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E-Learning as a Way to Tackle Fake News: A Case From Bulgaria

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Abstract: *This paper intends to address the question: Does distance electronic learning contribute to quality education? It is argued that new opportunities for acquiring essential skills and tools necessary to tackle various challenges successfully are opened, with combating fake news being cited as a significant example. To substantiate our hypothesis, opinions from learners and teachers on two key issues were initially focused on: the effectiveness of distance electronic learning and levels of media literacy in Bulgaria. This was based on open sources, utilizing the results of four published surveys, media materials, and an international report. Some surveys broadly represent the country's university population, while others reflect the opinions of students and faculty from a limited number of universities. A defined concept of fake news was then introduced and utilized throughout the study. Additionally, a case study was presented in Bulgaria, where 52 political science students studying Conflict Management were tasked with distinguishing between real and fake news during their online classes. Since fake news primarily proliferates through social media and the internet, the capacity to combat it must be developed within virtual environments. Existing e-learning platforms facilitate the implementation and practice of these skills, which continue to evolve.*

Keywords: *E-Learning; Distance Education; Fake News; Bulgaria; Media Literacy*

INTRODUCTION

E-learning in Bulgaria exploded with the advent of the COVID-19 crisis for the same reasons long-distance learning prevailed worldwide. On 3 March 2020, the first confirmed case was diagnosed in a small town in the Northwest. On 11 March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic. Following a debate in parliament, a state of national emergency was proclaimed on 13 March 2020, initially intended to last until 13 April but continuously renewed for months thereafter. Universities closed down to facilitate social distancing, forcing e-learning upon a system that had resisted these kinds of innovation. Quite rapidly, teachers and administrators needed to renegotiate their relationship with students and rethink their methodological approaches. This emerging reality crystallized into a new regulatory environment for higher education that came into force in September 2021 (REGULATION on the state requirements for organizing a distance form of education in higher education institutions 2021).

For too long, e-learning was dismissed as a dehumanizing and low-quality training substitute, resulting in substandard learning outcomes. Long-distance learning was perceived as a low-quality educational experience that was no match for physical classroom teaching by qualified professionals. This perception was, in turn, reflected in the job market, national and European. Only a few private academic institutions invested in long-distance learning, with

public institutions seeing little value in developing e-learning platforms and pedagogical methodologies. The demotivation to invest was primarily the result of limited digital skills among faculty staff as well as an outdated regulatory framework dating back to 2004, which did not realistically value and renumerate educational online services (Regulation on State Requirements for Organizing Distance Education in Higher Education Institutions from 2004 to 2004). In this demotivating context, teaching personnel and students knew that physical attendance in the classroom counted for more and paid more. Particularly in public universities, there was no credible "buy-in" for stakeholders.

The main research question we state is: does distant electronic learning contribute in some way to quality education? We argue that it opens new opportunities for developing new skills and tools to meet the challenges of fake news successfully.

The relevance of the research should be seen in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when social isolation, fear of unknown illness, rigid government control, hysteria sparked by some media, lack of information, and low public awareness created a fertile ground for the dissemination of fake news. However, it would be wrong to consider that the skills and tools in question are helpful only in crises – they have much broader application beyond troubled times.

In mid-2022, when this article was submitted, the sources on our research topic were not abundant. One of the first was the report of the World Bank, "Remote Learning During the Global School Lockdown: Multi-Country Lessons" (March 2022), which raises the following questions: "What can we learn from education emergency responses in low- and middle-income countries?", "Is remote learning perceived as effective?", and "What works with remote and remedial strategies?" (Rodriguez et al. 2022). Some articles were also valuable: "Student's Management of Covid-19 Fake News/Miss Information During the Pandemic" by Faiswal Kasirye, "(Mis)informed during Covid-19: How Education Level and Information Sources Contribute to Knowledge Gaps" by Tiziano Gerosa et al. as well as a book written by some authors of Eastern Europe. All these sources, however, studied the relationship between COVID-19 pandemics and fake news in the context of distant electronic learning. This paper is focused on how skills and tools obtained during the pandemic were transferred to other subjects, different than the pandemic itself.

METHODS

To prove our hypothesis, we first focused on the opinions of learners and teachers regarding two issues: the effectiveness of distance electronic learning and levels of media literacy in Bulgaria. This has been done based on open sources, using the results of four published surveys, media materials, and an international report. Some surveys represent the country's university population, and some represent the opinions of students and faculty staff in a limited number of universities. Then, we introduced a definition of fake news we would use. Finally, we have a case from Bulgaria where 52 political science students studying Conflict Management were asked to distinguish between real and fake news during their online classes.

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RESULTS

Opinions of Learners and Teachers

The quick and forced transition to a new teaching paradigm was indeed full of errors, missteps, and ineffective teaching strategies, particularly regarding the cooperation between teachers and students. Opinion surveys of both students and teaching personnel present contradictory results, probably reflecting the variation of educational experiences and the inability of peer groups to reflect on their experiences collectively. In this sense, Bulgaria is not unique. A survey carried out in the United Arab Emirates suggests that students believe that 20.82% of participants agree that online learning during COVID-19 promotes student engagement" and simultaneously, 29.49% of the participants believe that "e-learning does not promote student engagement" (Al-Karaki et al. 2021).

The opinions articulated by the most reliable survey in Bulgaria are similarly incoherent. The annual survey used to rate Higher Education Institutions in Bulgaria reaches out to nearly 25,000 students in Bulgaria (April-June 2020), which is by far the biggest polling exercise of its kind. The 2022 results suggest that two-thirds of the respondents are satisfied with their online learning experience (70.5%); however, they point out that group work has become exceedingly difficult (21%). In 45 out of 52 higher education institutions surveyed, more than two-thirds of the surveyed resolved that learning outcomes met the desired outcome despite introducing new and untested teaching methods (student views of online learning during COVID-19 in Spring 2020). Opinions could be influenced by the nature of the subject matter, as certain areas of study are better suited than others to e-learning. Still, the aggregation of survey results does not reflect this differentiation.

An online survey with a far smaller and non-representative number of interviewees was conducted in the Spring of 2020 (25 April to 6 May). The survey conducted by the biggest and oldest Bulgarian university - St. Kliment Ohridski University (SU) - and the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" (NSA) - reached out to 427 students (261 from SU and 166 from NSA). Rather than seeking to evaluate a specific course, the utility of this survey was "agenda setting" in the sense of presenting a cost-benefit analysis of the e-learning experience. The respondents polled consider the main advantages of e-learning to be the following: a flexible timetable (40,6%: SU students, 33% NSA students), the comfort of working at home (12,6% - SU students, 16,3 - NSA students), and the ease of working with suitably designed resources (14,5% - SU students, 10,8 - NSA students). Flexible hours and time-saving are more important for the students than lecturers; lecturers are less keen on working from home and are less satisfied with their online relationship with students. Online learning appears more onerous for teachers than students (Covid-19 Pandemic and the Academia: Current Problems of Distance Learning 2020).

Two much larger surveys were conducted by the University of National and World Economy, reaching out to 2,820 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled across all faculties. This student population achieved an average grade of 5.54 (on a scale of 1 to 7) in their first e-learning semester. Students generally enjoyed the broader use of project-based work, the greater use of multimedia resources, and the overall structure of lectures with carefully thought-out planning and interaction. Asked for their preference, 23% percent of the student body expressed a desire to revert to the traditional classroom, 28% wanted to retain current

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forms of online learning while 48% qualified their preference by reference to the subject matter under consideration and the competence of the lecturer (Mihailova, Mirchev, and Murjeva 2020).

Toward More Comprehensive Evaluation

The surveys above focus on participant perceptions of the educational process during the COVID-19 pandemic that forced long-distance education across educational institutions. However, these studies appear to be neither conclusive nor adequately representative for two reasons: first, e-learning and long-distance learning are not necessarily synonymous; secondly, there are contextual qualifications that should frame a methodologically informed assessment of the learning process.

In "evaluating" the learning process during the pandemic, there needs to be a clear understanding of the effectiveness of the process in terms of educational outcome or objective student performance (Naidu 2009); secondly, a study needs to take into account the subjective elements of "satisfaction" with the experience, which a more multivariable question but is closely linked to effective engagement of the student in the learning process. In sum, the prevailing opinion is that an evaluation should be founded on measuring engagement and educational outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic allows us to compare the effectiveness of long-distance platforms across disciplines in terms of measurable educational outcomes and perceived satisfaction with the learning experience (Markovic 2022).

One obvious contextual factor to consider in long-distance or socially distanced learning is the subject matter of study. Ultimately, one must distinguish between faculties where experimental activity is integral to learning (i.e., social sciences versus medicine). Another contextual factor is the subjective dimension of the learning experience, which one needs to understand when redesigning educational content to enable remote learning (Clark 2000). On balance, in assessing the effectiveness of long-distance learning, one needs to consider objective performance-related criteria such as skill and competence, as evidenced in project work and exams, as well as subjective factors that measure opinion and perception. The latter is important because the learning process goes beyond the curriculum's stated objectives and entails engaging a range of social stakeholders in the learning process, such as guest lecturers, practitioners, etc.

The inclusion of performance indicators is significant because the publication of long-distance learning outcomes by universities around the world renders the field transparent, facilitates comparisons, enables the setting of expectation benchmarks, identifies best practices, and improves e-learning curricula and infrastructure. In sum, an element of competition drives forward the quality of e-learning programs and infrastructure to benefit teaching quality and, chiefly, students. Ultimately, such criteria render universities accountable to the benefit of educational systems, taxpayers, learning communities, societies, and citizens.

Unfortunately, the transparency of data on remote learning opportunities and educational outcomes by Bulgarian universities leaves much to be desired. Before the COVID-19 pandemic rendered remote learning necessary, the range of fully developed e-modules was limited. There was no reliable system for the collection and publication of learning outcomes. For better or worse, the pandemic forced a dramatic review of curricula and individual modules, calling for reimagining each course into a socially distanced platform when and where possible.

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As expected, universities were unprepared for this transformational process and did not have set quality benchmarks or best practices. Furthermore, there were no centralized policy initiatives to assist and enable this transformation of the academic process, let alone a debate on contextual factors that mold a module or a curriculum from faculty to faculty. As a result, there is a crisis of student retention.

A screening of Bulgarian higher education suggests that throughout 2022, there has been a student recruitment and retention crisis. In this context, very few universities boast of their performance in remote e-learning to attract more and better candidates. The general impression is that remote education is a substitute rather than an integral dimension of the educational process, with the traditional class being the norm and e-learning being exceptional. This Bulgarian trend contrasts with the attitude of new trailblazing practices of forward-thinking European universities that have embraced the catalytic effect of the COVID-19 experience to rethink their educational paradigm. Frontline institutions now underscore the advantage of "an accredited degree from a European university" in the job market, offered in English, addressing a worldwide community of learners, and embracing worldwide performance comparisons. Freie Universitat Berlin (Germany), Stockholm University (Sweden), the University of Oxford (UK), and the Swiss School of Business and Management lead such indexes.

E-learning can effectively transfer knowledge and redistribute social capital, civic empowerment, and social mobility. Traditionally, this has been the role of universities and tertiary education. Therefore, it is paradoxical that such policy objectives are rarely considered when framing an evaluation matrix in tertiary education. To the best of our knowledge, no survey seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of learning platforms against similar objectives, which means that educational policy may be losing its drive and direction.

That trend has implications for citizenship as such. For instance, when universities fail to prepare effective e-platforms to develop and harness digital skills, it is harder for individuals to distinguish between real and fake news, which requires substantial competence in online orientation. It is no accident that the EU has been trying to promote a digital skills agenda, as online citizenship becomes critical for career development, political engagement, and the realization of civic engagement. The absence of policy motivation in Bulgaria to empower online citizenship is symptomatic of broader challenges that span key stages of educational development, from primary school to high school and university.

The level of media literacy in Bulgaria is a case in point. National and international studies suggest that Bulgaria ranks near the bottom in EU-wide comparisons. In 2022, it was reported that Bulgaria holds the lowest position in the EU for media literacy among students. Students from 10th grade cannot distinguish between facts and opinions and lack the essential skills to interpret media narratives. What's worse, the demand for student empowerment does not stem from educational institutions - schools or universities - reflecting a greater systemic failure of the educational process to encourage active citizenship. That is the conclusion of two studies on media literacy among high school students and teachers in Bulgaria, carried out by the Media Literacy Coalition in partnership with the Center for Assessment in Preschool and School Education at the Ministry of Education and with the support of the Active Citizens Fund (Dnevnik 2022).

According to research conducted by the Inclusive Communities through Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Education (IN-EDU) project team, the stakeholders of the educational

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process - parents, teachers, and students - are in consensus over the need for media literacy training in schools. Most parents (75%) suggest they are willing to engage in similar training with their children (INEDU 2019). Other organizations presented similar results: Failing to recognize fake news and propaganda content is a significant challenge among many Bulgarian students and the wider population, as they fail to recognize propaganda across media channels. Teenagers in our country need to upskill their ability to critically engage with the content they consume as they navigate news platforms and social media. Although Bulgaria ranks 115th place in the freedom of speech indicator (Freedom House 2021), our students will often uncritically endorse everything published on nationwide news platforms as "the truth":30% admit that they cannot judge what is fake news". These are some of the conclusions of a survey by the Center for Media Development conducted in 10 municipal secondary and vocational schools in Sofia, Burgas, Karlovo, Kostinbrod, Slivnitsa, and Stara Zagora (Dronzina 2021).

The 2018 Media Literacy Index suggests that Bulgaria ranks 30th among 35 countries considered (Charlton 2019). Only Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Turkey, and Macedonia lag, none of which have access to EU resources. It is no coincidence that the countries ranking at the top of the Media Literacy Index have stronger educational systems (Charlton 2019); this is not a challenge that can be addressed in isolation.

Fake News

Learning and working in a virtual environment presents many challenges, including fake news. The term "fake" describes a set of practices, techniques, events, and processes in communication that is intentionally subversive and is not committed to the value of objective coverage. While the phenomenon of propaganda is ancient, "fake news" has spread like fire since the mid-2000s, evolving from satirical TV shows such as The Daily Show (est. 1996) and The Colbert Report (2005-2014) (Gelfert 2018). Nowadays, fake news is a synonym for disinformation campaigns, cyber propaganda, cognitive hacking, and information warfare (Sharma 2017). Fake news is a way to deliberately spread misinformation or disinformation, going beyond individual propaganda messages to frame campaigns designed to penetrate mainstream information messaging across traditional media channels and peer-to-peer social media networks. The strategy of fake news sites can be understood through the principle of 5M: a) Misinformation; b) Misinterpretation; c) Maligning; d) Manipulation; e) Modification of human minds to make it conducive, tolerant, and accepting of specific agenda (Navin 2017).

Global interest in fake news was further inflamed following the election of President Donald Trump (2016) and the referendum campaign on membership of the EU in the UK (2016). President Trump often turned the term on its head, demanding unmediated and unedited contact with wider audiences while undermining the critical editorial process that guards information streams against disinformation campaigns. Many researchers have reservations about the concept, stressing that it is not new but has acquired new political significance. It is often employed to stigmatize journalistic content and undermine media scrutiny of the political process (McNair 2017).

Is fake news dangerous? The scandal involving the instrumentalization of Facebook psychometric data by Cambridge Analytica in both the Brexit and Trump campaigns suggests that fake news is dangerous not only because it is a lie but also because it is now possible to

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target people according to what they want to hear, thereby diversifying political messaging to achieve a political objective. When the work of Cambridge Analytica came to light in 2017-2018, the company went bankrupt, wrapping up operations to avoid closer scrutiny. Founded in 2014, the company collected data from over 50 million Facebook users and perfected micro-targeting advertising techniques, including deploying fake stories that resonated with specific psychological profiles. In the aftermath of the scandal, Facebook had to review its data governance and content curation protocols to avert subsequent legal liabilities. At the time, Facebook emerged at the heart of a new paradigm in which fake news was no longer about the perception of a specific fact but about the emergence of online identity communities created through the micro-targeting of individuals with specific psycho-social profiles (The Economic Times 2020).

Tackling fake news requires media literacy, which is internationally defined as a combination of information and technological processing competencies (UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education n.d.). In a European context, "media and information literacy" is described by the Council of Europe as a toolkit that integrates media, information, and digital competencies. Framed this way, media literacy empowers people, communities, and nations to participate in and contribute to global knowledge societies (Council of Europe n.d.).

A Case From Bulgaria

Universities in Bulgaria need to address the inability of secondary education to empower citizens with media literacy competencies. Responding to this challenge, the Conflict Management course at Sofia University challenged students to distinguish between Russian-generated fake news from international standard coverage. The course focused on Venezuelan and Balkan case studies in its pilot phase (2018-2019). Therefore, one team focused on the standoff between Nikolas Maduro's government and Juan Guaidó's supporters. Another focus is fake news dissemination activity on the Russian TV channel Tsargrad, owned by President Putin's loyalist oligarch, Konstantin Malofeev.

Students were asked to work in virtual groups via Moodle in a WIZIQ virtual classroom software environment. This module was organized in a virtual environment long before the emergency of e-learning was forced upon universities by the COVID-19 pandemic. Using methodological and technical skills developed through modules such as "Political Marketing and Communications", "Business Communication", "The Development of the Bulgarian Media", and "Persuasive Communication", students were invited to compare Russian sources to credible international media platforms in terms of narrative structure, visual effects, and editorial guidelines. Students then had to reflect on the significance and instrumentality of Russian communication strategies, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of fake news strategies.

Since President Putin's Russia is unlikely to participate in a costly nuclear race or large-scale conflicts to protect its economic and political interests, the state invests in similar cost-effective strategies that allow for tactical victories of cumulative strategic significance. Information campaigns of this kind take place continuously rather than merely in the context of a military confrontation (Technology 1996), an approach that fits the Russian paradigm of a perpetual information war with the West (Waltzman 2017), in which state-sponsored and private Russian media platforms are hardly distinguishable.

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Explanatory narratives need to account for causality and, therefore, the instrumentality of Russian information strategies. "Isn't Venezuela too far?" is a question educators have had to discuss. Using a range of sources, including Time Magazine, Venezuela was framed by students as a key field of the informational encounter between Russia and the United States (Bremmer 2017; Mead 2019), referencing the fact the country sears on the biggest proven oil reserves in the world, surpassing Saudi Arabia, despite the fact these are not exploited due to lack of investment. Beyond media engagement, it is significant to note that Russia and China are the country's largest creditors, industrial, and defense partners of the Nicholas Maduro regime, with Russia being the lead arms supplier (RIA Novosti 2019). Reuters estimates that from 2006 to 2017, Russia has provided credit and loans to Caracas totaling $17 billion. Paid in oil, Russia has gradually managed to control 13% of Venezuelan exports and gain broader influence over the international oil price. In this scheme, Russia has greater leverage in global energy markets and can trigger crises in regions traditionally regarded as a US backyard. Therefore, students learn to evaluate secondary sources to build plausible interpretations of events. They are encouraged and supported to reach out to primary sources in Venezuela, including academics working in Political Science faculties, an intelligence-gathering skill they can only practice online. Overall, this learning experience empowered their media literacy, as students went through 71 different sources before reaching an argued and substantiated conclusion about what is happening in Venezuela and the global significance of these events. Table 1 outlines their argumentation.

Table 1: Distinguishing the Facts from the Fake News about Events in Venezuela (Source: Authors' depiction)

No.	Fake News	It constitutes fake news for the following reasons:
1	As Venezuela celebrates Independence Day, the Nicolas Maduro regime sees every dissenting opinion that criticizes the National Assembly as the covert longarm of Washington.	There is no factual evidence to suggest the US is engaged in overt regime-change efforts; furthermore, it is hard to argue that Washington's support alone accounts for mass demonstrations against the government in Caracas. Such criticisms are further discredited because little attention has been paid to the substance of the criticism against the Venezuelan government.
2	CNN in Spanish has been banned in Venezuela because its journalist "have been distorting the truth and presenting inaccurate information", thereby undermining "peace and democratic stability" in Venezuela.	The Paris-based organization, "Reporters Without Borders" (RWB), ranked Venezuela 137 out of 180 in 2015, concluding that "it was a bad year for Venezuelan media." The 2018 RWB freedom of the press index ranks the country 143, pointing to further deterioration of standards. Human Rights Watch echoes these conclusions, stating that "criticizing the government may lead to censorship" and noting the absence of this fact from Tsargrad TV coverage.
3	The regime's coverage of General Motors expropriation of assets focused on the layoff of 2700 people.	The report failed to note that the layoffs came after the takeover of production facilities when the factory was closed. Media reports instead suggest the layoffs predated the seizure.

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Afterward, students were tasked with identifying manipulative techniques and explaining their utilization (Table 2).

Table 2. Explaining Manipulative Techniques and Their Utilization (Source: Authors' depiction)

No.	Manipulative Techniques	Purpose of the Manipulation
1	Selective and one-sided citation of "authoritative statements" aligned with Moscow's political priorities. Crediting leaders such as Bashar Assad with authority to blame Washington to stage a *coup-d'état*, "just like in Ukraine", referencing reactions to the Crimean annexation (Tsargras 2017)	Citing a Syrian rather than a Russian authority to convey perceived "objectivity".
2	Biased comparisons. Comparing demonstrations in Venezuela with the Colour Revolutions of the post-Soviet space to discredit them as proxy warfare.	To strip demonstrators of agency and legitimacy, ignoring the substantial criticism voiced against the Maduro regime, thereby dismissing criticism as reactionary and pro-American. The identification of a color revolution pattern is thereby a strategy of political delegitimation of every conservative or pro-American voice in Latin America(Tsyganov2017).
3	References to (pseudo) "natural proximity" and reflexive "kinship" between Moscow and Caracas.	Depicting Russia as the "natural protector" of all that is good and wholesome in Venezuela as elsewhere in the world renders Moscow a fair advocate of Venezuelan interests in international energy markets. During the meeting between Putin and Maduro in Moscow (2017), the foreign minister of Venezuela said, "We know that we can rely on Russia. We are not friends; we are brothers!".

All reports on the assigned tasks were collaboratively prepared under the facilitation of the lecturer, ensuring that no single faculty member or individual student dominated the narrative. During the evaluation session, students expressed profound satisfaction with the outcomes achieved in a remote learning setting, recognizing the course's role in fostering their critical engagement with news narratives. From the teachers' perspective, the project was immensely gratifying despite the additional effort involved in its initial implementation.

DISCUSSION

Even though this research fills the gap between the study of distant e-learning and the acquisition of skills and tools, which can be obtained only in the internet environment but implemented in any other one, it has certain limitations. The first one has to do with the empirical data. Here, surveys done over two years are presented and compared. Gathering more solid empirical data from an improved and more sophisticated methodology would be better. Another limitation has to do with the fact that only 52 students from Sofia University have been presented with experience. All of them study political science. Enhancing the scope to include

students from other majors would contribute to more reliable results. Further research should focus on increasing the number of respondents and on a more precise evaluation of the usefulness of the tools and skills obtained. As in any empirical research, the measurement of results is of crucial importance.

CONCLUSION

The main hypothesis of this research—that distance e-learning opens new opportunities to acquire the skills and tools necessary to meet the challenges of fake news successfully—has been confirmed. Since fake news are primarily disseminated on social media, i.e., the internet, the capacity to combat them cannot solely be developed in a virtual environment. However, existing e-learning platforms enable the implementation and practice of these skills. Moreover, they are becoming increasingly sophisticated over time.

Nevertheless, evaluating the effectiveness of distance learning is a long-term challenge. A more substantial understanding of educational outcomes takes years when first-year students sit their state exams or enter the labor market. In any event, the current climate of political instability in Bulgaria - with four governments coming to office in 2021 alone - suggests there is little room for resolute intervention in any policy sphere, including education. This political climate is not conducive to a national consultation process and the formation of a national strategy. There is little understanding of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced remote learning to universities, not least because there has been little reflection on the formulation of survey questions that should inform policy planning. However, the catalytic effect of the experience is evident. By 2021, most prestigious US institutions offered online courses leading to degrees, including Johns Hopkins University, the University of California, Boston University, and the University of Maryland (Team Careers 2021). European trends echo this trajectory. There is no going back.

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CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Tatyana Dronzina: conceptualization, writing-original draft preparation, methodology, data collection, formal analysis**. Yavor Raychev:** conceptualization, data curation.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the article.

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