

## EMPLOYEES' PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS IN ROMANIAN SMES

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**Annotation.** The paper addresses the perception of employees in Romanian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) regarding the way their leaders approached them during crisis periods, focusing on an important recent disruptive moment, respectively the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis tackles employees' perceptions about the support they received, their access to motivation measures, engagement, satisfaction, and degree of trust in the company during the pandemic. Based on a questionnaire-based survey, the paper advocates that during crisis periods, focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic, employees in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs benefited from greater support from their leaders, were more involved in the motivation measures implemented by their leaders and were more confident in their enterprises, compared to employees in autocratic led SMEs. On the contrary, employees' engagement and satisfaction were not influenced by the practised leadership style in the analysed SMEs during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** leadership, employees, crises, COVID-19, Romania.

**JEL classification:** M12, M20, M54, C83

### Introduction

A very complex and comprehensive field of study, leadership caught the attention of scholars worldwide over an extended period, intertwining, in a holistic manner, approaches from various areas like economics, psychology, business, and management. Benefiting from a vast amount of literature on diverse and broad topics, leadership is a highly investigated domain that still offers research opportunities worth exploring. Leadership-related aspects in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

might represent an example in this sense; these enterprises are less studied in the literature, especially when compared to large companies (Franco, Matos, 2015).

Considering leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2021), its investigation in SMEs is essential. Usually, SMEs are run by their founder-entrepreneurs, who are also the leaders of their enterprises. Thus, leadership becomes crucial for the survival and success of SMEs, significantly as these are influenced by the relationship between the leaders and their followers, respectively the employees (Al-Awlaqi *et al.*, 2021), and there might be situations of “leader identification as an antecedent of role-modelling leadership” (Balwant, Singh, 2023).

In a more specific regard, Chaganti *et al.* (2002) argue that SMEs’ performance, outlined by managerial decisions, operational output and financial indicators, is strongly linked to leadership; the leadership styles of SMEs’ leaders strongly impact the previously mentioned factors. Furthermore, the relationship between the leaders and followers – respectively, the employees – serves as a key driver of SMEs’ success. Unlike in large enterprises, in SMEs, this relationship tends to be or become more personal and direct (Hutchinson, 2018).

Thus, it is crucial to understand how leaders approach this relationship and how employees perceive it. In a more particular regard, how employees assess their leaders’ orientation towards them should be studied, depending on the different leadership styles they adopt. This represents the subject of the present paper, all framed in the context of crisis periods, focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic. This represented the most disruptive recent phenomenon societies faced worldwide (Aina *et al.*, 2023). Starting as a health crisis, it rapidly evolved into financial and economic crises, and its effects are still visible even five years after its emergence (Grosu *et al.*, 2025). Even more, the current global context is characterised by other challenging phenomena – like armed conflicts, climate changes, and economic and political instability, for instance – threatening the whole world to evolve into massive crises in the near future, with a direct negative impact on businesses (Mardosaite *et al.*, 2024). In such a scenario, understanding SMEs leaders’ behaviour, particularly their relationship with their employees in times of crises, becomes of topical importance.

SMEs, the pillar of any economy, are the most representative of the dynamics of the entrepreneurship phenomenon, contributing to economic growth, social inclusion, and a sustainable environment (Welsh *et al.*, 2019; Belas *et al.*, 2024). For instance, considering the European case, these account for over 99.8% of total enterprises, hiring 65.2% of persons employed and generating more than half of the value added by enterprises (Katsinis *et al.*, 2024). Ensuring an adequate internal and external environment becomes crucial for SMEs’ proper functioning. In order to achieve this, research is needed in various areas.

In such a context, the present paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview on how employees in Romanian SMEs perceive the way their leaders approached them during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is scarce literature on the leader-follower relationship in SMEs that usually focuses more on well-developed economies and less on developing economies (Breevaart *et al.*, 2015; Okuonzi, 2016).

Romania, as a region of investigation, belongs to the mentioned scenario and, even if it benefits from a burgeoning leadership-related literature (Aioanei, 2006; Cojocariu, 2012; Ogarca *et al.*, 2016; Mihai *et al.*, 2017; Mihai, 2019; Sanda, Stegaroiu, Sanda, 2022; Vac *et al.*, 2022; Vlase, Băluță, 2022; Radulescu *et al.*, 2023; Oprea *et al.*, 2024), there is a very scarce literature on the relationship between the leader and the follower.

Aiming to fill this gap, the present paper is structured into five main parts, including this introductory section. The next part of the paper puts forward a brief literature review that represents the ground for setting our study's hypotheses. The research methodology follows next, along with the main findings of our study and their implications. The paper ends with a series of final considerations, focusing on research limitations and future research actions.

## 1. Literature Review

Less studied in the leadership-related literature compared to large companies (Franco and Matos, 2015), SMEs offer diverse research opportunities for scholars. One of them, practically a poorly explored topic in the literature, refers to the relationship between the leader and the employees. Usually, no matter the size of the enterprise, the leadership literature tends to be focused more on the leader primarily because this represents the main "actor" in the leadership process (Mackenzie, 2012). However, leadership is not only about the leader (Owens, Hekman, 2016; Snaebjornsson, Vaiciukynaitė, 2016) but also about the followers – respectively, the employees (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014; Kong *et al.*, 2019; Get, Oprea, Miulescu, 2024).

Especially in the particular case of SMEs that face an increasingly competitive and dynamic environment, the potential of their employees becomes crucial for organisational success and for enhancing their value. Effective leadership plays a key role in valuing and motivating the employees, but also in fostering an understanding of their contributions to the overall performance of the SME, while the adopted leadership style influences the success of the leader-employee relationship, with direct effects on the general performance of the SME (Franco, Matos, 2015; Le *et al.*, 2023). Organisations that invest in developing leaders' leadership skills can achieve increased employee performance (Balakrishnan *et al.*, 2024).

Furthermore, according to Meirinhos *et al.* (2023), the overall performance of a company is influenced by communication, motivation, and the reward system, all framed in a proper leadership style. In a more specific regard, considering particular leadership styles, the same authors suggest that transformational leadership styles significantly positively impact organisational performance. Along the same line, Raeesi, Samsudin (2024) argue that transformational and transactional leadership styles positively influence employee engagement, directly affecting firms' performance. Employees' engagement and their level of job satisfaction, mediated by the use of transactional leadership style, are also influenced by the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of leaders (Aljumah, 2023). Leaders' intrinsic motivation (personal satisfaction, interest in tasks) and extrinsic motivation (recognition, external rewards) are supposed to influence how leaders apply and use their transactional leadership style. This leadership style, in turn, is associated with higher levels of job satisfaction for employees.

Therefore, it is assumed that the motivation of leaders can directly influence employee satisfaction by applying transactional leadership principles. Even more, considering the particular case of Chinese SMEs, Wang *et al.*, (2022) outline that authoritarian leadership styles foster employee followership behaviour, especially when employees share high cooperative goal interdependence and perceive their leaders as having high behavioural integrity. However, working in an environment dominated by fear might not be productive in the long term. For instance, according to Kelly, MacDonald (2019), the authoritarian leadership style is associated with the lowest solidarity. It determines very low job satisfaction and high levels of burnout in subordinates, which implicitly leads to low performance levels in companies.

Hamstra *et al.* (2014) argue that transactional leadership encourages prevention strategies and is associated with alertness, accuracy, and negative affectivity, while transformational leadership encourages promotion strategies and is associated with creativity, speed, and positive affectivity. Furthermore, transformational leadership positively impacts employees, manifested by the ability of transformational leaders to guide the organisation's staff and facilitate their professional evolution by delegating a high level of autonomy and responsibility based on employees' experience, skills and knowledge (Pungeršek *et al.*, 2020). Transformational leadership influences employees' performance through increased levels of empowerment and motivation, improving workplace discipline (Rahmi *et al.*, 2020).

In times of crises, taking as reference the COVID-19 pandemic, a study carried out by Sanda *et al.* (2022) reveals that leaders who develop a positive environment within their company, instil confidence and pride in employees, support their development, especially through personalised attention and implement a reward system for exemplary performance that can significantly enhance overall job satisfaction. Furthermore, by investigating the relationship between leadership and followers' work engagement and performance during the pandemic in the health sector, Oprea *et al.* (2024) outline a positive association, generally mediated by the satisfaction of followers' basic needs and not by work meaningfulness. Along the same line, Cremers, Curseu (2023) argue that even if the COVID-19 outbreak did not significantly affect perceptions of empowering leadership or perceived leadership support, teams that changed from empowering leadership reported corresponding variations in work satisfaction and effectiveness. In a more specific regard, Eichenauer *et al.*, (2022) study the types of leadership that employees assess as the most important during crisis periods (taking the case of the COVID-19 pandemic) and emphasise the communal leader behaviours in this sense as this type of leadership promotes collaboration, values employees' opinions, and supports innovative thinking.

Furthermore, Wadhawan *et al.* (2022) outline a strong connection between transformational leadership and employee performance by investigating employees in the IT sector during the COVID-19 outbreak. In the same context, by studying various SMEs active in the food retail sector in Australia, Thapa *et al.*, (2022) focus on the connection between transformational leadership and employee performance in the context of digital communication. Their study reveals that transformational leadership positively influences employee performance, which, in turn, represents a vital element in ensuring the success of any organisation.

## 2. Methodology

We constructed the present paper based on empirical field research, quantitative in nature, consisting of a questionnaire-based survey that started from the following research question: How did employees in Romanian SMEs perceive their leaders' orientation towards them during the pandemic?

Thus, aiming to provide a comprehensive answer to the previous question, our research envisaged the following objectives (RO):

- RO1: Analysing employees' perceptions about the support they received during the pandemic.
- RO2: Analysing employees' opinions about their access to motivation measures during the pandemic.
- RO3: Analysing employees' engagement, satisfaction and degree of trust in the company during the pandemic.

As the leadership style represents an essential factor in shaping employees' views about their role in organisations, all our investigation was developed in relationship with the perceived leadership style. In most cases, the selection of leadership styles in SMEs is constrained, usually by the limited available resources, making the leader-entrepreneurs lean on styles in their comfort zones to optimise efficiency and productivity (Le *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, as our research envisaged employees' perceptions and, considering that, according to a survey developed by the National Institute of Statistics (2024), only a quarter of the employees in Romania have a university degree, we focused our research on classical approaches to leadership styles, concentrating on behavioural theories.

More specifically, we started with two main leadership styles, following the Kurt Lewin model (Lewin *et al.*, 1939): autocratic and democratic. In a nutshell, the authoritarian style strongly focuses on tasks and promotes a low orientation towards employees, while the democratic style has a strong orientation on both tasks and employees.

However, based on the feedback received during the pilot testing of the questionnaire, to provide a more comprehensive view of leadership styles, at the same time still very easily recognisable for employees, we have finally focused on Vroom and Yetton's Normative Model (Vroom, Yetton, 1973). Thus, the following leadership styles were considered in the analysis:

- Autocratic, characterised by the fact that the leader makes the decisions and then tells the employees what he has decided.
- Consultative, which is described as the fact that the leader makes the decision on his own, but he also consults with the employees to gather opinions and input.
- Collaborative, representative for the leaders who work together with their employees to make decisions.

In such a framework, based on the state-of-the-art literature in the investigated area outlined in the previous section of the paper, we have formulated the hypotheses of our study:

- H1: In times of crisis, considering the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs are better supported by their leader compared to employees in autocratic-led SMEs.
- H2: In times of crisis, considering the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs tend to benefit more from motivation measures compared to employees in autocratic-led SMEs.
- H3: In times of crisis, considering the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees of consultative and/or collaborative leaders are more engaged and more satisfied compared to those of autocratic leaders.
- H4: In times of crisis, considering the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs are more confident in their enterprises compared to employees in autocratic-led SMEs.

The questionnaire-based survey was carried out online during the July 2023 – February 2024 time span. The questionnaire was developed in accordance with the objectives of the study, and an initial version of it was discussed with scholars in charge of teaching and researching leadership. The pilot test was performed on a sample of three persons. The final version of the questionnaire included 17 questions, both identification-related and correlated with the research objectives. Google Forms was used for questionnaire development, and this was administered via online means such as, for instance, employee

groups in social media. Only 122 valid answers were registered, leading to a response rate of 8%. A representation of the sample's structure is outlined in *Table 1*.

**Table 1. Sample's Structure**

<b>Residential environment</b>	urban	73	59.84%
	rural	49	40.16%
<b>Gender</b>	female	91	74.59%
	male	31	25.41%
<b>Age</b>	<30 years	28	22.95%
	30-39 years	36	29.51%
	40-49 years	44	36.07%
	50-60 years	11	9.02%
	>60 years	3	2.46%
<b>Educational attainment</b>	high school	23	18.85%
	university-bachelor	46	37.70%
	university-master	38	31.15%
	university-doctorate	7	5.74%
	postgraduate	8	6.56%

Source: developed by the authors.

It can be observed that most of the respondents were females (75%), residing in urban areas (60%), aged between 40 and 49 years old (36%), and having a bachelor's degree (38%). Respondents with a master's degree were also well represented in our sample, respectively 31%. In terms of age, the category 30-39 years closely follows the hierarchy with a share of almost 30%, outlining a sample of experienced people with a strong working background. The information provided by the respondents in the sample via the questionnaire-based survey was analysed using the SPSS Software, and its interpretation is further depicted in the next section of the paper.

### **3. Results**

Our research shows that employees working in SMEs with a consultative and/or collaborative leadership style benefited from great support from their leaders during the pandemic. Contrastingly, employees working in SMEs characterised by an autocratic leadership style had low support from their leaders during the pandemic.

From an econometrical perspective, following the measurement of the correlation between the two variables (with non-parametric methods, the two variables being ordinal qualitative) resulted a positive correlation of medium intensity, statistically significant at a significance level of 0.01.

In a more particular regard, in order to test the existence of significant differences between the support received by employees during the pandemic, based on the leadership style employed in the SMEs, the non-parametric Kruskall-Wallis test was applied (*Table 3*). The results show statistically significant differences in the support employees received from their leaders, depending on the leader's leadership style, at a significance level of 1%.

Moreover, this support increases with the accentuation of the democratic character of the leader's leadership style, expressed in our analysis through consultative and collaborative leadership styles.

In a nutshell, the leadership style significantly influenced the leader's support to their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 2. The Correlation Between the Support Employees Received During the Pandemic and the Implemented Leadership Style**

Correlations			
		Leadership_style_3	Support_from_leader
Kendall's tau_b	Leadership_style_3	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	122
	Support_from_leader	Correlation Coefficient	.493*
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	122
Spearman's rho	Leadership_style_3	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	122
	Support_from_leader	Correlation Coefficient	.540*
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	122

Note: the variable Leadership\_style was considered with three variants: 1 = autocratic leadership style, 2 = consultative leadership style, 3 = collaborative leadership style. \*. Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: developed by the authors.

**Table 3. Kruskall-Wallis Test Regarding the Support Employees Received, Based on the Implemented Leadership Style During the Pandemic**

Ranks			
	Leadership_style_3	N	Mean Rank
Support_from_leader	Autocratic	33	36.86
	Consultative	41	58.65
	Collaborative	48	80.88
	Total	122	
<b>Test Statistics<sup>a,b</sup></b>			
	Support_from_leader		
Chi-Square	35.344		
Df	2		
Asymp. Sig.	.000		

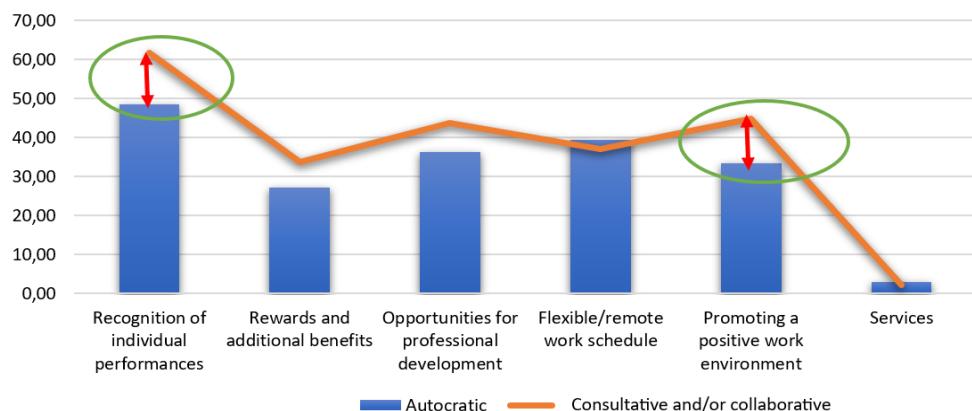
Note: a. Kruskal Wallis Test; b. Variable Grouping: Leadership\_style\_3.

Source: developed by the authors.

Thus, considering the above information, the first hypothesis of our study is confirmed. In times of crisis, considering the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs are better supported by their leader compared to employees in autocratic-led SMEs.

When analysing the relationship between the leadership style, as perceived by the investigated employees, and the degree to which the leader applied motivation measures during the COVID-19 crisis, resulted that, in most cases, different motivation measures were used to a greater extent in consultative and/or collaborative led SMEs, compared to autocratic led SMEs (Figure 1). Notable differences can be

observed in terms of motivation measures related to the recognition and appreciation of individual performance and to those related to the promotion of a positive, balanced work environment.



Source: developed by the authors.

Figure 1. Leadership Style and Motivation-Related Measures During the Pandemic

A higher degree of implementing motivation measures by consultative and/or collaborative leaders, compared to autocratic ones – although the differences are small – was also noted in terms of motivation measures related to additional rewards and benefits and to creating opportunities for professional development.

On the contrary, in the case of the motivation measures aimed at ensuring flexible working hours or remote working conditions, as well as those related to the granting of access to various services, it was noted that consultative and/or collaborative leaders applied these types of measures to a lesser degree than autocratic leaders – although the differences are minimal.

In a more particular regard, when investigating employees' involvement in the measures proposed and applied by the leaders to motivate their team, our econometrical analysis reveals that in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs, a higher degree of employees' involvement in the implemented motivation measures is ensured. Thus, employees in such companies tend to benefit more from motivation measures. Along the same line, in autocratic-led SMEs, a lower degree of employees' involvement in the promoted motivation measures is outlined.

Following the measurement of the correlation between the two variables (with non-parametric methods, the two variables being ordinal qualitative) resulted a positive correlation of medium intensity, statistically significant at a significance level of 0.01. (Table 4)

To test the existence of significant differences between the degree of employees' involvement in the measures proposed and implemented by leaders with different leadership styles to motivate the team, the non-parametric Kruskall-Wallis test was applied (Table 5). The results show that there are statistically significant differences in terms of employees' involvement in the motivation measures adopted by leaders, depending on the leader's leadership style.

**Table 4. The Correlation Between Employees' Involvement in the Applied Motivation Measures and the Leadership Style During the Pandemic**

Correlations				
			Leadership_style_3	Implication_in_motiv_measures
Kendall's tau_b	Leadership_style_3	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.527*
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	122	122
	Implication_in_motiv_measures	Correlation Coefficient	.527*	1.000
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	122	122
Spearman's rho	Leadership_style_3	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.567*
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	122	122
	Implication_in_motiv_measures	Correlation Coefficient	.567*	1.000
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	122	122

Note: The variable Leadership\_style was considered with three variants: 1 = autocratic leadership style, 2 = consultative leadership style, 3 = collaborative leadership style. \*. Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: developed by the authors.

**Table 5. Kruskall-Wallis Test Regarding Employees' Involvement in the Applied Motivation Measures Following the Implemented Leadership Style in the SMSs During the Pandemic**

Ranks				
		Leadership_style_3	N	Mean Rank
Implication_in_motiv_measures	Autocratic	33	37.33	
	Consultative	41	55.87	
	Collaborative	48	82.93	
	Total	122		
Test Statistics <sup>a,b</sup>				
	Implication_in_motiv_measures			
Chi-Square	39.028			
Df	2			
Asymp. Sig.	.000			

Note: a. Kruskal Wallis Test; b. Variable Grouping: Leadership\_style\_3.

Source: developed by the authors.

Moreover, this degree of involvement increases with the accentuation of the democratic character of the leader's leadership style, expressed in our study through consultative and collaborative behaviours.

Therefore, the leadership style practised in the analysed SMEs has a significant influence on the degree of employees' involvement in the motivation measures implemented in the enterprise.

Thus, considering the above information, the second hypothesis of our study is also confirmed. In times of crisis, considering the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs tend to benefit more from motivation measures compared to employees in autocratic-led SMEs.

With regards to employees' level of engagement and satisfaction, our analysis did not reveal any correlation between this and the leadership practised in the analysed SMEs during the pandemic. Applying Spearman and Kendall correlation coefficients, the results indicated that the two variables are not significantly correlated, with the values of the two indicators being very close to zero.

**Table 6. The Correlation Between Employees' Engagement and Satisfaction and the Leadership Style Practiced in SMEs During the Pandemic**

Correlations			Leadership_style_3	Empl_eng_satis
Kendall's tau_b	Leadership_style_3	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	<b>.016</b>
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.	.840
		N	122	122
	Empl_eng_satis	Correlation Coefficient	<b>.016</b>	1.000
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.840	.
		N	122	122
Spearman's rho	Leadership_style_3	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	<b>.018</b>
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.	.846
		N	122	122
	Empl_eng_satis	Correlation Coefficient	<b>.018</b>	1.000
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.846	.
		N	122	122

Note: the variable Leadership\_style was considered with three variants: 1 = autocratic leadership style, 2 = consultative leadership style, 3 = collaborative leadership style.

Source: developed by the authors.

**Table 7. Kruskall-Wallis Test Regarding Employees' Engagement and Satisfaction and the Practised Leadership Style in SMEs During the Pandemic**

Ranks			
	Leadership_style_3	N	Mean Rank
Empl_eng_satis	Autocratic	33	61.08
	Consultative	41	60.80
	Collaborative	48	62.39
	Total	122	
<b>Test Statistics<sup>a,b</sup></b>			
	Empl_eng_satis		
Chi-Square	.055		
Df	2		
Asymp. Sig.	.973		

Note: a. Kruskal Wallis Test; b. Variable Grouping: Leadership\_style\_3.

Source: developed by the authors.

Furthermore, the results of the non-parametric Kruskall-Wallis test also indicate that there are no statistically significant differences between employees' level of engagement and satisfaction depending on the leadership style practised in the analysed SMEs. (Table 7)

Thus, it can be deduced that the third hypothesis of our study was rejected; in times of crisis, considering the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees' engagement and satisfaction were not influenced by the practised leadership style in the analysed SMEs.

**Table 8. The Correlation Between Employees' Confidence in Their Enterprises and the Practiced Leadership Style During the COVID-19 Outbreak**

<b>Correlations</b>				
			Leadership_style_3	Trust_in_company
Kendall's tau_b	Leadership_style_3	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.350*
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	122	122
	Trust_in_company	Correlation Coefficient	.350*	1.000
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	122	122
Spearman's rho	Leadership_style_3	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.378*
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	122	122
	Trust_in_company	Correlation Coefficient	.378*	1.000
		Mr. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	122	122

*Note:* The variable Leadership\_style was considered with three variants: 1 = autocratic leadership style, 2 = consultative leadership style, 3 = collaborative leadership style. \*. Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Source:* developed by the authors.

However, employees' level of confidence in their enterprise was influenced by the type of leadership developed in the analysed SMEs, as revealed by our study. When analysing the intensity of the link between the practised leadership style and the degree of employees' trust in their organisations, a relatively weak but statistically significant positive correlation emerged between the two variables. This shows that an increase in the degree of democracy adopted by the leader in his leadership style – expressed through consultative or collaborative behaviours – is associated, although relatively weakly, with an increase in the level of trust that employees manifest towards their organisations. (Table 8)

Furthermore, to test the existence of significant differences between employees' confidence in their enterprise and the practised leadership style, the nonparametric Kruskall-Wallis test was applied (Table 9). The results show that there are statistically significant differences in the trust that employees have in the company depending on the leadership style, at a significance level of 1%. Moreover, this trust increases with the accentuation of the democratic character of the leadership style, expressed through consultative or collaborative approaches.

**Table 9. Kruskall-Wallis Test Regarding Employees' Trust in Their Company, Based on the Practiced Leadership Style During the Pandemic**

Ranks			
	Leadership_style_3	N	Mean Rank
Trust_in_company	Autocratic	33	45.05
	Consultative	41	59.49
	Collaborative	48	74.53
	Total	122	
Test Statistics <sup>a,b</sup>			
	Trust_in_company		
Chi-Square	17.352		
Df	2		
Asymp. Sig.	.000		

Note: a. Kruskal Wallis Test. b. Variable Grouping: Leadership\_style\_3.

Source: developed by the authors.

In summary, the practised leadership style in the analysed SMEs during the pandemic significantly influenced employees' trust in their organisation.

Thus, the last hypothesis of our study was confirmed, outlining that, in times of crisis, considering the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs are more confident in their enterprises compared to employees in autocratic-led SMEs.

## Conclusions

At the forefront of any economy, the SME sector represents the most significant means for assessing the dynamics of the entrepreneurial phenomenon in a country. SMEs make an important contribution to economic and social growth and development, and at the same time, they are the most exposed and vulnerable to disruptive factors. Crises periods, no matter their nature, bring important challenges to all types of companies, regardless of their size. However, SMEs usually face these challenges more pronouncedly than their bigger counterparts. To better face and deal with all the challenges derived from crisis periods, leader-entrepreneurs' input is essential. However, they will mean nothing without their team and, respectively, their employees.

In such a context, aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of how employees in Romanian SMEs perceived the way their leaders approached them during the COVID-19 pandemic, our research focused on the analysis of employees' perceptions about the support they received, their access to motivation measures and their engagement, satisfaction and degree of trust in the company during the pandemic.

The research consisted of a questionnaire-based survey among 122 employees in Romanian SMEs. The respondents were mostly females, from the urban environment, aged between 40 and 49 years old, having a bachelor's degree.

Considering the exploratory character of our research, this revealed that the leadership style significantly influenced the support the leaders offered to their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employees in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs benefited from greater support from their leaders during the pandemic than employees in autocratic-led SMEs. Furthermore, when deepening the idea of the support received from the perspective of the implemented motivation measures in the

enterprises, our research revealed that in times of crisis, considering the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs benefited more from motivation measures, compared to employees in autocratic led SMEs. Different motivation measures were promoted during the pandemic in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs, such as recognition and appreciation of individual performance, promotion of a positive, balanced work environment, rewards and benefits, and opportunities for professional development.

On the contrary, in autocratic-led SMEs, motivation measures aimed at ensuring flexible working hours or remote working conditions, as well as those related to granting access to various services, were better applied. However, in terms of employees' involvement in the measures implemented by the leaders to motivate their team, in autocratic-led SMEs, a lower degree of employee involvement was revealed by our study, especially when compared with employees working in consultative and/or collaborative-led SMEs. In addition, employees in these SMEs are more confident in their enterprises than those in autocratic-led SMEs.

Based on four hypotheses, correlated with the research objectives, our study confirmed three of them, as previously outlined. The third hypothesis of our study, referring to employees' level of engagement and satisfaction, was rejected. Thus, our study advocates the fact that in times of crisis, considering the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees' engagement and satisfaction were not influenced by the practised leadership style in the analysed SMEs.

Our research, implicitly this paper, contributes to the enrichment of the current literature on leadership in Romania while also adding to the poor overall literature on leadership studies from employees' perspectives. Furthermore, considering its practical implications, our research shows the importance of the adopted leadership style during crisis periods in SMEs from the employees' perspective. During crises, employees in democratic-led enterprises, analysed in our study from the perspective of consultative and collaborative approaches, are more supported by their leaders, more motivated, more involved in the implemented motivation measures and more confident in their enterprises.

These leadership styles bring more benefits to the employees, which is essential in times of crisis, especially for SMEs. SMEs depend very much on their employees, and ensuring their security and motivation becomes crucial during crisis periods in order to make them bear the entire context with their leader-entrepreneur. Our study, even though it was exploratory, revealed that employees get more benefits during crisis periods in SMEs based on democratic principles.

However, our study has some limitations. Maybe the most representative refers to the magnitude of the investigated sample that led to the lack of representativity, respectively to the impossibility of results generalisation. Nevertheless, this exploratory study comprehensively sets the premises for future research that is more complex in nature and representative at the national level for the SME sector.

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## DARBUOTOJŲ POŽIŪRIS Į VADOVAVIMĄ RUMUNIJOS SMULKAUS IR VIDUTINIO VERSLO IMONĖSE KRIZIŲ METU

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**Santrauka.** Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas Rumunijos mažųjų ir vidutinių įmonių (MVĮ) darbuotojų požiūris į vadovų bendravimą su jais krizių metu, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant neseniai įvykusiam svarbiam trikdžiui, t. y. COVID-19 pandemijai. Analizuojamas darbuotojų suvokimas apie gautą paramą, galimybę naudotis motyvavimo priemonėmis, darbuotojų įsitrukimą, pasitenkinimą ir pasitikėjimo įmone laipsnį pandemijos metu. Remiantis anketine apklausa straipsnyje teigama, kad krizių laikotarpiais, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant COVID-19 pandemijai, konsultuojančių ir (arba) bendradarbiaujančių MVĮ darbuotojai gavo didesnę paramą iš savo vadovų, labiau dalyvavo vadovų įgyvendinamose motyvavimo priemonėse ir labiau pasitikėjo savo įmonėmis, palyginti su autokratiškai vadovaujamų MVĮ darbuotojais. Priešingai, darbuotojų įsitrukimui ir pasitenkinimui pandemijos metu analizuotose MVĮ taikytas vadovavimo stilius neturėjo įtakos.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** vadovavimas; darbuotojai; krizės; COVID-19; Rumunija.