education and Teacher Training Agency, the Croatian Institute of Public Health and the Society for Psychological Assistance organizes professional trainings on topics related to the mental health of children and young people.

* **Other measures and activities -**

In its area of competence Central State Office for Demography and Youth took several concrete measures to help the youth sector dealing with crisis. The Office organized a series of meetings with the youth representatives on the topic of Pandemic. The office also enabled young people to communicate with the National Civil Protection Headquarters, and the result was a video entitled „Enjoy life, be responsible“, which calls out for wearing masks and responsible behavior for young people. This is an example of good practice and cooperation between young people and decision makers, Central State Office for Demography and Youth and Ministry of Interior.

In order to strengthen cooperation with young people, an online forum *„Together towards the same goal - let's remain responsible“,* was held. On that occasion young people were recommended to get involved in the work of local civil protection headquarters and thus give their direct contribution to the creation and implementation of measures to combat the spread of the pandemic.

Further, in cooperation with the Croatian Psychological Chamber the Office have launched free of charge telephone lines for psychological counseling for young people during the pandemic. This is part of the project *“Take care of yourself - be well - survive Covid”*. Young people can ask for advice and support by phone, but also by SMS and messages via mobile applications.

Financial support to the youth organizations is also one of the important measures. In 2021 the Office announced a tender procedure for the allocation of financial resources for youth-oriented projects. Within the priority areas of this call, financial support has been provided, *inter alia*, for activities to preserve the mental health and psychological well-being of young people associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and other crisis events.

One of the biggest events on the topic was held within the Conference on the Future of Europe. Central State Office for Demography and Youth organized an international conference *“Demographic Challenges of the Republic of Croatia and the European Union after the COVID-19 Pandemic”.* In this occasion the State Office conducted a survey among the citizens on the impact of the pandemic on the demographic picture of Croatia and in cooperation with the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb conducted a survey to collect young people's opinions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on quality of life, the future of the European Union and support for senior citizens. The results of both surveys were presented at a conference held on 7 October 2021, and conclusions were made.

1. **What role have the young people had in Covid-19 response, vaccination and recovery efforts in your country?**

The crisis showed that young people in Croatia are resilient and flexible to a large degree and many of them have been included in different voluntary activities or as promoters of healthy and safe living in the pandemic, mostly within the youth organizations.

1. **What measures is your government taking to value (encourage the role of youth in Covid-19 response, vaccination and recovery efforts?**

Youth participation in policy making is encouraged on a regular basis, including by supporting the activities of the youth sector. The same has been practiced during the pandemic. The only difference is that most activities was transferred online such as meetings and conferences.

1. <https://www.idi.hr/en/nacionalno-pracenje-ucinaka-pandemije-bolesti-covid-19-i-potresa-iz-2020-godine-na-organizaciju-odgojno-obrazovnih-procesa-i-dobrobit-ucenika-i-odgojno-obrazovnih-djelatnika-u-republici-hrvatskoj/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. More info at: <http://www.esf.hr/prva-odluka-o-financiranju-u-okviru-poziva-up-01-2-0-04-pronadi-me-provedba-aktivnosti-dosega-i-obrazovanja-neaktivnih-mladih-osoba-u-neet-statusu/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)