



**TECHNIUM**  
**SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL**

**Vol. 7, 2020**

**A new decade  
for social changes**

[www.techniumscience.com](http://www.techniumscience.com)

ISSN 2668-7798



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## Young people's perception of the measures taken by the authorities in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

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**Abstract.** Transparency is generally defined by political scientists as the principle of allowing the public to obtain information about the operations and structures of a given entity (Etzioni, 2014). Transparency symbolizes a mechanism for promoting good governance and public confidence in a modern and democratic public administration (Jashari and Pepaj, 2018). The theory of open public administration gives the individual a greater role in the adoption of the executive regulations and greater transparency in the operations of the public administration (Bugaric, 2004). A fully transparent administration, either at central level or at local level, involves informing and participating citizens in the decision-making process, becoming an indispensable principle of the rule of law. On the other hand, democratic citizenship involves obtaining information about the problems that affect you and working with others to influence how society will solve those problems (Portelli and Solomon, 2001). The objectives of the study are: (1) Identification of the degree of knowledge of the concept of decision-making transparency in public administration; (2) Analysis of the perception regarding the degree of decision-making transparency and communication of the local and central public administrations in the context of the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic; (3) Analysis of the degree of confidence the crisis management generated by the new Coronavirus by public institutions. The questionnaire, which included 10 items, was applied, on a sample consisting of 200 students and graduates of the Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences - “Ovidius” University of Constanța (Romania, European Union). The period of application of the questionnaire was April 4-10, 2020. Of these, 80.77% are female, and 19.23% are male, with an average age of 27.5 years. Most of the respondents (56.41%) are undergraduate students, and the remaining 43.59% are study participants are graduates or masters of the same Faculty. At the same time, 71.79% of the study participants come from urban areas, and 28.21% from rural areas.

**Keywords.** young people, covid-19, pandemic, perception, transparency, authorities, measures, decision making, public administration

### Transparency of decision-making in public administration

Transparency is generally defined by political scientists as the principle of allowing the public to obtain information about the operations and structures of a given entity (Etzioni, 2014). Transparency symbolizes a mechanism for promoting good governance and public confidence in a modern and democratic public administration (Jashari and Pepaj, 2018).

The theory of open public administration gives the individual a greater role in the adoption of the executive regulations and greater transparency in the operations of the public administration (Bugarcic, 2004).

A fully transparent administration, either at central level or at local level, involves informing and participating citizens in the decision-making process, becoming an indispensable principle of the rule of law.

On the other hand, democratic citizenship involves obtaining information about the problems that affect you and working with others to influence how society will solve those problems (Portelli and Solomon, 2001).

In this respect, Law no. 52/2003 establishes at art. 1 "the minimum procedural rules applicable to ensure the transparency of decision-making within the authorities of the central and local public administration, elected or named" and apply to the relations between these authorities and citizens, or associations legally created by them. One of the stated purposes of the law is to increase the degree of transparency at the level of the entire public administration.

Public authorities are required to comply with the provisions of Law no. 52/2003 are: central public administration authorities (ministries, other central bodies of public administration subordinated to the Government or ministries, their decentralized public services, as well as autonomous administrative authorities), as well as local public administration authorities (county councils, local councils, mayors, institutions and public services of local or county interest).

The importance of the transparency of decision-making in the public administration revealed in various studies and specialized articles shows that:

- democracy cannot exist in the absence of freedom of information;
- secrecy is an obstacle to the political education of a community;
- opportunities for individuals to respond adequately to political initiatives are low;
- the right to know implies the responsibility of the governors;
- the secret generates a climate in which the citizens no longer perceive the public administration in terms of responsibility and trust, but in terms of bad-will and mistrust;
- represents an important instrument for ensuring respect for other principles such as: the rule of law, equality before the law and accountability;
- protecting the public interest.

Therefore, the transparency law ensures the opening of the activity of the central and local public administration to the citizens through the two important mechanisms: public participation in the process of elaborating the regulations, respectively the decision-making process.

Therefore, the decision-making transparency represents an obligation that must be fulfilled by any public authority or institution, predictability regarding the impact of the decisions taken, standard of good administration, as well as a criterion of legality according to the regulations.

### **Establishment of a state of emergency in the territory of Romania to prevent the spread of Covid-19**

By the Decree of the President of Romania no. 195/2020 regarding the establishment of the state of emergency on the territory of Romania, the state of emergency was established throughout the territory of Romania for a period of 30 days, being established a series of first emergency measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and the management of the consequences, related to the evolution of the epidemiological situation.

According to art. 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights "every person has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without any interference and to seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas by any means, regardless of borders".

During the state of emergency, the decree also provides for the limitation of the exercise of citizens' rights and freedoms, some of them being stipulated in the European Convention on Human Rights

Thus, in Article 2 of Decree no. 195/2020 it is specified that during the state of emergency, in the context of the dissemination of COVID-19, the exercise of the following rights is restricted, in proportion to the degree of fulfillment of the criteria provided by Article 4 (4):

- free movement;
- the right to intimate, family and private life;
- inviolability of the domicile;
- the right to education;
- freedom of assembly;
- the right of private property;
- the right to strike;
- economic freedom.

#### **The measures regarding the restriction of rights are gradually applied, depending on the situation**

According to the provisions of art. 9 of the O.U.G. no. 1/1999 regarding the regime of the state of siege and the regime of the state of emergency, with the subsequent modifications and completions, the leaders of the public authorities, of the other legal persons, as well as the natural persons have the obligation to respect and to apply all the measures established by this normative act, in the acts related regulations, as well as in military ordinances or in order, specific to the established state.

In the preamble to the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 34/2020 states that "seeing the experience of the countries severely affected by the evolution of the virus regarding the speed of decision-making at the level of the authorities and finding that it is necessary for Romania to continue, gradually and in real time, measures to limit the spread it, which aims at actions both in the field of public health and in other areas of social and economic life, understanding that in order to manage the social and economic consequences of the situation caused by the danger of spreading the virus, it is necessary to include normative acts under the regime of maximum urgency".

Therefore, the adoption of normative acts under maximum urgency regime to limit the spread of COVID-19 is mandatory to be respected by the leaders of the public authorities, of the other legal persons, as well as by the natural persons.

#### **How to comply with the decision-making transparency procedures in the public administration during the state of emergency**

Transparency is in fact aimed at ensuring a wider access of citizens to the information and documents in the possession of state institutions, the participation of citizens in the decision-making process and ensuring the legitimacy, efficiency and responsibility of the administration towards the citizen. An essential element introduced by art. 1 of Law no. 52/2003 is the indication that the provisions of the law must be interpreted by establishing minimum

standards imposed on the public administration and public institutions in their relation with the natural or legal persons.

Government Emergency Ordinance no. 34/2020 states that: "during the period of the siege or the state of emergency, the legal norms regarding the decision-making transparency and the social dialogue do not apply in the case of the draft normative acts establishing measures applicable during the siege or state. emergency or which are a consequence of the establishment of these states". At the same time, in the foundation note to the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 34/2020 it is proposed to introduce a provision according to which, during the period of the siege or emergency, the legal norms regarding the transparency of decision and the social dialogue should not apply in the case of draft normative acts establishing measures applicable during the state of siege or emergency or which are a consequence of the establishment of these states.

In this context, the provisions of art. 2 of Law no. 52/2003 regarding the information, consultation of citizens and legally constituted associations and the active participation of citizens in making administrative decisions and in the process of drafting normative acts, in compliance with the rules, does not apply. The draft normative acts are promoted without the application of the legal norms regarding the decision-making transparency and the social dialogue.

However, the draft Government Emergency Ordinance no. 34/2020 for amending and completing the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 1/1999 regarding the state of siege regime and the state of emergency regime was promoted with the assurance of a minimum of functions of the decision-making transparency procedure according to Law no. 52/2003 regarding the decision-making transparency in the public administration. The public information activities regarding the elaboration and implementation of the normative act were carried out by publishing on the Internet page of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to ensure the information of the population and the possibility of transmitting proposals and observations to be analyzed by means of a temporal report on the stages of project promotion, under maximum emergency.

At the same time, for the projects of normative acts that do not concern the state of emergency, the authorities of the central and local public administration have the obligation to respect the rules regarding the transparency of decision making, by informing and consulting the citizens and the legally constituted associations, as well as the participation of the citizens in the decision making in the field of public administration. In this regard, the opinions of the interested persons on the legislative proposals under public consultation can be sent in writing to the public authority / institution by postal services, by fax, email, personal submission at the headquarters or by accessing the online form corresponding to each legislative initiative, so that consultations and opinions on the draft normative acts are delivered by electronic means in a timely manner.

### **The situation of young people in the context of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic**

One of the measures established by Decree no. 195/2020 is the suspension of courses from all units and educational institutions.

Among the measures taken by the Romanian authorities regarding the closure of public places frequented by young people in the context of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, we mention:

The Ministry of Internal Affairs adopted the Military Ordinance no. 1/2020 in which measures regarding the agglomerations of persons are provided (the activity of serving and consuming

food and alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages is suspended, organized by restaurants, hotels, cafes or other public places, in the spaces destined for this purpose from inside or outside the location).

Article 2 of the Military Ordinance no. 2/2020 "temporarily suspends the retail activities, products and services, in the commercial centers in which several economic operators operate, except for the sale of food, veterinary or pharmaceutical products and of cleaning services".

In the context of the measures ordered by the Decree of the President of Romania no.195 / 2020 regarding the establishment of the state of emergency in the territory of Romania, the normative acts, the related normative acts, as well as the military ordinances or in order, specific to the established state, was applied the questionnaire „Perception of young people on the measures taken by the authorities in the context of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic”.

### **Research methodology**

#### ***The research objectives***

O1: Identification of the degree of knowledge of the concept of decision-making transparency in public administration

O2: Analysis of the perception regarding the degree of decision-making transparency and communication of the local and central public administrations in the context of the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic

O3: Analysis of the degree of confidence the crisis management generated by the new Coronavirus by public institutions

#### ***The research tool***

The questionnaire, which included 10 items, was applied, on a sample consisting of 200 students and graduates of the Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences - “Ovidius” University of Constanța (Romania, European Union). The period of application of the questionnaire was April 4-10, 2020. Of these, 80.77% are female, and 19.23% are male, with an average age of 27.5 years. Most of the respondents (56.41%) are undergraduate students, and the remaining 43.59% are study participants are graduates or masters of the same Faculty. At the same time, 71.79% of the study participants come from urban areas, and 28.21% from rural areas.

### **Centralization and data analysis**

Ask if they have knowledge about the provisions of Law no. 52/2003 regarding the decision-making transparency in the public administration, 66.67% of the respondents answered yes and the rest 33.33% answered negative. Moreover, the majority of respondents state that the right of citizens to access information is the most important aspect when it comes to the concept of transparency in public administration, and the other two most important elements of the same concept, which most respondents - they indicated, are: respecting the rights of the citizen to understand the activity of the public administration and the control and participation of citizens in the decision-making process.

At the same time, the majority of the respondents (56.41%) classified as neutral the degree of transparency at the level of the public administration in the context of the development of the crisis generated by the new coronavirus, and a quarter of the respondents (25.64%) evaluated the decision-making process as transparent and very transparent in public administration. At the opposite end, 10.26% of the respondents consider that the public administration is non-transparent during the crisis, and 7.69% - totally lacking transparency.

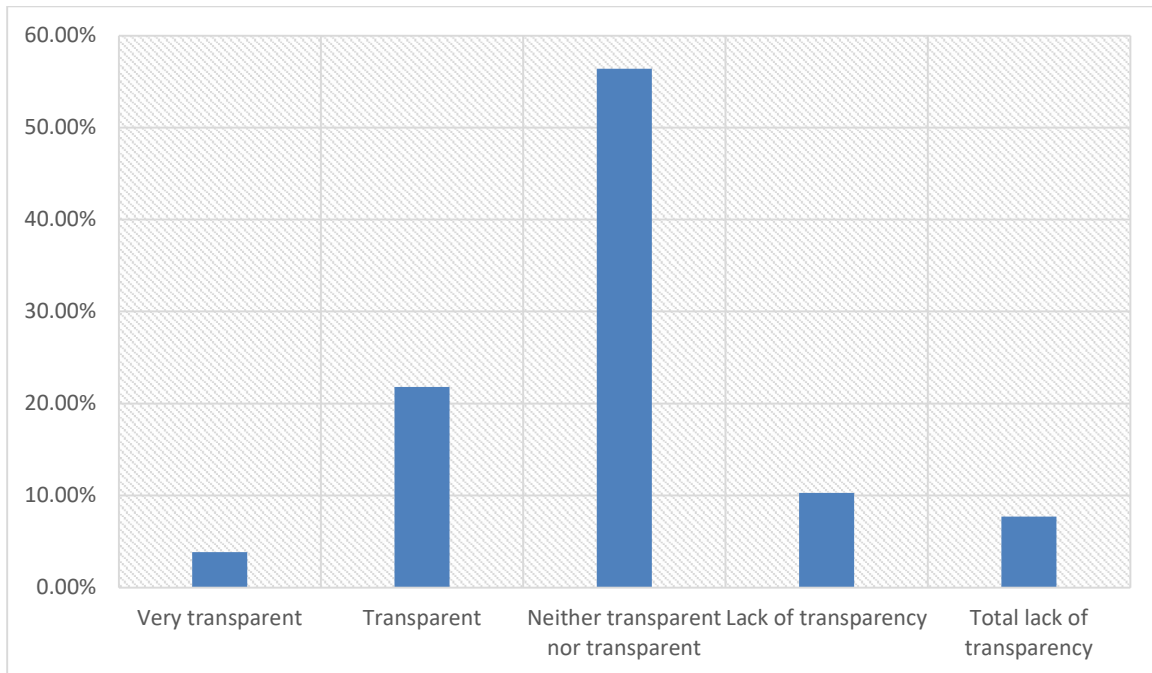


Figure 1 - In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, how do you assess the degree of transparency at the level of public administration?

The institutions, which enjoy the highest degree of confidence from the respondents when it comes to how they manage to manage the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, are hospitals and doctors (66.10% of the respondents have partial and total confidence), followed by the Army and the Police (53.8% - partial and total confidence). At the opposite end, public institutions, such as the City Hall, the Romanian Presidency and the Government do not benefit from the confidence of the respondents. Thus, 38.46% of the respondents have partial and total distrust in the Government of Romania and in the ministries, 46.15% have partial and total distrust in the mayors, and most - 47.44% are partially and totally unreliable in the way the Romanian Presidency manages and will manage in the future crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

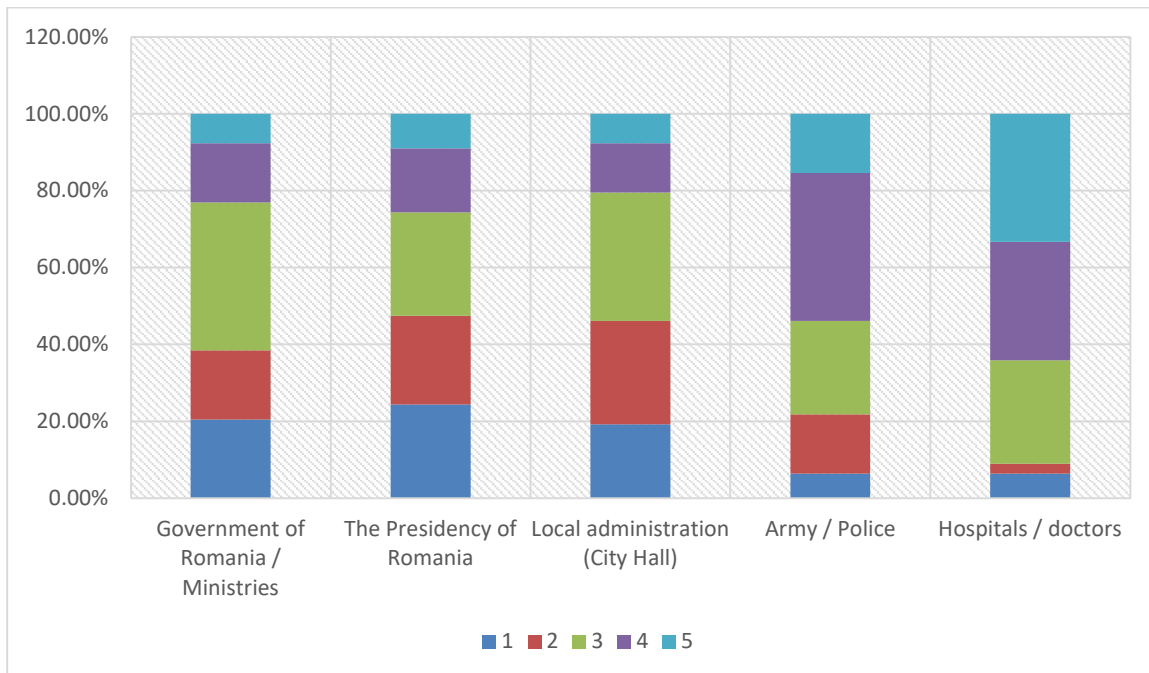


Figure 2 - How much confidence do you have in the way the following public administration institutions have managed and will handle the Covid-19 virus crisis?

At the same time, when asked to evaluate, in general, how central public authorities manage to communicate information of public interest regarding the Covid-19 crisis, most of the respondents (44.87%) had a good and very good opinion, follow being of the respondents who had a neutral position (42.31%). At the opposite pole, 11.54% of the respondents rated it as a bad way of communicating the central public authorities, and 1.28% - very bad. On the other hand, 70.51% of the respondents believe that the Romanian public authorities have not done everything they should to prevent and protect young people during the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, and the rest of 29.49% consider the opposite.

Asked what are the mass communication channels from where they most often obtain information regarding the Covid-19 crisis, most respondents (42.31%) indicated television, followed by 20.51% - news websites, 19.23% - SNSs and only 10.26% directly from the Public Relations departments of the public administration.

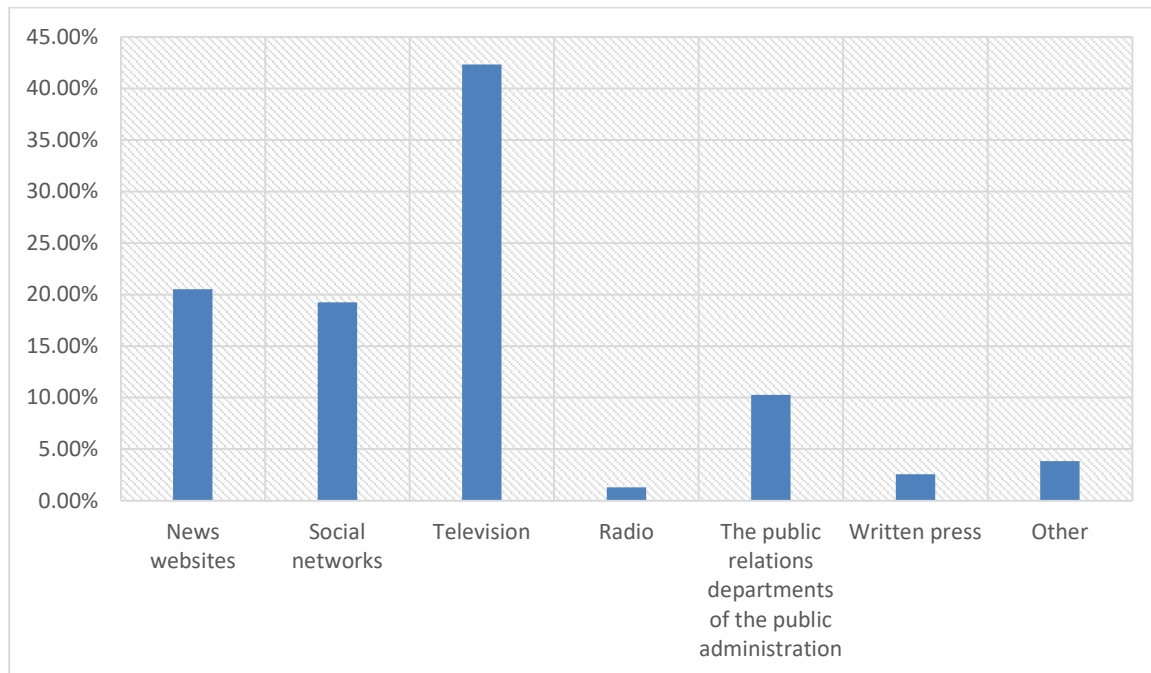


Figure 3 - Where do you personally get the most information about the Covid-19 crisis?

Regarding the measures taken by the Romanian authorities regarding the closure of public places frequented by young people (cafes, restaurants, malls, etc.) in the context of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, most of the respondents evaluated them as very useful (62.82%) and useful (20.51%), and at the opposite pole, 7.69% of the respondents consider them neither useful nor useless. Only an insignificant percentage, 8.69% consider them useless or totally useless.

Asked how affected is considered by the Covid-19 phenomenon, 42.31% of the respondents stated that they are very affected, 34.62% - affected, 15.38% - somewhat affected, 6.41% - very little affected, and 1.28% - not affected at all. At the same time, most of the respondents (44.87%) feel neither protected nor unprotected, during the crisis, by the local authorities, and 29.48% of them feel little protected and not at all protected. At the opposite end, 25.64% of the respondents say that, in the period of crisis generated by the new Coronavirus, they feel protected and very protected.

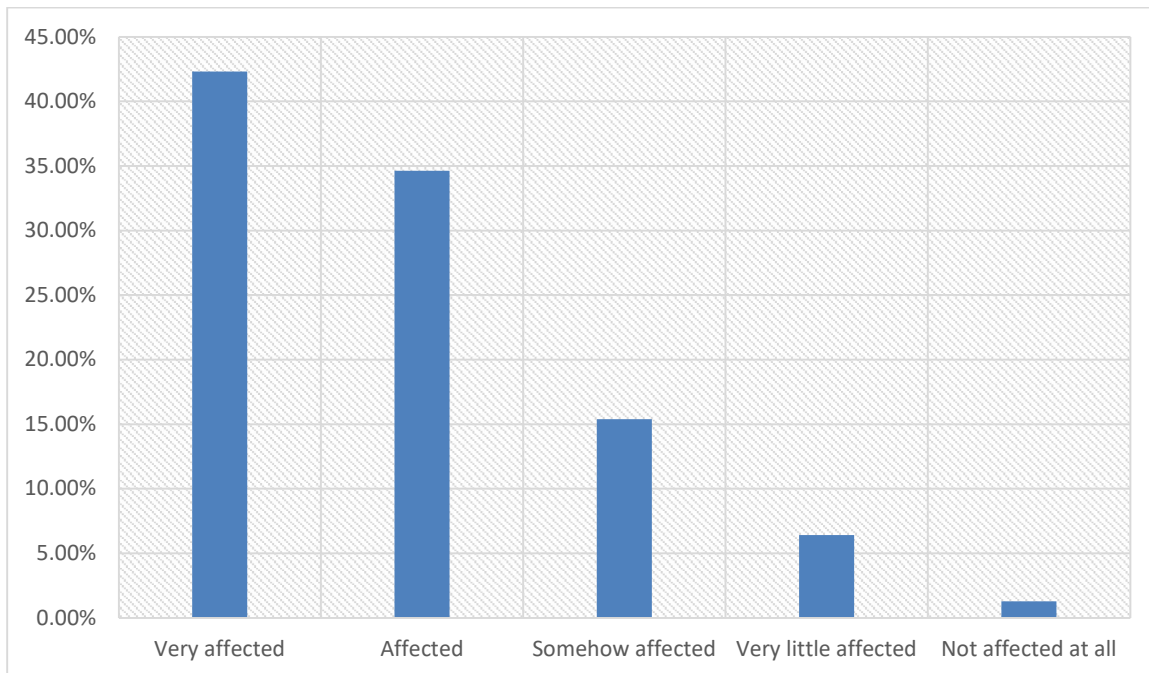


Figure 4 - How affected do you think young people are from the Covid-19 phenomenon?

### Conclusions

Information is the basis of democracy, and democracy would be inconceivable without public free access to information. Lack of transparency in political life and in the act of governing is one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome by a democratic society, in which citizens trust politicians and rulers.

Confidence in the legal framework will result in a greater degree of acceptance and observance of the law, with positive consequences on economic development and the maintenance of cooperative relations between the government apparatus and society.

However, according to the study we conducted on April 4-10, 2020, on a sample of 200 young people - students and masters - we can see that most of them have a neutral position when asked about the degree of transparency of public administrations during the crisis generated by the Coronavirus pandemic, and the degree of trust in institutions such as the Romanian Government, the Romanian Presidency and local administrations does not benefit from the trust of the study participants regarding the current and future management of the Covid-19 crisis. On the other hand, the Army, Police, hospitals and doctors enjoy greater trust from respondents.

Moreover, most respondents believe that, in general, public authorities have not done everything necessary to prevent and protect young people from the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, although many of them believe that the way in which the authorities communicates, in the midst of the pandemic, it is good and very good and that they took very useful and useful measures for young people when they closed cafes, restaurants and malls. At the same time, most respondents say they feel affected and very affected by everything that happens because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Regarding the media it uses to find out about the crisis generated by Covid-19, television ranks 1st, followed by news sites and Social Media. At the opposite pole are the public relations departments of the authorities, the written press and the radio stations.

In conclusion, official institutions must place great emphasis on decision-making transparency, especially in crisis situations, as lack of transparency can cause chaos in society,

and unofficial channels can be very effective means of spreading false news that can cover numerically view the official information channels. As Social Media is the main means of information that most young people access, in the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the most effective way to increase young people's trust in local public institutions or focus is to adapt the entire communication strategy. to the specifics and needs of the target audience: short posts, understandable to all, suggestive photos, opinion polls with few questions and videos in which image vectors are public figures, easily recognizable and with which young people often identify. Thus, it is necessary to improve administrative efficiency at the level of central and local public administration institutions in terms of decision-making transparency by introducing in current practice an e-communication system - a modern tool for administrative management.

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