Navigating Crises: Examining the Impact on Students in Four European Countries

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Abstract: A crisis is any challenging situation that requires a judgment or a decision. During their lifespan people are exposed to crises at micro, meso and macro levels. Lately, many research deals with crises at macro level. Situations of crises at a macro level that we have been facing such as pandemics, war, earthquakes, and substantial challenges in everyday situations and life lead to the necessity to explore learning and teaching at higher education institutions in the times of crises. The goal of the research was to determine strategies for dealing with crises on macro level among students in higher education. For this purpose, qualitative research was conducted using the focus group method. Four focus groups were held in which a total of 40 students of different profiles from Belgium, Croatia, Poland, and Romania participated. The results show that the biggest challenge for most participants in crisis situations was the absence of social support. In their answers, participants discussed the challenges of distance education, stating "screen fatigue" as an obstacle. Despite this, participants pointed out that times of crisis enabled them to discover their own strengths, which they can use as coping strategies in potential future crises.

Keywords: Crises, Higher Education, Belgium, Croatia, Poland, Romania

Krizleri Yönlendirmek: Avrupa'nın Dört Ülkesinden Öğrenciler Üzerindeki Etkinin İncelenmesi

Öz: Kriz, bir yargı veya karar gerektiren herhangi bir zorlu durumdur. İnsanlar yaşamları boyunca mikro, mezo ve makro düzeylerde krizlere maruz kalırlar. Son zamanlarda birçok araştırma makro düzeydeki krizleri ele almaktadır. Salgın hastalıklar, savaşlar, depremler gibi makro düzeyde karşılaştığımız kriz durumları ve günlük durum ve yaşamdaki önemli zorluklar, kriz zamanlarında yükseköğretim kurumlarında öğrenme ve öğretmeyi keşfetme ihtiyacını doğurmaktadır. Araştırmanın amacı, yükseköğretimdeki öğrenciler arasında makro düzeyde krizlerle başa çıkma stratejilerini belirlemektir. Bu amaçla, odak grup yöntemi kullanılarak nitel bir araştırma yürütülmüştür. Belçika, Hırvatistan, Polonya ve Romanya'dan farklı profillerden toplam 40 öğrencinin katıldığı dört odak grup çalışması gerçekleştirilmiştir. Sonuçlar, kriz durumlarında çoğu katılımcı için en büyük zorluğun sosyal destek yokluğu olduğunu göstermektedir. Katılımcılar cevaplarında uzaktan eğitimin zorluklarını tartışmış ve "ekran yorgunluğunu" bir engel olarak belirtmişlerdir. Buna rağmen katılımcılar, kriz zamanlarının kendi güçlü yönlerini keşfetmelerini sağladığını ve bunları gelecekteki olası krizlerde başa çıkma stratejileri olarak kullanabileceklerini belirtmişlerdir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Krizler, Yükseköğretim, Belçika, Hırvatistan, Polonya, Romanya

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The challenges that have been taking place in the last few years have a great impact on learning and teaching in higher education. Given that we are talking about events that took place suddenly and had a significant impact on people and property, it is justified to talk about crises (Ovie, 2022). The crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on all spheres of life, regardless of the age of the population, but it had a particularly significant impact on education. The entire education system stopped functioning in the existing way and was moved to the sphere of virtual classrooms where teaching took place remotely/distance. Nevertheless, the concept of distance learning is not new. Keegan discussed it in 1980, referring on older works of Moore (1973), Peters (1973) and Holmberg (1977). Despite that, the transition to distance learning was not easy or without problems. The consequences of the pandemic were similar in mostly all over the world - the closure of educational and cultural institutions and/or stopping not necessary activities. In Europe, apart from the pandemic, other crisis events took place - earthquakes, the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and all this affected the lives of students in a personal and professional sense.

Starting from the assumption that the crisis has had a great impact on students, and especially on students, it was justified to investigate how they coped with the crisis. The following research aimed to determine strategies for dealing with crises on macro level among students in Belgium, Croatia, Poland and Romania, so we, as society, may respond better and faster to possible new crises.

Education in the context of (not just) pandemic crises

At the beginning of 2020, the world was gripped by the crisis caused by COVID 19. The crisis started as a health issue with a focus on preventing the spread of the disease and finding answers to it. The Covid-19 disease pandemic caused by the new coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020) and accompanying epidemiological measures (quarantines, closure of institutions, movement bans) have caused global changes. The new way of working in certain sectors (health, shops), working from home, loss of jobs and closure of educational institutions affected the life of every individual and, consequently, the community.

Even though the most affected by the pandemic were workers in the health and service sectors, the pandemic was equally demanding for education at all levels. To cope with the challenges, many higher education institutions organized classes online without checking the social and material conditions and their own possibilities in implementing it. The closure of educational institutions and the transition to a virtual working environment indicated unequal opportunities for participation due to technical equipment, network connectivity, (in)sufficient digital competences and motivation of participants (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Kim, 2020).

Higher education institutions embarked on (for most institutions) a new organization of the teaching process without the time needed to analyse the existence of the material conditions and competencies involved. Not knowing the deadline in which teaching at universities will resume in the (until then) usual way - face-to-face has further contributed to the uncertainty (Mok, 2022). The crisis particularly affected the most vulnerable groups and thereby increased educational inequalities (United Nations, 2020). Adaptation to teaching in conditions of closedness, distance and virtual platforms initially seemed like a good solution for continuing education. But as time went on, it became clear that there are forms of teaching that are not suitable for online platforms. At teachers' faculties, this referred to methodical exercises that require the presence of students in practicums (Neuberg et al., 2022). On the other hand, some research (i.e. Visković, 2021) shows that students are in favour in face-to-face classes.

Although these changes were caused by the negative impact of the pandemic on people's lives, in the context of higher education it is possible to see them as a stimulus for change. Rasli et al. (2022) see digital transformation and online curriculum as the most significant changes. Encouraging the implementation of online curricula in tertiary education has shown the possibilities in the development of study programs that can be carried out entirely online. In this way, it strengthens the attractiveness and accessibility of studying to different stakeholders. Liu and Shirley (2021) emphasize that digital transformation has contributed to the development of collaborative learning in an international environment, and consequently, to the development of intercultural competences. Despite the challenges, it is evident that the challenges posed by the pandemic

to higher education have encouraged changes that can improve education.

While the world was learning to live with the pandemic, war broke out in Europe. After thirty years, in February 2022, Europe had a war. The war caused concerns related to the security, problems with energy and food supply (European Council, 2023). The war triggered a wave of refugees from Ukraine. Among them were students who were trying to be included in universities in European countries. Of course, the neighbouring countries had to provide care for the largest part of the refugees.

All the crises mentioned above, along with changes in the daily routine, stress caused by problems in establishing and maintaining relationships with close people, consequences for well-being and mental health indicate that studying in the last three years has been extremely demanding. Depending on the countries, the conditions in which the high school teaching took place changed, as did the challenges that affected it.

Belgium – Flanders

Like in other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected children in Belgium and Flanders across all domains of their lives (education, leisure, health, …) from the very start (Kenniscentrum Kinderrechten & Jeugdonderzoeksplatform, 2022). On March 13th 2020, schools closed, leisure activities (including sports activities) could no longer take place and amusement parks, museums and playgrounds were closed. In relation to education, all lessons in pre-primary, primary and secondary education were suspended from March 13th until April 3rd 2020. University colleges and universities switched to distance learning. During the same period, working at home also became the norm and non-essential travels were forbidden. In May 2020, measures were alleviated. Primary and secondary education could partially restart, even though kindergarten remained closed until June.

An overview report of studies on the impact of the COVID-19 measures on children, young people and young adults conducted by the Flemish Children's Rights Knowledge Centre and the Flemish Youth Research Platform (Kenniscentrum Kinderrechten & Jeugdonderzoeksplatform, 2022) shows that different scholars agree that the corona measures have had a predominantly negative impact on various life domains of persons aged between 0 and 25 years. Many of the surveys conducted during the corona pandemic have focused on the mental well-being of children, adolescents and young adults. Also the negative impact of the corona measures on education has been the focus of research. The overview study shows that although the negative impact is an obvious conclusion, differences can be observed in how individuals aged 0-25 have been affected by the pandemic. (Young) children, adolescents and young adults who were in socially vulnerable situations before the crisis experienced a more negative impact of the corona measures, showing that the COVID-19 has reinforced already existing inequalities and difficulties. For example, the fact that during online education, parents were mostly responsible for supporting their children in their school work, existing inequalities were reinforced as not all parents were equally able to provide the needed support to their children. However, the corona pandemic has also created new vulnerable situations, for example in relation to the accelerated digitalisation (Kenniscentum Kinderrechten & Jeugdonderzoeksplatform, 2022).

Croatia

In March 2020, an epidemic of Covid-19 disease was declared (Ministry of Health, 2020). The Government of the Republic of Croatia (2020) passed a *Decision to suspend teaching in higher education, secondary and primary schools and the regular operation of early childhood education institutions*. The epidemic resulted in the closure of many institutions, restrictions on movement and, where possible, the remote work. The new family and work structure were somehow improvised. Višnjić-Jevtić and Visković (2021) conclude that a new daily rhythm and schedule of activities had to be organized, mutual obligations (jobs, roles) and ways of solving problem situations had to be harmonized. While lower primary classes were organized trough television (*School on 3rd*) and upper primary and secondary classes were organized through various learning platforms. Teaching at higher education institutions is realized through virtual platforms with the support of CARNET (Croatian Academic and Research Network). While the world coped with educational challenges in different ways during the pandemic period, Europe faced new crises. In the first days of the lock down, the capital of

Croatia was hit by an earthquake of magnitude M=5.5 according to the Richter scale (Markušić et al., 2020). Residents who at that time spent time isolated in their homes to avoid infection with the virus, suddenly found themselves without homes and without the possibility of avoiding contact with other people. With damaged buildings, interruptions in communication, loss of personal belongings, newly established online classes became impossible for a large part of students. At the end of the year, in December, earthquakes hit the wider Zagreb area again. Day after day, Petrinja was hit by earthquakes of magnitude 5.0 according to Richter and 6.2 according to Richter[6]. The consequences for the population were even more terrible and triggered new crises for everyone who lives, works, or studies in that area.

Poland

The Polish education system has been affected by continual changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist regime in 1989, and after the EU accession of 2004 (Odrowaz-Coates, 2020). Recent decisions by the right-wing government to replace previous educational reforms have led to significant confusion in the administration of the education system (Eadem). Changing rules for the evaluation and governance of Polish schools (Chłoń-Domińczak, 2017; Eurydice, 2022) and universities (Odrowaz-Coates, 2020) has caused anxiety among the employees. The return to an older, pre-EU system of educational stages has made the uncertainty continue and grow (Eurydice, 2022). Notwithstanding the above, the outbreak of COVID-19 had an important impact and contributed to the uncertainty in education, which led to older children, youths and academic students, learning online for the longest period in Europe (Statista, 2022), with students forced into isolation, missing out on peer relations and being exposed to a new digital reality. The pandemic caused considerable job losses and deaths, thus creating a deluge of mental health issues among the young (Ammar et al. 2020, Heitzman, 2020). As the situation began to stabilise, the war in neighbouring Ukraine brought new anxieties and challenges. Both Poland and Romania share a direct border with Ukraine. Since February 2022 Poland has experienced mass migration and a high-intensity influx of war refugees, who have accessed Polish schools and universities with unprecedented speed and volume, with 800,000 school-age children studying in Poland by September 2022 (Minister of Education, 2022). Almost 10 million refugees have crossed the Polish border to date (Sas, 2023). In times of insecurity, constant change, growing social challenges and an unpredictable future, it is very difficult to build a sense of safety and well-being in educational settings, both for staff and for learners.

Romania

The Romanian educational system followed the regulations of the World Health Organization to the letter. Once schools locked down, the entire educational system went online, from kindergarten to the university. Despite the three scenarios put into place by the Romanian Government, for the 2020-2021 school year (green – face-to-face classes, yellow – alternating online and face-to-face classes, red – online classes), there have been significant problems with various institutions to offer online classes due to the lack or ill prepared online infrastructure. This meant that children from mainly rural areas would lack proper education, or they would abandon school altogether, thus falling into the criteria set by the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 133/2020, which should aid students in receiving educational support (over 300000 students) However, overall student online participation in online classes was over 80% (Edelhauser & Lupu-Dima, 2021). Despite the overall issues with Covid and its aftermath, school dropout rate fell 3%, from 2012 to 2022, from over 18% to around 15%, while the European rate, for 2022 was over 9.5% (Statista, 2022, 2023). The Ministry of Education failed to have an efficient immediate response to the lockdown, leaving students and teachers to adapt on their own to the new situation. Concrete strategies followed, but lacked the cohesion of other countries (Holotescu et al., 2020). Despite the generational gap, teachers managed to adapt to the online teaching methods, at times with the help of students, but at a national level, the infrastructure to provide high quality online classes is lacking (Nicolau et al., 2020). One positive effect of the pandemic was the increased used of technology in schools, which provide a more challenging environment for both teachers and students. Classes are more dynamic, and the instruction is more versatile, including online content together with

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[6] https://www.pmf.unizg.hr/geof/seizmoloska_sluzba/mjesec_dana_od_glavnog_petrinjskog_potresa

traditional teaching methods, such as textbooks (Grigorescu & Scarlat, 2023). There is a high probability of new epidemics, earthquakes and wars in the world. Education should be prepared for new crises by making correct inferences from our past experiences in higher education. For this, it would be useful to examine different experiences.

Method

The aim of the research was to determine and better understand the macro-level crisis management strategies for students whose future work is focused on working with people in the education and social welfare system (educators, teachers, social workers, educational rehabilitators...) across four different countries.

The research question was: How did the students manage the times of crisis? Are there any common strategies students used that enabeled their well-being?

For this purpose, a small case study based on qualitative research paradigm was conducted using the focus group method - 4 focus groups in which a total of 40 students from Belgium, Croatia, Poland and Romania participated, 10 from each country. Focus groups were created from participants from different countries to ensure different experiences sharing between participants.

Protocol for focus group was created and the open the questions for focus groups were prepared. Focus group researched student experiences in the times of crisis in the area of education, social life, family and friends, and work life. Students were also asked to share their startegies of coping with crisis and to identifiy situations that they saw as opportunities and new possibilities for the future. In the end we were tried to explore the lessons learnt from the situations we were during the crisis. Research participants were assigned tags to ensure their anonymity, which were used to cite their quotes. Since the

After the data was collected, it was analyzed using content and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the most commonly used procedure for processing qualitative data, because it provides the possibility of processing a wide range of research questions and topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further, thematic analysis detects and summarizes the obtained data and includes the following steps (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018): 1. Data collection; 2. Coding of data; 3. Creating themes 4. Interpretation of results, 5. Answering research questions. Research participants were assigned tags to preserve their anonymity, which were used to cite their quotes. The ethical concerns were addressed by including informed consent, research with adult volunteers able to give informed consent and to withdraw at any time during this study.

Results and Discussion

Three main themes were explored: challenges and barriers, coping mechanisms and strategies; opportunities and lessons learned. Within each theme subthemes were recognised according to common codes.

Theme 1: Challenges and barriers

Most of the participant that took part in the focus groups from all four different countries identified the same barriers and challenges. COVID – 19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, energy crisis, education crisis, earthquake (specific for Croatian students) (Table 1). COVID – 19 was mostly discussed as a common crisis all students experienced. From the focus groups in different situations, it was pointed out that the lock down made a huge impact on mental health and social life of students and others. It revealed a loss of trust in government, social isolation and issues with mental health.

Table 1. Subthemes and codes: theme 1: challenges and barriers

Subthemes	Codes
COVID	Health issues
	Lock down
	Education issues
	Lack of social support
	Lack of trust in government
	Lack of trust in media
	Anxiety
	Fear (for self/family members)
	Going back to everyday life
War in Ukraine	Anxiety
	Fear (for self/family members)
Earthquake	Anxiety
	Fear (for self/family members)
Energy crisis	Lack of resources
	Lack of heating
Education crisis	Screen fatigue
	Overwhelming obligations
	Lack of time management skills
	Lack of IT skills of HE teachers
	Lack of personal IT skills

Romania: The pandemic was actually the first big crisis that I have been through, and I kept thinking in the beginning, is this actually really happening? Is this actually, is this the end? What is going to happen?

Poland (male): I think social life was also a bit hard in the pandemic times because in Poland we couldn't go anywhere. We just had to stick to like internet connection and hopefully make it through the pandemic and not lose our friends during it.

Belgium: In Belgium it was hard also because you couldn't have a social life. Everyone had to stay home and then you had to choose like this circle of persons that you could contact, that you could see in person but that was after a long time of in lockdown…

…It was, it was on and off, like lockdown, and then a little bit of freedom. Yes, we had three lockdowns I think for a couple of months but on and off like in the end it was not clear anymore what the rules were even because it was changed so much. Yeah, it was no fun.

Croatia: And for me while the pandemic was on, I was not that much afraid of my heath and if I will die, I was more afraid about my people I love for them, their health. And especially for my mother because her mother died in these years that she's now. So, I was so overprotective especially for her.

Another participant from Belgium commented the changing rules:

Belgium: For Belgium too, I think, I hope, the government learned, because we had a lot of rules like social distancing but also like who you can see and it was like, and it changed all the time. Sometimes it was like, it became a joke because some rules were like: "What is this rule?" Some other things were allowed, so I, I think they were also like panicking…

Romania: When the pandemic started, the stores actually closed for a few weeks so we didn't go to school and we didn't do any learning, online classes either, so we just got into a small vacation to call it like that. And we weren't allowed to go on the streets, we would need to sign a paper and that actually freaked everbody out because all of a sudden you weren't allowed to go, you would yeah you would have to sign like an agreement and say where are you going and why are you going.

Croatia: In my city we were really cut off because I live in a village next to the city and we couldn't go to buy groceries in the city without the certificate also because we all needed like reason to go there and it was really hard even to go out on the street, police were there and you can't walk just around not even around your house because police are watching everything. I was in, I didn't leave my house for two months, two and a half months…

Interesting conclusions came about trust in media:

Romania: Well, media is always gonna say bad things. And it's always going to make, we have a saying in Romania, they're going to transform a mosquito into a horse.

Poland: I think it's kind of funny because we live in 21st century, and the access to the information is so easy, now I check the word and I knew the word, but we don't know which news we can trust. And it's also stressful for me, because I don't know if I say something stupid because I read it.

Belgium: And, they say to us: "Oh check multiple newspapers, to see which is the correct one." But often they just copy-paste it in different… in different paper… So now they often say to us: "Go to sources in other countries and check it if they say the same thing." So… I don't know what to do anymore with the news.

Romania: During the pandemic and during the lockdown I did a lot of sports and everything that I was doing was that I tried to avoid the news. Because I wasn't sure that everyone is for real, and I prefer to be sure me and my family was well.

There was a lot of discussion on how COVID impacted how we perceive health issues:

Poland: You know, I was travelling by train to the University and sometimes I got on my running nose, and it's not that uncommon (?), you know… And all the people was like…

Croatia: I sometimes use that principle in my advance, like you know other people, when I was in crowded places I would just cough. So, everybody would like (inaudible due to laughing). And I would try to make it as dry as possible, because dry coughing was a symptom, not like wet coughing, so…

Another common crisis that impacted all students was war in Ukraine. The impact of this crisis was obvious in all countries. Students expressed empathy but critically reflected on the steps undertaken in different counties. Where does help for others end and self-interests starts. It was easy to notice a critical reflection on the situation in different countries.

Romania: We are also just more affected by this war than another war that is going on, on the other side of the world, because this war is affecting the trades that are going on in our country and it's affecting the food that we get so that's, and for me I think that's the reason why people feel also connected because they are experiencing results of the war.

Poland: … we got the refugees to our homes --- okay and in my city for like New Year Eve there are fireworks, always and this year they are not… How do I put it, they didn't show up, I don't know. Because these people, you know, they got the PTSD, they are afraid of the loud noises or something like that.

Belgium: For me I think it's a bit hard that we will help the Ukrainian people, but not the Syrian. So, in Belgium it's like: "The refugees they don't have to come, we won't help them." Not all people, but there are in society this thoughts. But the Ukrainian people, we will help them. I think they are the same people, just from a different country. And that's hard for me personally in my heads.

For the participants from Croatia, earthquake was a crisis that further stressed them during the last few years.

Croatia: Also, the constant state of fear, for yourself, for people around you, your family, other… your friends that you know that are all around the world and your country so… on top of that we also had the earthquake crisis and, so, the constant fear of that.

Educational crisis during the pandemic was clearly stated in participants' comments. They reflected on positive sides such as more time, ability to stay and home and close to family as well as and negative sides of online lectures (screen fatigue and increased workload).

Romania: For me, what was really hard was to keep up with school and education because, I was doing it at the same time with my sister and we had to share a laptop because there weren't enough for my mom to work remotely and my dad also. So, I had to share a laptop with my sister, I missed certain classes and then, she missed certain classes I just found it altogether really… overwhelming to be able to do everything that the teachers were asking us to do and to not be distracted by the fact that I'm home and I have my pets in the room with me and it was just so hard to stay concentrated and actually have the will to learn more and study more and be curious about school.

Belgium: Yeah, I started a new education during covid, so it was difficult to meet new people. But at the same time, it was also easy to just do your classes online. Cos, we had a lot more time, cos we didn't have to travel to your classes, and stuff. So, there were bad things in but also good things.

Romania: Yeah, like, in the pandemic situation, a year and a half online and I think that affected me a lot because I didn't like the system. It was like I lost my focus and everything. And I couldn't just focus on what the teacher said. And the relationships with my colleagues also were affected. And I didn't like that.

Croatia: For me it was not that good to be online. Because what others said about having time for studying, that was like too much having time. And I want to go to college university, to be there, to listen because that is the place that my brain like: "Now, you have to study. Now, you have to focus on that." And in my room, it was like bed, movie, eating. I don't know, it was not good for me.

Belgium: And for school in Belgium it was also draining because you always if you had to follow school online you're never away from school in a way because you're in the same house when you're doing your free time and when you're eating and when you're working, so it's all your workspace and then you feel guilty because you're not learning or not

studying.

Croatia: A challenge for me was time management. And since all the lectures were online, we had some Zoom meetings, and we have this online portal from our university where we put all the documents when we finish the task by uploading them to that portal. And teachers gave us a lot of homework to do when we were online having lectures. So that's a real challenge to organise yourself to do everything and it was very hard and tiring. We were very tired from all the work on our computer because it wasn't two or three hours a day, but it was nonstop for a minimum of 8 hours. There were lectures after lectures and then do some homework and then have another lecture. And it was like that.

Poland: For me it was that every day it looked similar. My mom was in the kitchen, my brother was in the room, my dad was in the living room, and I was in my room. The class was every day the same. On the same table, on the same laptop, with the same people. It was boring for me. We were closed at home. Can't go outside because of the pandemic. So, we were in that one house. And it's not healthy for me. And I think it's the worst that I felt.

Going back to "normal" everyday life turned out to be a struggle for students.

Belgium: I think it was after the lockdown even harder to meet up with friends because you were so isolated for so long that you just didn't have the energy to like be with friends or talk or it's like you like a little bit of social anxiety or something, not extreme, but I felt it was there with a lot of people. And also you have to start life again after being on a break for so long and then suddenly everything starts up again and you have to be productive again and doing stuff again and everything is just basically back to normal so it was like from zero to one hundred and it's very hard to adapt to that situation.

Romania: After the lockdown and after we were allowed to go back to schools we actually had school anxiety. I was feeling I have to stay and listen to the teacher for fifty minutes when during the online classes were thirty to forty minutes so everybody everything in my head was a mess because I was I started to get used to being in my room, staying in my pyjamas…

Croatia: For me it was the hardest thing maybe to learn, how to get myself to study again because in the beginning we were just giving like small tasks from every subject and when we had to back when we had to go back to school like we adapt we get Zoom application and everything we get like online tests. It was really hard to get back on track on how to study now because and also we didn't have proper lectures, like we had to do a lot of it just by ourselves and it was really challenging for me.

Theme 2: Coping mechanisms and strategies that enable well-being

Within the scope of theme 2 Coping mechanisms and strategies that enable well-being, different subthemes and codes were identified (Table 2). Coping is defined as "efforts to prevent or diminish threat, harm, and loss, or to reduce the distress" that we experience during times of adversity (Carver, 2013). From the responses of focus group participants, it was easy to identify that the crises resulted with different emotional, behavioural, cognitive and physical responses. To be able to cope with the crises coping strategies of care for others and self-care were identified. Participants described the ways in which they dealt with their internal distress. Students found support in their family and friends, as well as adaptive coping strategies for self-care. Mostly functional but also dysfunctional coping strategies were identified.

Table 2. Subthemes and codes: theme 2 coping mechanisms and strategies that enable well-being

Subthemes	Codes
Social support	Family members
	Friends
	Boyfriends/girlfriends
Personal interests	Reading
	Music
	New hobbies
	Cooking
Reflection	Walking in nature,
	Self-reflection
Education	Attending online lectures
	Focusing on other educational obligations
Professional help	Seeing a professional (therapist)
Substance abuse	Drugs

Social support:

Croatia: … before the pandemic we were all in like kinda we were together we lived together but we had like our own

lives, like because we are really, especially me and my sisters, we are huge, we have huge difference in age, we are all 6/7 years apart so like I was always in the in my high school, they were in theirs, mom and dad was always working, and this was a really time that we made really huge connection that also helped me when I went to college to different city, it helped me stay connected with them, I would say that it was a huge impact on that.

Belgium: We tried to do different funny things with friends, although we weren't together. So, each of my friends baked cookies, and we put it in front of the house, and then we left, but we had cookies from each other. Or we watched a movie together but separated. And we send it cards with photos to remind them of funny experiences, or something. Yeah.

Belgium: Both. Even the teachers admitted like hey we know it's hard mentally for you and we are doing the best we can to help you so and also like a lot of students, school psychologists they had a lot of people they had to talk with because I mean school is also very supportive but as students but also apart from school young people talked about it in every aspect.

Personal interests:

Romania: During the lockdown we notice that we didn't have a purpose anymore I think this is why everybody started baking as I've heard.

Poland: I think it was music because if I was tired of everything I put my earphones and just listen to music – happy, sad, everything, but it put my mind in peace. This all just spent my time with my family, if I couldn't stay put in my room, I just go to kitchen to help my mom to talk about anything to just make to make me better.

Romania: Well I think I went back to my old passions like playing the guitar or reading a book I wanted to do all this time but I didn't get the chance to. I mean, I would love during the pandemic, my favourite activity was taking the garbage out so I started to love that even though before I was complaining about it and going to the groceries…

Reflection:

Belgium: Main thing for me, was that I had too much time. I was thinking too much, I had nothing to do and I just went spiralling down sometimes, like oh shit, it isn't going good. I am a really social person, so it was a hard time not being connected to other people, even sometimes you enjoy being alone, it was too much, you had too much time to think and to reflect on everything.

Professional help:

Poland: Therapy. I went to therapy before the pandemic and the first two months of lockdown I was also like yes involved in a therapy. So my therapist told me how to cope really he suggested that I bake, I meditate and I do like yoga and stretching. I need help for a while but then I like dropped it because I didn't felt like doing it anymore because I was kind of tired of it and I just stick to music and playing video games and it was really time consuming, it didn't involve too much like brain, brain activity so I think that's got me through the pandemic and the lockdowns.

Belgium: I mean I eventually I went to the psychologist and then she helped me starting to kind of you know live again and starting to appreciate more things outside of the house so then I got out of it but it was a hard time so…

Some students noticed that their friends and acquaintances resorted to some harmful strategies of dealing with crises.

Croatia: I think that in my country people started using drugs more than usually and some kind of addiction on drugs like I started to smoke cigarettes in lockdown but I stopped before three months ago so, yes, that's…

Theme 3. Opportunities for the future

Within the scope of theme 3. Opportunities for the future the following subthemes and codes were identified (Table 3).

Table 3. Subthemes and codes: theme opportunities for the future

Subthemes	Codes
Development and growth	IT skills
	Personal growth
	Confidence
Renewed trust	In others
	Emphaty
Global benefits	Ecology – lack of travel
	Rethinking resources
	Rethinking social groups
	Rethinking health care
	Rethinking legislation

Renewed trust:

Although students critically reflected on the actions of their societies and governments there was a general feeling of renewed trust. The actions that followed the COVID-19 crisis seemed to have been much better perceived amongst students.

Romania: There was so much solidarity. People just felt connected cause everybody is going through the same things… I mean you do small things and it can change a lot.

Croatia: So, like, with the war in Ukraine now, like, everybody's helping, the whole world is helping not just the guys in governments, but like common people can help because they have a way of helping, not just by thinking about them, but actually doing action, sending donations, sending people, doing work, accepting people… I think that's a really nice feature of today's world that we are really connected and really care for people that we never saw or will never saw or hear, but they're there and going through struggles and I think that's nice.

Romania: So, I think the pandemic made us stronger as a community and when the war started and the Ukrainians came into Romania, people were actually opened to them and we were like, okay, we've been to the pandemic, can we imagine how it's like to be through a war. And it was maybe because it was so close to us and we put ourselves in their shoes and we welcomed them with our arms opened and we tried to help him. Romanians offered their homes to the Ukrainians, and all the people were, we were trying to help them more.

Crisis made students think about what needs to be changed in how we see environment, society, health, education, national regulations and how we as a global society have benefited from the crises we were dealing with.

Poland: … So when there was a war between Russia and Ukraine, there was a lot of immigrants coming to Poland and I think the law like regulations were a bit slow to make sure they won't be like excluded from society … I think that's like general law regulations for the future that would be a bit broad but also be able to help people in the upcoming crisis if they occur would be a good option to have both in law and also in a society that's…

Croatia: So, before COVID and earthquake in Croatia and war in Ukraine, I think that people spend a lot money on stupid things which is not necessary for our lives. So, I think that we should start from ourselves to save money for black days. So, when some crisis come, we'll have like fund for these days. So I think this is very important thing for life of every person to know how to spend money rationally.

Belgium: I feel like, as a society we grew and we learned a lot from each other… we should work together. Cause during the COVID crisis it really worked, so I think it can help during the other crises, for example now the energy crisis how other countries… Put energy together to lower the prices, it's, again, an example of how the society learned to work together for different crises, and not just focus on their own countries. So the housing crisis is an example of that doing together we can do a lot.

Romania: I think that cope better with the next crisis, any type of crisis, especially the ones we talk about society. I think it would be important to move back to what happened and make out all the good and bad parts. I mean, that's basically why we do history in school if we think like bigger.

Belgium: Because we are often not prepared for the next crisis, I think we also have to make choices that are ethical or moral…

Conclusion and Discussion

In the previous few years, the society has undergone global crises that were intensive for all. There is an emerging field of literature dealing with the consequences of these macro crises (COVID-19, war, energy crises, poverty, earthquakes). The biggest crisis on a global level that was felt by all was the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to restriction in social contacts and lockdowns in countries universities were forced to resort to emergency remote teaching, with little time to transition (Hofer et al., 2021; Šenjug Golub et al., 2020) and its impact on education is multifold: impact on students' learning. increased workloads, academic performance, reduced motivation and even professional careers among higher education students and student well-being and health (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Chandra, 2020). It is clear now that COVID-19 pandemic does not only represent a major medical and economic crisis, but also has a psychological dimension and consequences for well-being (Zacher & Rudolph, 2021).

This research tried to identify how student cope with the stated crisis of Covid-19 pandemic while dealing with other global crises that emerged simultaneously such as earthquake, energy crises and war in

Ukraine. The times of university studies tend to put a lot of stress on well-being of students as is. The emerging and ongoing crises strained the capacities of students in the last years. Student resorted to different coping strategies that resulted with different emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and physical responses. Students found support in their families and friends, as well as adaptive coping strategies for self-care. Mostly functional but also dysfunctional coping strategies were identified in the research. Although the student perception on the global crises were explored the pressure of the global crises differed across countries and while all participants were aware of and impacted by different crises, some seemed more local. Participants in Romania and Poland stressed the impact of war in Ukraine, participants form Belgium were impacted by energy crisis, while participants form Croatia added a reflection on crises developed by earthquake. What could be seen as a common denominator in all focus groups was lack of trust in government decisions created by changing rules during the lockdown in the pandemic and a lack of trust in media. Social support, personal interests, reflection, education, seeking for professional help were identifies as functional adaptive strategies while substance abuse was recognised as dysfunctional coping strategy.

Although the experiences of participants during the crises made them question the abilities of adults, governments, and the society, they did conclude that there is a lesson learned and the possibility of moving forward as o global society.

The present study contributes to the growing body of research that crises have on student well-being and adaptability. Further exploration of methods and strategies used in the times of crises can help universities prepare for the crises that might arise in these uncertain times. Further suggestions for higher education institutions can be found in the research report on the project's website: https://educatore.aps.edu.pl/educatore/.

Declarations

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