

Abstract

Given the turbulent environment that governments and citizens across the globe faced in the last two years (due to the COVID-19 pandemic), one concept seems to stand out as extremely valuable in this context: resilience.

Resilience, understood as the capacity of a system to bounce back from adversity, becomes a key component in the equation of post-pandemic evolution and recovery. Resilient leadership is just one of the multiple derived applications of the general resilience concept, referring (in an institutional setting) to the capacity of leaders to turn out positive results despite adverse conditions. Based on qualitative research consisting of 10 interviews conducted with women leaders (from the private and non-profit sectors) during the last 18 months, our results show that governmental response (regulation and support) and financial pressures have been the major organizational challenges no matter the sector, while organizational dimension seems to have an influence on the capacity to adapt and respond to adversity. Gender does not seem to play a role in the response provided to the crisis.

Keywords: resilient leadership, resilience, adversity, changes, adaptation.

RESILIENT LEADERSHIP. QUALITATIVE STUDY ON FACTORS INFLUENCING ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE AND ADAPTIVE RESPONSE TO ADVERSITY

Tudor ȚICLĂU
Cristina HINȚEA
Constantin TROFIN

Tudor ȚICLĂU

Associate professor, Ph.D., Department of Public Administration and Management, College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Tel.: 0040-753-688.192
E-mail: ticlau@fspac.ro

Cristina HINȚEA

Associate professor, Ph.D., Department of Public Administration and Management, College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: cristina.hintea@fspac.ro

Constantin TROFIN

Lecturer, Ph.D., Department of Journalism and Digital Media, College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: trofin@fspac.ro

1. Introduction

The pandemic environment that the world has experienced starting with 2020 has created major challenges to governments across the globe. In this context, resilience has become a 'go to' concept in trying to understand what are the drivers and factors that positively influence an adaptive and 'bounce back' response in adversity conditions. We have argued previously (Țiclău, Hințea and Andrianu, 2020) that unpredictable change and what we can call wicked problems or dealing with turbulence (Ansell, Trondal and Øgård, 2017) is becoming the rule rather than an exception, thus understanding what creates and drives resilience in any system is essential in responding in an effective manner to these types of challenges.

The current article tackles the issue of resilient leadership (based on the concept of individual resilience (Ledesma, 2014)), coupled with elements of workplace resilience (Cooper, Flint-Taylor and Pearn, 2013) with the purpose of highlighting the experience of women leaders in two types of organizations (for profit and nonprofit) and how they adapted to the challenges raised by the pandemic in the last 18 months¹. As the main focus of our study was to explore and understand how leaders have coped with the adversity conditions of the pandemic and draw insights into potential patterns and coping mechanisms across the two sectors (for profit and non-profit) we used a qualitative approach: we collected and analyzed data using interviews (N=10) with women leaders from the for-profit sector and the nonprofit sector. Specifically, we wanted to: (1) identify and understand the major shocks (and challenges) the leaders faced during the last 18 months of the pandemic (2020-2021); (2) evaluate the impact and response to the shocks, and (3) identify (if possible) potential trends and common factors of influence concerning the response and overall recovery from the exposure to the shock. In the first part of the paper we briefly cover the theoretical framework concerning resilient leadership, we discuss the methodology used and finally present the major findings on the three research goals we focused on.

2. Resilience and resilient leadership

One of the first general definitions of the resilience concept (Holling, 1973) highlights the ability of a system to bounce back or return to equilibrium following a disturbance. Modern approaches in studying the concept have remained constant in focusing on adaptation and adversity – Wright, Masten and Narayan (2013, p. 17) refer to resilient behavior as 'positive adaptation in the face of risk or adversity'. These two conditions (shock/adversity and positive response) for resilience to manifest itself are present when narrowing the focus to individual level: the ability to overcome adversity, recover, and emerge strengthened, successful and develop social, academic and vocational competence, despite being exposed to severe psycho-social

1 The study covers the period between January 2020 and June 2021.

stress (Grotberg, 2001) or the ability to overcome adversity, recover and strengthen themselves by developing favorable competencies to adapt to changes that may involve psycho-social stress (Eachus, 2014).

A thorough analysis of how the concept evolved in the scientific literature (Țiclău, Hînțea and Andrianu, 2019) indicates that although initially individual resilience was mainly the focus of psychology, recently the perspective has broadened, with significant research from the field of organizational studies: change management (Conner, 1993) and leadership (Ledesma, 2014; Förster and Ducheck, 2017). In an institutional context, individual resilience is relevant from a leadership perspective, or resilient leadership, being defined mostly as the capacity of leaders to remain effective in adverse surroundings (Förster and Ducheck, 2018).

Scientific literature on the topic of resilient leadership can be divided in two major approaches: (1) focus on individual trait/characteristic of a person (leader) – personal quality that predisposes individuals to bounce back in the face of loss or adversity, and (2) focus on the process – a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of a significant adversity. These studies, although not going beyond personal (individual) factors, do conceptualize resilience as resulting from the interaction of several personal characteristics.

There is also a string of modern research (Förster and Ducheck, 2017 and 2018; Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013) that tries to combine the two by studying how resilience capacity develops over time while incorporating the interaction between the individual (and the individuals characteristics) and the environment. This is highly relevant for workplace and institutional resilience as it can offer insight towards drivers or factors that influence both individual and institutional resilience. Concerning shocks or adversity, the literature is mostly covering workplace specific adversities faced by leaders which can refer to: general workplace trends that affect the entire labor market like certain economic trends (Bennis, 2007 – globalization, instant communication, new media), social change (demographic changes) but also specific workplace adversity (which is related to holding a formal leadership position) – ‘long work hours’, ‘demanding schedules’, ‘non-stop meetings’ and ‘hectic travel schedules’ (Quick *et al.*, 2003).

Finally, coming to the issue of adaptation, in the context of resilient leadership, adaptation is seen as the capacity of the individual to change in order to respond better to the requirements of the external environment. Adaptation becomes more important when the external environment changes; the bigger the change the more important the capacity to adapt to the new conditions. In this context, drivers of leadership resilience (which implies capacity to adapt) refer to those factors that influence an individual’s capacity to sustain and adapt to adversity or shock. The scientific literature (Förster and Ducheck, 2017; Cooper, Flint-Taylor and Pearn, 2013) proposes three major categories of factors:

- Individual factors: this line of study focuses on individual traits, behaviors or even demographic variables that have a direct influence on resilience. Elements

like confidence, social support, adaptability and purposefulness are identified as having a positive effect on individual resilience;

- Behavioral factors refer to personal and interpersonal behaviors that increase resilience and include three categories of specific behaviors (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013): (1) behavior that aims to increase the effectiveness of work processes, (2) behavior that focuses on the social or relational aspects of work, and (3) behavior focused on free-time activities;
- Situational factors refer to context or characteristics of the situation that influence leadership resilience, like: (1) resource and communication, (2) control, (3) work-life balance and workload, (4) job security and change, (5) work relationships, and (6) job conditions.

Concerning variables that influence individual (leaders) resilience and capacity to thrive in adverse situations, the literature groups them into two main categories (adapted from Țiclău, Hințea and Andrianu, 2019; previous analysis by Carver, 1998; Ledesma, 2014):

- Internal factors (Ledesma, 2014) refer to internal variables of the individual that impact resilience – self-factors, personality factors, or individual resources. The literature is quite broad on their nature, we highlight some that have been proven to have a positive effect on resilience – hardiness, coping ability, a sense of coherence, the use of personal resources, cognitive resources, threat appraisal, and self-efficacy (O’Leary, 1998); modes of thought, response, action, positive self-esteem, a sense of being effectual, and being in control of one’s surroundings (Beardslee, 1989); optimism, empathy, insight, intellectual competence, direction or mission, and determination and perseverance are characteristics reported also to be present in thriving individuals (Ungar, 2004). These factors appear to have significant impact on how a person interprets and deals with the crisis at hand.
- External factors refer to variables placed outside of the individual that have influence over the ability to remain resilient in the face of adversity. Of the external variables defined, the most compelling and most consistent finding (according to Ledesma, 2014) indicates the importance of relationships (Beardslee, 1989; Masten, 2001; O’Leary, 1998) and benefiting from social support (Bonanno, 2004; Carver, 1998; Nishikawa, 2006). Carver (1998, p. 252) notes that ‘a person experiencing a traumatic event finds that help from others is readily available; that the significant others in his or her life can be counted on, and that the result can be a positive change in the sense of the relationships involved. The person may experience a strengthening of the sense of security in those relationships... Perhaps, then, the person who experiences ready availability during a period of adversity acquires an enhanced sense of security in relationships. In principle, this would permit the person’s future exploration to operate a more secure base’.

Individual (and leadership) resilience is usually conceived as a dependent variable in most studies with several drivers or factors influencing resilience being part of

what is called organizational setting. According to Cooper, Flint-Taylor and Pearn (2013, p. 17) the focus should be on ‘the interplay between the personal characteristics of employees, the main sources of workplace pressure and support, and the processes by which resilient outcomes are achieved’. Starting from this assumption², workplace resilience is the result of interplay between individual resilience and a series of work related settings that can have a positive or a negative influence on the response to the shock.

3. Methodology

Given the main objectives of the study we used a qualitative method for data collection – structured interviews with leaders from non-profit and for-profit organizations. We had 10 respondents, all women, 6 from for profit organizations, 4 from non-profit organizations (the criteria for organization selection was convenience). We deliberately chose women to test whether gender played a role in the response to adversity – although this was not the main focus of the study it was one of the reasons why only women were chosen.

The interview guide was structured in three main sections:

- Section 1 – question concerning the organization, their role in the organization and experience/length of time in the current (leadership position);
- Section 2 – focused on shock/adversity description, main challenges faced, impact, type of response, role of the external elements or factors; and
- Section 3 – lessons learned from the situation. We included three questions concerning gender roles in this section as well³.

We contacted the respondents directly on their professional email and once the approval to participate in the study was given, the interview guide was sent to them. The respondents had one week to return the answers, all of them responded in due time. No personal or identifying data of both the persons and the organizations they represent will be used, the references will be made only to the field of activity of the organizations.

Regarding the typology of organizations represented in the interviews, we have a majority of private sector/business organizations (I1–I6) with a relatively high variety – multinationals, national businesses in the hospitality sector, industrial production, and non-profit organizations (I7–I10) – human rights, representation/lobby, advocacy. Data was collected in April and June 2021.

2 That individual resilience is a byproduct of individual characteristics interacting with workplace variables.

3 The questions were focused on: the role played by gender (if any, positive or negative) in how they responded; identifying whether a male counterpart would have a different response; comparing employee reaction to the response from a gender perspective (would employees react differently if the response came from a male leader?).

4. Data analysis

We structured the responses around three major points of interest:

- Shocks – identifying and understanding main shocks that the organization has faced in the last 18 months;
- Impact and response – identifying how the organization reacted to shocks and what were the ‘lessons’ learned, the solutions developed; and
- Influencing factors – identifying the elements inside/outside the organization that decisively influenced the response to shocks. In this section we included the analysis on the influence of gender on organizational response/adaptation.

4.1 Shocks

Excluding the pandemic situation created by the SARS-COV2 virus, we wanted to see whether these leaders and their organizations faced other major shocks; the main shocks faced are mainly of financial nature, with both the representatives of the private and non-profit sectors making reference to this event and the pressures put on the company by the 2008-2009 financial crisis.

‘The biggest shock our organization faced is the financial crisis of 2008 that affected the company at European level; the impact was in the area of costs, which generated a change of strategy focused on cost reduction with implications at the level of human resource’ (I2, multinational production and services business).

‘The majority (French) shareholder went into insolvency and the company was sold to another French group (...) there was a sequence of events and changes related to insolvency that created unrest among employees (...) this was felt on the business side as well, orders fell, it was very unstable working environment, (...) there were restructurings, there were very drastic cost cuts, there were staff reductions, there was a moment of instability, a crisis in fact, it was resolved relatively quickly, somewhere within 6 months’ (I3, industrial multinational business).

The same type of shock is identified by the non-profit sector, but with a specific element for the sector, namely instability or changes of external funding sources, which raised major challenges for the organization continuing to support all activities. The 2008–2009 crisis is not mentioned in the response.

‘The main shock was and remains the discontinuity of funding in our field of activity (...) there are few governmental and European funding lines, and Romania does not have a culture of private and CSR donors, thus we have a high level of dependency on these kind of resources (financing lines). There have been years when the organization has operated without real funding, except for small sponsors. This was felt most strongly in 2016 when the EEA funds (Norwegian funds) were stopped and relaunched only in 2020’ (I7, human rights non-profit).

The most frequently mentioned (current) shock or adversity is, as expected, the global pandemic triggered by the SARS-COV2 virus, being mentioned either as the only shock or as one of the biggest shocks or crises the organization has faced in the last 10–15 years.

‘Honestly, until the pandemic hit, I can’t say that there was a shock or major crisis that the company faced. Facing the effects of the pandemic was a very difficult thing, especially the moment when for a few days the whole company was technically unemployed, it was a very strong shock, because I didn’t realize what I was going to do next’ (I4, small-medium business, events organizing).

‘The biggest crisis since we opened (2016) was the pandemic... and I can say that I went through that period, (the business) was even closed, I only worked for a week in delivery mode, but it was too difficult for us (...) honestly I had nothing to do, only through delivery I could not survive and then we decided to wait for the end of the emergency period (May 2020), to be able to operate in over the counter store, and we consider ourselves lucky because we can operate like that, there are many other restaurants and similar units (like us), which had to close during this period, not being able to serve inside and not having the necessary structure to operate in over the counter mode. From this point of view we consider ourselves lucky because we can operate; you come and get what you want from the window and you’re gone...’ (I5, small business, food/bistro).

‘The pandemic changes directly influenced our activity — physical event organization — the financial amounts received from sponsorships and grants were clearly reduced (because of the pandemic), the prioritization of companies’ budgets made certain projects no longer take place also this year (2021), there were a few members who chose not to be in the club, we had to figure out alternative ways to keep the association afloat’ (I8, nonprofit, event organization/club/association).

We can note that in general the pandemic has created an immediate and abrupt effect on the ‘normal functioning’ of the organizations — none of the organizations were able to continue their activity without any ‘adaptation/change’ measures. The main impact (as expected), no matter the sector, was on the access and availability of financial resources, and thus the viability (and survival) of the organization was in question — in the case of SMEs or non-profits. Although effects of the pandemic on organization functioning are differentiated, in all cases this was a high level disturbance, able to produce a significant change in the internal processes and activities (financial, human resources management, production process, core activities).

4.2 Impact and response

The next set of questions focused on the impact of the pandemic on the ‘normal functioning’ of the organization and what response was adopted. Based on the an-

swers provided, we can distinguish a series of patterns (of responses):

- Organizations have tried to adapt to the adversity/shock faced by generating (or trying to generate) solutions that respond directly to the immediate effects – financial problem – identification of alternative sources, specific activities for fundraising or HR restructuring.
- Due to the complex, multidimensional nature of the problem faced (pandemic implications in areas concerning health, overall functioning, access to resources, relation with clients and so on), the generated solutions were more diverse and more complex (targeted several organizational areas) and involved a wider change in resource allocation (decision processes, time, new mechanisms);
- The size of the organization has a significant influence on the response or solutions generated, large organizations being able to better manage/overcome the situation; in the case of small organizations actual survival of the organization was at play thus a broader and more dynamic set of changes are considered – completely changing the area of activity, nature of activities, finding alternative sources for financing, partial layoffs – basically, a ‘we will do anything to survive’ approach. The process of adaptation/transformation itself to cope with the shock is less dynamic and more structured in the case of large organizations compared to small ones (this was expected as large organizations have a higher level of formalization, including for change management and crisis response).

Here are some of the answers – the selection aims to highlight the diversity of the adaptation/transformation process as well as the differences between the types of organizations and the response, as previously stated. We start with a typical response from a large corporation that highlights the specifics of the changes/adaptation process:

‘Employees worked in telework – having a policy already implemented, with legal and legislative provisions included, it was easy to adapt to the new work regime. Also, most of the team is between 24–40 years old, which provides a framework conducive to adapting to changes of such magnitude. The impact was partially felt by the colleagues who joined us in the team from March 2020 onwards, because their team integration and training program was affected by the lack of face-to-face interactions. We tried to compensate by teleconferencing, audio or audio/video, and we tried to learn along the way how to approach this situation. Team-level communication and rigorous planning of returning to the office in the months that allowed us to do so (epidemiologically and legislatively) were key to achieving good results. It was a joint effort: the management of the company, the management of groups and teams, employees, internal legal advisers’ (I2, multinational business, production and services).

There are some clear features of the adaptation process: the existence of relatively complex institutional/organizational mechanisms, proportional to the size of the organization and the complexity of the activities it offers. The response/adaptation

implies changes on several levels, from employee management to allocation of daily tasks and activities; it also implies the involvement of several organizational structures (a higher degree of formalization of the specific response of the organizations in a mature stage of development). The same leader (interviewee) continues:

‘At the company level, additional cleaning and disinfection measures were taken (disinfectants, more frequent cleaning, etc.) and procedures (rapid testing after holidays, adaptation to new hygiene measures, etc.) were made available to colleagues (...) visuals in buildings/campuses to prevent/avoid the spread of the virus but also to maintain the health of the colleagues who were physically present at the office. Colleagues from the health, safety and environmental protection departments as well as colleagues from the employer branding area contributed to ensuring the above. Various online seminars were organized to help employees address pandemic-specific situations (advice for parents, anxiety management, a healthy lifestyle, etc.). Additional reporting measures have also been introduced, in particular on the productivity side, to ensure that quality levels and delivery times for the services provided are maintained. It required more effort on the part of the teams, but they understood the need to carry out these more detailed analyzes’ (I2, multinational business, production and services).

We notice the same pattern of adaptation – complex solution to the problem specific to the complex nature of the organization, clear institutional character of the adaptation with high levels of formalism, involvement of several departments, comprehensive solution.

In the case of small organizations, the measures are timely and address the major problem or main effect of the crisis. The response is less complex and involves a relatively linear approach (even ad-hoc adaptation):

‘In the intervening period, many NGOs, including the one in which I operate, were forced to rely on a lot of voluntary work, and the staff had to have external collaborations to ensure their income. The organization sought to enter into partnerships with private donors, which it did to some extent, most notably the partnership with a local private company. The organization also tried to obtain core funding (covering operating and administration costs) from international foundations, but without success. In addition, it has reduced its activity and relied more on voluntary work’ (I9, small non-profit).

We notice that although we have three adaptation actions (fundraising/sponsorship, voluntary work, activity reduction), all three are essentially ways of operating in a low-income situation (core problem). No other additional measures or elements specific to the pandemic period were mentioned in terms of daily activities and tasks.

In the case of another non-profit of slightly larger size (I8, non-profit, event organization) the adaptation process is differentiated in two directions: cost reduction

(necessary due to the impact of the pandemic), and transformation of core activities into a way to allow the organization to function in the new context.

'The biggest shock is represented by this pandemic, which negatively influenced the organization, in the sense that the amounts received from sponsorships and grants were clearly reduced. Prioritizing the budgets of the companies (note: who sponsored us) made certain projects no longer taking place this year (2020). There were a few members who chose not to be part of the association. We had to rely on lower sponsorship amounts. The main event as a source of income, the holiday of France in July, was not organized in 2020, and we are skeptical that it can be organized in 2021. This event is the most important because it brings the most revenue and visibility for our organization, therefore we can say that this is one of the main blows for us (...) at the level of activities. The smaller events were configured in hybrid or online system. We can say that we crossed well the first part of the pandemic, our members were receptive to the reconfigurations of these events. The continuation of the dynamics of the club is quite good, and as a measure during the crisis we had to reduce the staff by half and to transform one of the positions from project manager to occasional internship for certain projects' (I8, nonprofit, event organization).

There is a diversification of adaptation measures on two major levels: re-organization of the activity on a small financial basis, and re-organization at the level of the basic activities, specifically the transfer of smaller activities in the online sphere (where possible). The same pattern is maintained in the case of small private sector organizations, where the issue of survival appears as the main challenge.

'We are a company organizing events at the base; given the pandemic, we immediately reshaped ourselves, we opened a flower shop to try to survive, and in addition we tried to develop in parallel three more online stores, on christening accessories, bottles and jars and party accessories. Before the pandemic, we operated 70% on the organization of private events — weddings and baptisms — and 30% on corporate events, including large events of 12–15 thousands of people. When the pandemic came, it was normal that I was one of the most affected companies, considering the field of activity' (I4, small-medium business, organizing events).

We also note that an element that facilitated survival and adaptation was external in nature, namely the regulations imposed by the government to tackle the negative economic effects of the pandemic. This was a factor beyond the control of these organizations, but it had a decisive influence on the survival equation especially for SME's; we should take note that this external element with zero control from the perspective of the organization was a major factor, thus part of the positive outcome may be attributed to external elements (noteworthy).

4.3 Influencing factors, lessons learned and gender

The last part of the analysis focuses on the main factors influencing the organizational response to shocks/crisis situations. The aim is to identify the nature of these factors, the level of control (from the perspective of the organization), and the extent to which gender plays a role in this equation.

The variables that influenced the response/process of adaptation to shock/crisis situation are preserved: the size of the organization and the relationship with the external actors are the main factors influencing the success of the response. The relationship between the two variables is one of interdependence – more precisely, the size of the organization directly influences both the nature of the relationship with external stakeholders or partners (co-dependence or total dependence), and the nature of this relation – in the case of small organizations, external stakeholders represent a direct (sometimes unique) source of survival, while on the opposite spectrum (corporations) have a more diverse set of interactions and relations with different stakeholders which need a particular type of response, depending on the stakeholder (customers, distributors and producers, partners, etc.).

An important element that has a direct impact on the adaptation process is the level of influence that organizations can exert on the external environment; more specifically, a distinct element that emerges from the analysis of data collected is the major influence that regulatory institutions, in this case the Government, have on how organizations cope with adversity conditions. From this perspective, supportive measures taken for businesses had a positive impact but the lack of predictability and making quick decisions without prior consultation or communication was detrimental to adaptation. The financial support measures taken by the Government were essential (for survival) for small organizations.

‘Institutional partners are helpful. Here I would mention other NGOs and non-governmental networks of which we are part, which support us in carrying out activities (offering complementary services, for example) or which are our partners in various projects. More public-private partnerships are needed to support service-providing NGOs (assistance for victims of domestic violence, for example). It is also necessary to ensure a consistency of public funding, as well as a simplification and de-bureaucratization of the funding procedures. At present, it is difficult for small or medium-sized organizations to access European financing (due to lack of new funding opportunities on the new budget). Last but not least, more expertise is needed in NGOs in the area of financial management and financial resilience (private companies could be an important player in supporting NGOs in this regard with different types of support)’ (I6, small non-profit, human rights, advocacy).

We note two distinct elements that will be reiterated by small private sector organizations. On the one hand they emphasize the importance of external partners to carry out activities and increase resilience in the future (understood as an ability of

the organization to adapt more effectively to situations). The second element refers indirectly to survival and is given by funding sources (the main core problem/challenge for small organizations); the need to diversify these sources which is explained (indirectly) by the fact that sources are in small measure in control of the organization – the adaptation strategy mentioned above aimed at identifying and then ‘grabbing’ new sources, which indicates a limited number of initial sources; simply put small organizations procure their financial resources from a small number of sources, any shock/situation that eliminates these sources endangers survival. Thus, in terms of resilience (increasing it) diversifying sources and increasing funding opportunities (basically creating an environment with a high abundance of such sources) significantly increases not only the chances of survival but the actual level of response and adaptation, allowing these types of organizations to mature (develop) at much faster rate. Indirectly this assumption is confirmed by the other strategy adopted, voluntary work. A similar response is observed in the case of small private organizations (discussed below).

‘When we look at the overall revenues, comparing 2019 to 2020, in 2020 we had around only 10% of the revenues compared to the previous year, so we are not affected, we are almost wiped out. But that doesn’t mean we put our weapons down (...) I ended up working 14 hours a day, 7 days a week, yes that’s it. If we can do this throughout this period (sustain this level of work), it will be fine. The moment you assume a leadership role of a company you are not only responsible for yourself, but you are responsible for your employees. As well, referring to the relationship with external partners, in this case the loyal customers, it is vital to have loyal customers, because this is what kept us going through the hardship; although from the customers perspective contributing with 50 to 100 RON does not seem much, or ordering a more expensive product like a plant wall (worth around 1000 lei), that money can mean the salary of an employee; if I manage to keep an employee working, that individual can provide for his family, this contributes further to the economic and social structures. It’s a positive chain of interactions. What helped me a lot, and there is no point in denying this, is measure 2⁴; when I received measure 2 (...) in December for me it was a breath of oxygen, it was the first night I slept almost 7 hours’ (I4, small-medium business, organizing events).

We notice again the high importance of external factors, in this case governmental support, completely outside the sphere of influence of the organization (external environment characteristics seem to impact stronger smaller organizations – in this

4 The interviewee refers to State aid scheme for SMEs called ‘Working Capital Grants’ established by Ordinance no. 130 of 31 July 2020 on some measures for granting financial support from non-reimbursable external funds, related to the Competitiveness Operational Program 2014-2020, in the context of the crisis of COVID-19.

case governmental regulation and policy). Concerning stakeholders, the situation is quite similar to the previous case (NGO) – whereas in that environment other non-profit organizations would offer support, given the nature of a business organization, the main stakeholders are the network of loyal clients which continue to support the business.

The size of the organization seems to be the main differentiating factor with respect to the effectiveness of the response/adaptation process.

‘The lesson learned refers to the communication part, because in crisis situations, in which colleagues react differently (calm, anxiety, the need for anticipation, more or less adaptation to change and ambiguity), there is never enough or too much communication. The reaction of the authorities often came at the last moment (e.g., decision regarding school opening), which led to a delay in communication from us to colleagues, given the need to make decisions as much as possible in real time. Saving data in the cloud has helped us significantly for information management. For example, we were in the process of organizing a business continuity plan, a plan that was just beginning and involved 3–5 years of developing the final solution. Certainly, the pandemic helped us to take steps to understand issues that were previously at the level of discussions/assumptions (e.g., remote access to data, collaboration with colleagues from other locations, online interactions and services). Concerning internal changes, we used the existing spare equipment stocks in each department to provide equipment for all employees, in the context of teams that use desktops instead of laptops, and made it easier for colleagues to access monitors that would work more efficiently at home. Concluding, certainly, the organization is better prepared to react to a crisis situation now than before the pandemic, but there are still aspects of both domestic and legal policies that need to be taken into account (e.g., extending the work from home procedure). Identifying alternative suppliers (external partners) is of great impact, considering that the existing suppliers may also have personnel problems and difficulties in fulfilling all their duties. We do not have complete solutions for the issues mentioned above, but there are areas we focus on to reduce the negative impact caused by this crisis’ (I2, multinational business, production and services).

The response indicates a well-developed, multinational organization with institutional mechanisms designed to protect the system in the event of such shocks; both the nature of the changes and their complexity (diversity, multi-level impact) is to be expected. External factors of influence remain the same – government regulations and their unpredictable character – but the overall influence of such factors is much reduced, mainly due to the internal resources that the organization can mobilize to respond to such challenges. We also notice a focus on efficiency of the response and learning component; the size of the organization offers a bigger buffer in countering

the negative effects of an adverse situation, and at least in this situation generates a much higher degree of resilience, exemplified by the pattern of the adaptation process – environmental scan, internal change, learning, focus on maintaining efficiency.

Lastly, we analyzed the extent to which gender plays any role in the overall response; from the data obtained, the only element highlighted by the respondents that can be related to a women leadership component would be values emphasized throughout the crises: empathy, compassion, collaboration, and team spirit.

‘I think that the empathic way of communication and the flexibility in solutions helped to manage the pandemic and exerted less additional pressure on the already existing one on each individual given by the epidemiological situation. From experience so far, being a woman helps in this approach to an average extent. Men on the other hand are more organized/structured in general, and so there could have been better structured and communicated actions sometimes’ (I3, industrial multinational business).

‘I do not consider that my gender has directly influenced the organization in times of crisis, but work experience and studies show that the female gender correlates with greater social involvement, especially in the activity of NGOs’ (I6, small non-profit).

‘I don’t think gender matters, I think actions and qualities are more important than gender. I don’t know how a male manager would have acted or what other measures a female person would have taken. I have no way of knowing, I think it depends a lot on the experience you have, on the relationship you have with the team and the subordinates and that you have built so far; I think this is very important, I don’t think gender matters that much’ (I4, small business).

We notice that along with the minimization of the influence of gender as a determining factor regarding the response to adversity (beyond a certain specific style of leadership that may or may not be determined directly by the gender of the leader, which we did not cover) there is a latent factor, namely experience. Management experience is indicated by most respondents as the main factor that generates a resilient response in crisis situations, along with good / quality interpersonal relationships with employees. Indirectly, these answers indicate the importance of leaders to create a favorable social environment within the organization, a positive factor for an effective response to crisis situations (according to the literature; Ledesma, 2014).

5. Conclusions

The character of this research was mostly exploratory, and, given the qualitative nature of the approach, the strong points provided refer to the specific details of the cases analyzed, which are highly different organizations and their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the data provided by the respondents we can indicate a series of patterns concerning the response and adaptation process at organizational

level, with the important observation that these results are only representative for the organizations analyzed.

Concerning the shocks faced by organizations, besides the pandemic, the major pressures were of financial nature and were coming from the external environment (not produced by internal changes like restructuring or leadership change); this is relevant for almost all organizations, thus it points to the importance of having financial stability and predictability to ensure the continuous development of the organizations.

Regarding the factors influencing the response to the adverse situation (adaptation process) a number of important variables are noted: the most evident is the size of the organization. Not surprisingly, organizations with a high level of maturity (corporations) have integrated complex internal mechanisms to respond to such shocks, the existence of these mechanisms being a condition for development, taking into account the age of the organization. In the case of these organizations, the response is highly formalized, it reflects the complexity and development of the organizations, focused on maintaining effectiveness levels and having sufficient levels of internal flexibility to mitigate the situation and transform it into a positive response (including learning), which translates into higher level of resilience. At the other end, in the case of small organizations, regardless of sector, the shock response is mainly focused on survival. The size of the organization is a positive mediating factor for large organizations and negative for small ones, as internal management and functioning systems have mostly a semi-formal character (at best), and in the case of shocks with a continuous character and with high degree of uncertainty (the pandemic is characterized by this) formal mechanisms (seen in large organizations) are practically non-existent, small organizations resorting to ad-hoc solutions, such as the first solution that works and keeps them afloat.

The importance of external factors in responding to shock is noteworthy. Two variables are important: (1) lack of influence/control on external factors – again large organizations fared better but highlighted the importance of external stakeholders; small organizations are more dependent and vulnerable – this indirectly underlines the importance of developing internal mechanisms for coping in crisis situations which would include the relation and support of stakeholders; and (2) the nature of these factors – decision makers, in this case the government and government policies and regulations in response to the crisis situation have the greatest influence on the response – both for large and small organizations, the impact being inversely proportional to the size of the organization. At the level of public policies, the lack of predictability in measures, the lack of transparency and poor communication are negative factors, while the introduction of direct (financial) support measures are positive factors (important or even essential); thus, creating a predictable, transparent and inclusive environment, in which stakeholders are in direct contact with government decisions is a significant element that can generate an effective response even in the case of small, fragile organizations. Zooming out, the nature of the external

environment seems to be decisive in organizational resilience, with importance increasing for smaller organizations.

The data collected indicates that gender seems to play a minor, insignificant role in responding to crisis situations, at least in the cases analyzed, instead organizational experience and style and value leadership (at the level of style and shared values) are positive influencing factors if focused on participation, empathy, transparency and collaboration.

References:

1. Ansell, C., Trondal, J. and Øgård, M., 'Turbulent Governance', in Ansell, C., Trondal, J. and Øgård, M. (eds.), *Governance in Turbulent Times*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 1–26.
2. Beardslee, W.R., 'The Role of Self-understanding in Resilient Individuals: The Development of a Perspective', 1989, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 59, no. 2, pp. 266–278.
3. Bennis, W., 'The Challenges of Leadership in the Modern World', 2007, *American Psychologist*, vol. 62, no. 1, pp. 2–5.
4. Bonanno, G.A., 'Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive after Extremely Aversive Events?', 2004, *American Psychologist*, vol. 59, no. 1, pp. 20–28.
5. Carver, C.S., 'Resilience and Thriving: Issues, Models, and Linkages', 1998, *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 245–266.
6. Conner, D.R., *Managing at the Speed of Change: How Resilient Managers Succeed and Prosper Where Others Fail*, New York: Random House, 1993.
7. Cooper, C., Flint-Taylor, J. and Pearn, M., *Building Resilience for Success: A Resource for Managers and Organizations*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
8. Eachus, P., 'Community Resilience: Is It Greater than the Sum of the Parts of Individual Resilience?', 2014, *Procedia Economics and Finance*, vol. 18, pp. 345–351.
9. Fletcher, D. and Sarkar, M., 'Psychological Resilience. A Review and Critique of Definitions, Concepts, and Theory', 2013, *European Psychologist*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 12–23.
10. Förster, C. and Ducheck, S., 'What Makes Leaders Resilient? An Exploratory Interview Study', 2017, *German Journal of Human Resource Management*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 281–306.
11. Förster, C. and Ducheck, S., 'Leaders' Resilience - A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Agenda', 2018, *Academy of Management Proceedings*, vol. 2018, no. 1.
12. Grotberg, E.H., 'Resilience Programs for Children in Disaster', 2001, *Ambulatory Child Health*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 75–83.
13. Holling, C.S., 'Resilience and the Stability of Ecological Systems', 1973, *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, vol. 4, pp. 1–23.
14. Ledesma, J., 'Conceptual Frameworks and Research Models on Resilience in Leadership', 2014, *Sage Open*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 1–8.
15. Masten, A.S., 'Ordinary Magic: Resilience Processes in Development', 2001, *American Psychologist*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 227–238.
16. Nishikawa, Y., *Thriving in the Face of Adversity: Perceptions of Elementary-school Principals*, La Verne, C.A.: University of La Verne, 2006.

17. O'Leary, V.E., 'Strength in the Face of Adversity: Individual and Social Thriving', 1998, *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 425–446.
18. Quick, J.C., Cooper, C.L., Nelson, D.L., Quick, J.D. and Gavin, J.H., 'Stress, Health, and Well-being at Work', in Greenberg, J. (ed.), *Organizational Behavior: The State of the Science*, Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2003, pp. 53–89.
19. Țiclău, T., Hințea, C. and Andrianu, B., 'Adaptive and Turbulent Governance. Ways of Governance that Foster Resilience. The Case of the COVID-19 Pandemic', 2020, *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, Special Issue, pp. 167–182.
20. Țiclău, T., Hințea, C. and Andrianu, B., 'Leadership rezilient. O scurtă analiză teoretică a conceptului' (Resilient Leadership. A Short Theoretical Analysis of the Concept), 2019, *Revista Transilvană de Științe Administrative*, vol. 2, no. 45, pp. 63–72.
21. Ungar, M., 'A Constructionist Discourse on Resilience: Multiple Contexts, Multiple Realities among At-risk Children and Youth', 2004, *Youth & Society*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 341–365.
22. Wright, M.O., Masten, A.S. and Narayan, A.J., 'Resilience Processes in Development: Four Waves of Research on Positive Adaptation in the Context of Adversity', in Goldstein, S. and Brooks, R.B. (eds.), *Handbook of Resilience in Children*, 2013, New York: Springer Science + Business Media, pp. 15–37.