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REPORT\*

**“Objectives and Challenges of Cooperation in the field of Education in the Black Sea  
Region after the Pandemic”**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

1. Human capital is the main factor in the successful development of countries. The most important component of human capital is education, its quality and availability. Education is the process of mastering knowledge and skills, a necessary condition for preparing a person for life and work. The purpose of education is formation of personality through motivation, communication, deduction, creativity and competitive skills and abilities to meet the needs of modern society. Improvement of education system plays an important strategic role in the accumulation and transfer of experience and knowledge to the coming generations. Education, therefore, is a system for designing the future, which ensures the progress of societies and humanity as a whole.

2. The COVID-19 pandemic created the largest disruption of the education systems in the human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners around the world. According to UN research, the school closures and other restriction measures have impacted 94 % of the world's student population. The crisis has increased the education inequality by reducing the opportunities for the most vulnerable children, those living in poor or rural areas to continue their learning. The losses of the sector threaten to extend beyond this generation and erase decades of progress. However, this situation has stimulated innovation within the education sector in support of education and training continuity. Distance learning innovation methods and solutions were developed as the urgent and quick responses by governments with the essential role of teachers and education personnel.

3. Due to the topicality of the issue and the effect of the pandemic on education in BSEC Member States, the PABSEC Cultural, Educational and Social Affairs Committee decided to focus on the "Objectives and Challenges of Cooperation in the field of Education in the Black Sea Region after the Pandemic" as the main item of the Agenda of its 57<sup>th</sup> Meeting.

4. Contributions to the Report were received from the National Delegations of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Bulgaria, the Hellenic Republic, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Turkey, and Ukraine. Reference material was also obtained from the official websites of the UN, the UNDP, the UNESCO and other relevant international organizations and sources on the Internet.

## **II. OBJECTIVES AND CHALLENGES OF COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION IN THE BLACK SEA REGION AFTER THE PANDEMIC**

5. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all countries in the world and almost all areas of public life, including education. One of the ways to combat the coronavirus infection was social isolation, which required the partial or complete closure of educational institutions and their supporting infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the disruption of education, having a universal impact on learners and teachers around the world, from pre-primary to secondary schools, technical and vocational education and training institutions, universities, adult learning, and skills development establishments. The educational establishments were forced to change their learning system, introduce online and hybrid methods in order to achieve maximum possible results and maintain the achieved level of education. All these caused significant damage to the educational systems and the quality of education in general.

6. The importance of ensuring inclusive and quality education is highlighted in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4 "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" with seven targets and three means of implementation is the clear confirmation of the global willingness not to leave

anyone behind. Over the past decade, significant steps have been made in expanding access to education and increasing school enrolment at all levels. To achieve this goal, broader participation of civil society, educators, specialised organizations, the private sector, research institutes and foundations is required.

7. One of the important indicators of education is the Education index is a component of Human Development Index published every year by the United Nations Development Programme. Education index is an average of mean year of schooling (for adults) and expected years of schooling (of children), both expressed as an index obtained by scaling with the corresponding maxima. According to the World Education index 2019 published by the United Nations Development Programme in December 2020 the BSEC Member States are ranked as follows: Albania (69); Armenia (81); Azerbaijan (88); Bulgaria (56), Georgia (61); Greece (32); Republic of Moldova (90); Romania (49); Russia (52); Serbia (64); Turkey (54) and Ukraine (74).

8. The PABSEC attributed due attention to the issue of education before and after Pandemic and adopted reports and recommendations on the issues like: improvement of education (Recommendation 10/1995), mutual recognition of higher diplomas (Recommendation 31/1998), Black Sea Universities Network (Recommendation 56/2001), reforms of higher educational systems (Recommendation 97/2007), improvement of the quality of life (Recommendation 100/2007), lifelong learning (Recommendation 125/2011), benefits and perspectives of cooperation at the postgraduate level among Universities (Recommendation 133/2013), and education and science for sustainable development (Recommendation 154/2016).

9. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the educational establishments temporarily suspended their physical activities, while in a short while they adapted their systems to hybrid or online studies. In the created circumstances, government authorities, heads of educational institutions, teachers, as well as the students themselves and their parents began to hastily adapt to the new learning conditions, mastering various formats of remote interaction. The physical presence of students in classrooms became possible only in stages, taking into account the need for full-time practical classes in subjects requiring the presence of students and with strict adherence to epidemiological rules.

10. Switching from traditional classroom learning to online pattern brought totally different experience for the students. The adaptation process was not easy for both students and teachers. Not many education systems could cope timely with the implementation of the transfer of students to online studies. There were unsuccessful experiences and mistakes. The time-frame for setting up the necessary infrastructure and digital content, provision of methodological and technical support to teachers and the introduction of the necessary rules and regulations have become the main obstacles on this path. At the same time, many students did not have personal computers or tablets, that created problem in adequate internet connection, especially in rural areas. Large-scale investments in educational technology have become necessary to close the gap between different groups of students in accessing education.

11. During the quarantine and self-isolation, the main problem was the loss of knowledge during the massive closure of the schools and the higher education institutions. The main task was to ensure the continuity of the education and the conditions for high-quality distance and hybrid or online forms of learning. In the beginning, the full-scale transition to online learning did not sufficiently take into account the individual needs of students, but over time, educational institutions began to quite effectively use technological means for the successful

implementation of online learning, creating mechanisms for accessing the resources, tools, platforms and content in order to simplify the process and monitor possible failures. Teachers were tasked with implementing distance learning modalities, and they were largely unprepared to immediately adapt to new methodologies. Today a full-fledged online educational is ensured through interactive programs, tools for creating digital educational content and numerous electronic databases of educational materials.

12. The obligatory transition to a distance learning format turned out to be a great stress for all participants in the process. Repeated restrictions following the new waves of the pandemic had an extremely negative impact on the population. The most negative consequence of distance learning during restrictions was the deterioration of the physical and psychological condition of students. According to the opinion polls, 84% of teachers, 73% of students and 68% of parents experienced the stress because of emergency switching to online education during quarantine and of a radical change in the established model of social interaction. Communication between students and teachers turned into a completely new format causing increase in tension. Accelerated digitalization has become a kind of test for teachers, educational institutions, national educational systems, and the ability of humanity to interact during the great challenges. Many countries integrated psychological support into their contingency plans, manuals, and guides for teachers and local associations; and NGOs mobilized to provide additional support.

13. As pandemic continued, the education systems started to react and adapt accordingly. Governments responded quickly to ensure education continuity and protect the safety of learners and education actors. Ensuring learning continuity during the time of school closures became a priority for governments. Along with the established online learning modalities, a mix of educational television and radio programming, and the distribution of print materials are used in areas with limited Internet connectivity. School closures have necessitated changes in the students' evaluation pattern. In some countries exams have been postponed; in others they were cancelled or replaced by online testing. As countries reach plateau in COVID-19 incidence and restrictions have been eased, schools resumed, although some countries take more cautious approach and do not open schools. Long-term shutdown of educational institutions makes it difficult to implement catch-up programs. Periodical closures and reopening are likely to continue as the virus continues to circulate. The most effective measure that countries can take to reopen schools and educational institutions as soon as possible is to suppress transmission of the virus to control national or local outbreaks. To this end, vaccination is recommended to achieve herd immunity.

14. After the first wave of the pandemic, the vast majority of the world's leading universities announced plans to introduce hybrid learning model, when classic face-to-face classes are complemented by work on an online platform. It is evident that the higher education establishments need to take into consideration a new dimension of their management, referring to the capability of a higher education institution to continue the primary mission of education, research, and service, despite potentially disorderly events that might be the case of pandemics, natural disasters, major social movements, and other situations.

15. The crisis revealed low levels of digitalization and structural weaknesses in technical and vocational education and training systems. There is a need to adapt vocational training programs and training centres. To ensure the continuity of vocational education and training, innovative approaches are being taken to provide study kits for online or home study. Adequate attention should be paid to vocational education and training and accelerated transformation in these areas.

16. National ministries of education have important role in crisis planning and management for enduring education resilience. The activities of ministries of education in many countries have demonstrated high efficiency in the transfer of education to digital format, which made education more flexible, personalized and effective. In many countries, the ministries of education have organized contactless delivery of textbooks, provided everyone in need with tablets. They monitor the situation on a daily basis, consider challenges and possible solutions in the functioning of educational institutions, undertake and implement activities in accordance with the established measures ensuring safety and health of children, students and employees.

17. The global pandemic has underlined the role of education for all and lifelong learning. During the pandemic, online learning becomes a very important tool for regularly learning new knowledge and skills. The distance format is convenient for advanced training, development of specific narrow skills, acquaintance with new programs and digital tools. It also opens up new opportunities for online projects and start-ups.

18. The education sector has passed a serious test of the strength and effectiveness of its work. Decisions made today in the context of COVID-19 will have long-term consequences for the futures of education. The governments, the policymakers, educators, and representatives of the academic fields must be united in elaborating the proper urgent strategies, being guided by the shared principles based on a humanistic vision of education and human rights frameworks.

19. Some researchers estimate that the socio-economic skills gap could increase by more than 30 % due to the pandemic. The World Bank identifies three possible scenarios for the loss of learning: a reduction in average learning levels for all students, a widening of the distribution of learning achievements due to highly unequal effects of the crisis on various populations, or a significant increase of students with very low level of achievement. This suggests that 25 % more students may fall below a baseline level of skill needed to participate effectively and productively in society, as a result of the school closures only.

20. Conducting assessments to estimate learning gaps and prepare remedial or accelerated learning programs is essential at the time of reopening. States need to create safe working and learning conditions and ensure that school reopen as soon as possible. It is necessary to adopt short and medium term programs to manage the crisis situation.

### **III. INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK AND EXPERIENCE**

#### **The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**

21. The UNESCO develops educational tools to help people live as global citizens so that each child has access to quality education by fostering programmes and policies as platforms for development and cooperation. UNESCO helps countries adopt international standards and manages programmes for knowledge sharing. Its founding vision is to reaffirm the humanist missions of education, science and culture.

22. In March 2020, UNESCO launched the Global Education Coalition (GEC), an international multisectoral partnership between the UN agencies, civil society, and media to meet the urgent and unprecedented need for continuity of learning as the pandemic disrupted education systems across the world. The Global Education Coalition currently has 175 partners. The Coalition is operating in 112 countries, establish large cross-country missions such as the Global Skills Academy, which aims to equip one million youth with employability skills, and conducting large-scale data collection and support for the joint

global survey on education response (UNESCO, United Nations Children’s Fund, World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development).

23. On 29 March 2021, UNESCO hold High-level online ministerial event “One year into COVID: Prioritising education recovery to avoid a generational catastrophe”, which presented the lessons learnt, the greatest risks facing education today and strategies to leave no learner behind. It examined the most pressing current challenges, informed by the presentation of some key data sets. It showed how the Global Education Coalition has mobilised partners to support learners, teachers and policymakers with new tools and knowledge.

24. The International Commission on the Futures of Education is an independent commission convened by the Director-General of UNESCO, aiming to consider the education in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, inequalities, challenges, and possibilities. This initiative relies on a broad, open consultative process that involves youth, educators, civil society, governments, business and other stakeholders. Its work is guided by a high-level International Commission of thought-leaders from diverse fields and different regions of the world. The Commission draws its inspiration from the hundreds of thousands of students, teachers, educators, parents, activists and policymakers who have expressed their support for a vision of education as a common good that benefits all.

### **BSEC Framework**

25. The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) recognises that cooperation in the field of education contributes to further bilateral and multilateral cooperation and that education and training play a key role in promoting sustainable development, stability and prosperity in all BSEC Member States. The key priorities for BSEC activity in the field of education are defined by Goal 14 “Higher Standards in Education and Training” of the “BSEC Economic Agenda towards an Enhanced BSEC Partnership” (2012). The main activities are carried out by the BSEC Working Group on Education, established in 2005, whose Country – coordinator until the end of 2021 is the Hellenic Republic. The main goals of the Action plan envisage: modernization of the educational systems in the BSEC Member States aimed at increasing sustainable growth and the establishment of knowledge-based societies, inter alia, through the exchange of information and experiences; enhance cooperation in the field of vocational training among the BSEC Member States; intensify cooperation between the relevant authorities of the BSEC Member States and their business and academic communities; promote and support the development of joint academic programmes between the Academies of Sciences and Universities of the BSEC Region.

26. Three Meetings of the Ministers in charge of Education and one Meeting of the Undersecretaries and the Heads of Delegations of the Ministries of Education were held. The Joint Statements and Declarations serve as guidance for the activities in this domain. In 2015-2018 were held the International Conference on “Professional Education and Economic Needs of the Black Sea Region” and the Workshop on “Developing an Information Network on Recognition to Maintain Quality in Higher Education”. A Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation among Diplomatic Academies and Institutes of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the BSEC Member States was signed in 2007. Training Programs for junior diplomats from the BSEC Member States were organised by the Republic of Turkey (2010 and 2012) and a Workshop for Young Diplomats from the BSEC Member States by the BSEC PERMIS in collaboration with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS), in 2018.

27. At the last Working group on education, held in April 2021, the participants discussed the challenges facing the education sector due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and shared good practices in the field. The Working Group expressed its interest to learn how different countries have resolved the problem of online learning and building public trust on their work. Moreover, participants presented ways and means for adapting the education systems, the teachers and students of the BSEC countries to the digital era, in order to better respond to the current global needs and eventual future challenges, laying a special focus on strengthening and exchanging good practices on digital skills at all levels of education. In this regard, the representatives of the Hellenic Republic as Country-Coordinator, with the assistance of the BSEC PERMIS, will prepare a list of common denominators on the experiences gained and on the best practices implemented by Member States, in order to promote possible measures and mechanisms with a wider, regional effect for mitigating the negative consequences of the pandemic.

28. The Black Sea Universities Network (BSUN), established in 1998, counts over 100 universities from the 13 BSEC Member States. The current priority areas of cooperation and activity of BSUN are: Sustainable Development, Networking on Innovation and Knowledge Transfer, Energy Security & Renewable Energy Sources, Advanced & Multifunctional Material, E-health & Telemedicine, Social & Cultural Cohesion in the Black Sea Region. BSUN has organised following events on the COVID-19 pandemic: on 13<sup>th</sup> of April, 2020, it was organised the BSUN e-Conference on: “Solutions to Address the Impact of SARS CoV2 Pandemics on the Higher Education Activities”; on 28<sup>th</sup> of April, 2020, it was organised the BSUN e-Conference on: “Addressing the Impact of SARS CoV2 Pandemics on the Higher Education Activities in the Black Sea Region”; on 14<sup>th</sup> of May, 2020, the Black Sea Universities Network, in partnership with the Institute for Advanced Studies in Levant Culture and Civilisation Centre of Excellence organised the e-Conference on: “How will the World look like after the Pandemic? ”; on 18<sup>th</sup> of June, 2020, it was organised a BSUN – Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UNICA), Joint Webinar on “The Impact of COVID-19 on Universities”.

### **Situation in the BSEC Member States**

29. With the suspension of the educational process in secondary schools in *the Republic of Azerbaijan* due to COVID-19 pandemic, 4833 lessons have been broadcasted on Madaniyyat channel of AzTV and Gunash channel of ARB TV within the framework of the television program “Lesson Time”. Moreover, eight programs named “After the lesson” and ten series of an animated movie named “A letter from the teacher” were made to serve the development of students’ independent learning skills. The program named “Lesson time for applicants”, which offers 148 lessons covering the subjects needed for university admission exams, was also filmed and broadcasted. To enlarge the scope of pre-school education, lessons with a new format named “Learn while playing” were prepared within the framework of “Lesson Time” television program and broadcasted on Madaniyyat channel of AzTV and Gunash channel of ARB TV. To ensure easy and continuous access, the lessons were also posted on [www.video.edu.az](http://www.video.edu.az).

30. As regulated by the Decision No 312 of the Cabinet of Ministers dated 29 August 2020 on “the organization of activities of educational facilities in the Republic of Azerbaijan during the special quarantine regime”, hybrid model of education (in-class and distant) in general secondary schools started to be implemented from 15 September 2020 onwards. The Ministry of Education launched the “Virtual School” project on 2 April 2020, to ensure access to continuous and quality education. Currently, the project covers 1.4 million students (84.74%) and 128000 teachers (92.88%) across the country. The Virtual School offers a wide

range of opportunities for teaching and learning process, management, professional development, and extracurricular activities. Students who are the most active users of the platform take advantage of the opportunities offered by it and are already succeeding nationally and internationally with their digital skills.

31. The portal offers a single platform and Azerbaijani language interface. Distant learning process on the platform is organized based on national content and through an interface translated into Azerbaijani. All information provided by the users for registration is kept confidential. To ensure security during the teaching process, access of third parties to classes is blocked. The platform has a centralized monitoring capacity, which allows for quick responses to learning outcomes of students, timely adjustments, and development of effective teaching strategies. To analyse how students perform tests and which subjects they master better, Power BI tool is used, analysis is done, and gaps are found to allow the content to be enriched where necessary. The platform not only provides a unified environment for information sharing, but also serves as an extensive content database. All processes, such as the completion of classes, the transfer of teachers and students, the admission of students to the first grade, are automatically integrated into the platform.

32. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Institute of Education has prepared a number of materials and conducted trainings. In addition, within the framework of the project “Promotion of e-learning practice in the education system of the Republic of Azerbaijan” carried out by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan in cooperation with UNICEF, trainings were held on the following subjects: trainings for teachers on the organization of distance and hybrid education, e-learning tools and other related topics; webinars for professional development of school principals and employees of local education authorities on the organization of education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (16,516 school principals and employees of local education authorities). At the same time, a 3-day online training on “Monitoring and Evaluation of Online Learning in Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan” was held within the framework of the EU TAIEX instrument, which hosted 51 people.

33. *The Republic of Bulgaria* took urgent measures in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in order to protect the health of children, teachers and their families. The Ministry of Education and Science managed to organise the training and to create an opportunity and support to teachers and principals for extremely fast switch from in-person learning to distance learning in an electronic environment.

34. The Ministry of Education and Science developed “Operation guidelines for the school education system during the school year 2020-2021”. General and recommended measures have been put in place to limit the risks of spreading the virus. The general measures include mainly health protocols and organisational rules to be applied by all schools, and the recommended measures include ideas and decisions from which each school chooses and applies where possible. The Ministry of Education and Science has developed measures for safe distance learning in an electronic environment and for equal access to school education. In relation to distance learning, various types of support have been provided, including to children and students from vulnerable groups whose parents have a low educational status or are without education, and therefore cannot be included as full partners in their children's learning process.

35. Given that the health and protection of children, students and pedagogical specialists are essential for organising and conducting activities in institutions in the system of pre-school and school education, “Guidelines for organising and conducting in-person learning and



activities in institutions in the system of pre-school and school education”, were prepared and distributed. The guidelines are aimed not only at carrying out personal development support activities such as additional training in school subjects and interest activities, but also at conducting similar activities in the personal development support centres, the National Palace of Children, the special education support centres and the regional support centres for the process of inclusive education. The training is carried out by the decision of the Director of the institution either in physical presence and/or in a distance learning using the means of information and communication technologies.

36. The policies of the Ministry of Education and Science in the field of higher education are related to ensuring constant adaptation to the current challenges for the training and professional development of every student, doctoral student or specialist. In implementation of the policies for higher education, the Higher Education Directorate developed and launched three national programmes. The process of developing and launching national programmes coincided with the period of spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Within the framework of the national programme are Enhancing the competences of teachers from state universities preparing future teachers, the preparation of manuals, video presentations, lectures and resources shared in a virtual library will be funded, supporting the preparation of future teachers.

37. In *Georgia*, special resources were created to facilitate distance learning activities for preschool and general education students. Recommendations were developed and provided to general education institutions on how to manage the educational process and advance its effectiveness. On 30 March 2020, the educational project “Teleskola” (TV-School) was launched for conducting TV-lessons for schoolchildren according to the standard and the program defined by the national curriculum. To ensure the safe learning process, mandatory periodic testing of teachers was carried out, as well as voluntary vaccination. During the summer of 2020, the needs of each school to meet the sanitary norms were studied in detail and the schools were fully equipped with the appropriate equipment and the necessary means to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus.

38. Each vocational education institution, in order to obtain the right to resume the educational process, passed the labour inspection of the Ministry of Health. Simultaneously with the launch of the private sector, the implementation of work-based/dual programs continued, however, from October 2020, the training process in large cities has shifted to the hybrid learning model and then continued in a fully remote form. Significant preparatory work was carried out during the summer of 2020. The Ministry has set up 17 sectoral networks, online, where teachers of one profession are united (Agriculture Network, Tourism Network, Construction-Related Professions Network, etc.). Vocational education programs were analysed and the components that can be delivered remotely were identified. Educational institutions analysed and mobilized resources for the implementation of distance learning programs.

39. Amendments were made to the Law of Georgia on Higher Education regarding the possibility of providing higher education in distance learning. A rule was established on the admission of distance learning in higher education institutions and the period of implementation of distance learning. Amendments were made to the Law on Education Quality Improvement, according to which the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement recognizes distance education abroad if it is obtained because of distance learning in a foreign country due to pandemic and/or pandemic prevention or elimination. Research on COVID-19 prevention, diagnosis and management is underway at research institutes to involve science in fighting the pandemic. The material and technical bases

required for the research have been improved.

40. It should be noted that during the pandemic, a new model of assessment was introduced, according to which, in the 2019-2020 academic year, two mandatory forms of assessment were defined - developing and defining. In the first case, the student development dynamics described by the teacher contribute to improving the quality of learning. Defining assessment evaluates the student's level of knowledge with appropriate scores. In addition, alternative ways of assessment were developed, which included defining the points earned in the current academic year as annual points. Students were also given the opportunity to apply to the school administration in due course and raise their mark in a particular subject. During the pandemic, local subject support groups were set up at the regional level to actively work with public schools to both improve distance learning practices and to share pedagogical experience. Such an approach is a step towards decentralization.

41. The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs of *the Hellenic Republic* had to accelerate the digital transition in Education and transform a trend into a reality for all the educational community. School units of (Pre-)Primary and Secondary Education had to operate in distance learning mode, the students of each class attended live (synchronous distance learning) on a daily basis: at least 3 sessions of 30 min in pre-primary education, at least 5 sessions of 30 min in primary education and at least 6-7 sessions of 40 min in secondary education. Educational television programs for primary education students were also broadcasted on national television. 70,000 educators have been registered and performed over 200,000 classes per day, with over 4.2 million student participations per day.

42. The Greek Committee of Health Experts evaluates constantly the situation in all areas of Greece, based on many indicators (e.g. number of COVID-19 cases, number of people in the intensive stations etc.) and issues specific instructions, among others, also for the educational sector. The Ministry has reinforced the capacity of existing servers in order to support the unprecedented rise in digital classrooms and online users. The measures taken for the simultaneous distance learning education are described in certain Decisions, which have been published in the official paper of the government. Regarding the special education, the following apply: Common Ministerial Decision which, among others, regulates special issues of mask use and attendance for students with disabilities and/or special educational needs who attend special education schools or visit Educational and Counselling Support Centres (KESY).

43. In the same context, KESY are called upon to plan and organise remote counselling support for parents and students, who have either been evaluated or are contacting their services for the first time, using direct or indirect support, electronically (via teleconferencing platforms or email) or by telephone. Similarly, teachers are encouraged to make appropriate adjustments to distance learning by utilising modern and asynchronous teaching tools. From the beginning of the COVID-19 emergency, schools were gradually provided with IT devices and students were immediately offered a free-of-cost connection to synchronous and asynchronous distance-learning platforms. More specifically: the Ministry of Education has provided more than 90,000 portable electronic devices (tablets and laptops) to support distance learning.

44. The Coordinators of Educational Matters of the Regional Centres for Educational Planning (PEKES) provided appropriate guidance to teachers and Principals of Secondary schools with a view to utilize all appropriate tools, methods and educational materials as well as to ensure the dissemination of good practices applied either by schools or by other educational structures.

45. **The Republic of Moldova** promotes an educational policy connected with the European educational policies, relevant to the current problems and needs of the educational system and its beneficiaries. The documents for the strategic development of the education system acknowledge the concern of the Government of the Republic of Moldova to shift the emphasis in education in favour of the educational process quality and skills that young people acquire in the educational process. At the international level, the education in the Republic of Moldova is based on the implementation of the Moldova-European Union Association Agreement, adopted in 2014, the 2030 Agenda adopted worldwide, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals set by the UN globally. In this context, it should be mentioned that the Republic of Moldova is in the final stage of developing the Education Strategy 2030, which is to be approved by the Government of the Republic of Moldova in the autumn of 2021.

46. As for the period of 2020-2021, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of normative acts (51 normative and methodological acts), instructions, methodologies, and guides were developed in the national education system to regulate the organisation and carrying out of the educational process under pandemic conditions. The remote educational process for the general education system was organised and the school year 2020-2021 was completed under conditions of maximum safety for students and teachers, ensuring the issuance of graduation documents to graduates of secondary and high school education.

47. The pandemic has had a profound effect on the education system all over the world and has affected many categories of children and students, including: children from low-income families, children from rural areas with poor infrastructure, children from ethnic and linguistic minorities, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children, children and young people not attending educational institutions. For these reasons, improving the resilience of the education system by planning a high-quality inclusive education for the most disadvantaged children should be a top priority for the coming months and years and should be the basic principle of rebuilding better education and better schools in the Republic of Moldova.

48. Concerning the most important challenges and lessons learned during the pandemic, the following should be mentioned: continuous development of digital skills of teachers and students; infrastructure development of educational institutions (ensuring the local network and high-speed Internet connection of all school rooms); providing educational institutions with modern technology devices (laptops/computers, interactive whiteboards, high-performance webcams); development and implementation of specialised programmes and applications (educational software, management platforms at the institutional level, teaching resources and digital textbooks, electronic register, etc.); the need to strengthen the technical and material base of educational institutions in the country to provide access to a friendly environment for all children.

49. During the pandemic, **Romania** focused its efforts on transitioning to online and distance learning, as well as on measures for reducing the negative impact on pupils, students, teachers and trainers. The Ministry of Education worked together with national, regional and local authorities, as well as with the private sector and civil society to ensure the continuity of learning for pupils and proper support for teachers. The Law on National Education has been amended, establishing the conditions for online teaching activities at all levels of education. A number of issues regarding the development of online teaching activities were regulated by order of the Minister, for the approval of a framework methodology on the conduct of teaching activities through technology and the Internet. Over 182.000 teachers took part in trainings and webinars aimed at enhancing their digital skills and at providing them with

relevant information and recommendations for adapting their teaching and evaluation methods to the respective scenario.

50. In order to limit the negative impact on the education system with regard to the difficult access to educational resources, the Ministry of Education launched, shortly after the suspension of face-to-face courses, the “Teleșcoala” (Teleschool) program - an educational programme implemented in partnership with the Romanian Public Television (TVR), broadcasting lessons for pupils in terminal years in order to prepare them for the national exams. Through the implementation of the National Programme “School from Home”, 250.000 electronic devices connected to the internet have been purchased in view of facilitating distance learning activities for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

51. In February 2021, the National Pilot Program “School after school” was approved with a budget of 30 million euros. The aim of the Programme is to prevent school failure and early school leaving by means of remedial educational activities, which will support pupils’ learning and skills development, targeting in particular pupils who had poor access to or no access at all to distance/online teaching during the first semester of 2020-2021 school year in the COVID-19 context.

52. The Ministry of Education is currently implementing a large-scale project “Relevant Curriculum, Education Open to All - CRED”, co-financed by the European Social Fund. The project is implemented between 2017 and 2021 and aims to prevent early school leaving by implementing systemic measures with a focus on the capacity development of 55,000 teachers in primary and secondary education. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this project also represented a framework for providing adapted programs according to the current needs of teachers, both from the perspective of content adaptation and from the training / development of digital skills.

53. The adoption of the Strategy for the Development of Education in *the Republic of Serbia* until 2030 and of the respective Action Plan is the basis for systemic improvement of education in the Republic of Serbia. In the academic year 2019-2020 in order to properly and uniformly act primary schools in the implementation of the Decision of the Government of the Republic of Serbia on the suspension of teaching in higher education institutions, secondary and primary schools and regular operation of preschool education, in accordance with the Decision on declaring a state of emergency and the Decree on measures during a state of emergency, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development organised distance learning and thus ensured continuity in the education of students and the work of educational institutions.

54. Through the television channels of the Public Media Service and multimedia internet platforms, more than 1,200 teaching hours were broadcasted for primary school students, including preparatory classes for the final exam, as well as classes dedicated to task analysis within the knowledge self-assessment and the mock final exam. With the establishment of the national platform for online learning [mojkola.gov.rs](http://mojkola.gov.rs), the interactivity with students was introduced, online communication between teachers and students was established and a contribution was made in developing a self-regulation in students’ learning. At the same time, in accordance with the provided instructions, the schools organised educational work through distance learning for their students.

55. In the circumstances of a complex epidemiological situation during the academic year 2020/2021, the educational work was organised to ensure continuity and successful implementation of teaching as well as safety and health of students and employees in accordance with the Decree of the Government of the Republic of Serbia on measures to

prevent and combat COVID-19 infection and the decisions of the Crisis Staff. The Institute for the Improvement of Education, based on the initiative of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development prepared a special program of primary education to be applied by all the primary schools in the Republic of Serbia in 2020-2021 academic year. In accordance with the Rulebook on the special program of education (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No 110/2020), recommendations and curriculum in case of an imminent danger of war, state of war, state of emergency or other emergencies and circumstances, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development provided schools with detailed instructions and guidelines for the organisation of the educational work.

56. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development has been working for a long time on improving the conditions in terms of technical equipment of schools, which has been intensified since March last year, additionally encouraged by the current epidemiological situation. Independently - from its budget, as well as with the help of partners and donors, the Ministry managed to significantly improve the situation in terms of school equipment. The activities in this field shall continue.

57. The National measures implemented in *the Republic of Turkey* in the field of education during the pandemic are as follows: suspension of face-to-face education by the Ministry of National Education as of March 23, 2020; implementation of Education Information Network (EBA) digital education platform, with the EBA applications (EBA Live Course, EBA Academic Support) and with the broadcasts on EBA TV within the scope of the cooperation with TRT (EBA Primary School, EBA Secondary School, EBA High School; involvement of approximately 1000 teachers from 112 branches in the preparation of the contents broadcast on EBA TV channels and 11,523 lesson videos; delivery of 664,157 tablet computers with a 25 GB quota internet package to disadvantaged students who cannot continue distance education due to their socio-economic conditions.

58. In order to close the skill gaps of the students who continue their vocational and technical education, the internship and skill trainings carried out in the enterprises continued depending on the permission of the parents during the pandemic. In order to meet the needs of the society during the pandemic, 16 million litres of face cleaner, 4 million litres of hand disinfectant, 300 thousand litres of cologne, 300 million surgical masks, 60 thousand N-95 masks, 2.3 million face shields in vocational and technical education schools/institutions and 2.1 million overalls/uniforms were produced.

59. In order to reduce the success differences between schools and to support the multi-faceted development of students with physical, social, emotional and academic programs, the "I am in the Remedial Training Too" program was implemented between 5 July and 31 August 2021. The mobile application "I am Special, I am in Education" for the use of all citizens is launched on application platforms Google Play and AppStore. In this application, all content, activities, practices and textbooks on special education are offered free of charge to students, parents and teachers. The "My Game Chest" set, which includes 52 different educational materials and an Early Childhood Education Calendar, was distributed to 3200 families with 5-year-old children residing in villages and similar settlements during the distance education process and who should start compulsory education next year. Similarly, the "More Than One Thing" activity book, which includes game, art, math and science activities, was distributed to 11,000 families with unfavourable conditions, and the "My First Friend" activity book, which helps develop preschool children's problem-solving skills, was distributed to 10,000 families.

60. The current situation in the Republic of Turkey in the field of education during the pandemic is as follows: Between 23 March 2020 and 18 June 2021, approximately 14 million students and 1 million 100 thousand teachers actively used EBA; Between 13 April 2020 and 18 June 2021, a total of 300,122,722 hours of live lessons were held at all grade levels (Grade 1-12) in the EBA Live Class feature; Within the scope of cooperation with TRT, a total of 18,377 hours were broadcasted on EBA Primary School, EBA Middle School and EBA High School channels at all grade levels (Grade 1-12); 1,868,339 citizens studying at Distance-Learning Schools received certificates (graduation, student certificate) via e-government.

61. With an increase in the level of COVID-19 infection among the participants in the educational process and in order to prevent the spread of acute respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus on the territory of *Ukraine*, the founders and heads of educational establishments for the period of quarantine must strictly comply with the resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine “On the establishment of quarantine and introduction of restrictive anti-epidemic measures in order to prevent the spread of acute respiratory disease COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus on the territory of Ukraine”. In order to properly organise the educational process in quarantine conditions, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine has created a website “We learn and study during the quarantine”, with recommendations for pedagogical and scientific workers on the features of organising distance learning for recipients of primary, basic and specialised secondary, vocational and higher education. To ensure equal access to high-quality school education for students in grades 5-11, at the end of last year, a platform for distance and hybrid learning “All-Ukrainian Online School” was launched. In order to digitalise educational sphere, a pilot software module with free - state electronic diaries and journals for general secondary education institutions was put into operation.

62. According to the laws of Ukraine “On Higher Education” and “On Professional Higher Education”, actions of institutions of higher and professional higher education are carried out by the principles of autonomy and self-government, their independence and responsibility in decision-making within the limits of these laws. The Ministry has also developed a recommended algorithm of action for the head of an institution of higher and professional higher education in case of revealing signs of acute respiratory disease in a student, teacher and /or employee of these institutions.

63. With the aim to protect education workers in the pandemic situation, the Ministry of Education and Science has signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the leading insurance companies of Ukraine, envisaging consolidation of efforts of the parties to provide participants in the educational process with affordable and high-quality services in the field of voluntary health insurance in case of illness, including illness with the COVID-19 virus. Teachers and other education workers have been identified as one of the priority groups for vaccination against the coronavirus disease. At the beginning of April 2021, the “Teachers’ Office” programme was launched, which helps teachers adapt to hybrid or distance learning, facilitates communication with students and makes it possible to track their results. The content of the electronic platform “All-Ukrainian Online School” is updated. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Ukraine joined the learning for designing lessons and provided expert support on inclusiveness.

64. The Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, launched on the portal “Action” the national digital literacy test for teachers “Tsifrogram for Teachers” with the aim to ensure that each teacher can assess its own level of digital literacy and improve the skills. By the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine “On the implementation of a pilot project to organise

enrolment and training (internship) of foreigners and stateless persons using the Unified Interdepartmental Information System”, the implementation of a corresponding pilot project was launched. The project aims to ensure the control and the reduction of corruption factors, as well as the safe stay of foreigners and stateless persons (applicants and students) on the territory of Ukraine.

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

65. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a real challenge for education systems. It became necessary to take large-scale response measures in the shortest possible time in harsh preventive conditions. The uncertainty of virus behaviour has led to an unprecedented closure of educational institutions at all levels. Most education establishments were not prepared for this kind of challenge. Overcoming the crisis in the field of education became possible by taking decision to use of digital technologies and create electronic educational environment radically changing the traditional system of education.

66. In all countries, including the BSEC Member States, students and teachers faced significant difficulties to adapt to the new forms of online or hybrid studies. This caused variety of challenges, including unavailability of infrastructure and technical tools, errors in the operation of new educational platforms and services, lack of personal computers, lack of digital knowledge among students and teachers, psychological tension due to changes in the usual way of life of students, etc. However, the counter measures taken by the ministries of education in close cooperation with the ministries of health allowed to cope with the Pandemic and not to interrupt the educational process.

67. The BSEC Member States very quickly managed to adapt to the new realities and provide students and teachers with access to necessary teaching materials, online education platforms and applications, necessary infrastructure and digital content, methodological and technical support. Large-scale investments were made in educational system to close the gap between different groups of students in accessing online education. Despite the pandemic situation and the restrictive measures, the countries have managed to maintain a high level of education.

68. The educational community has shown its resilience and laid the foundation for further recovery. Yet, the BSEC Member States should review their possibilities and realise the potential of both individual people and societies through investing in education. Strengthening cooperation in the field of education, as well as the exchange the best practices and technologies will help to better understand the vulnerabilities and change the situation creating truly modern conditions for students and teachers. To this end, the PABSEC welcomes the activities of the Organisation of the BSEC in the framework of the Working Group on Education.

69. Following the pandemic, the countries have rethought many approaches to the development of education systems and assessed future challenges. Taking into account all the best practices, the Member States should intensify cooperation in order to implement joint projects and initiatives for the development and enhancement of education. The work of the governments in the education sphere gives hope to avoid a worst scenario. An objective assessment of the accomplished work will make it possible to more effectively organize the upcoming educational process for the benefit of the younger generation. Building a better sustainable future for all residents of the Wider Black Sea region is a common goal for all countries and peoples.