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STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE FUNCTIONING OF MICRO-ENTERPRISES IN THE SILESIAN VOIVODESHIP

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Purpose: The objective of the paper is to study the impact of the global coronavirus pandemic on the standing of micro-enterprises in the Silesian Voivodeship.
Design/methodology/approach: A study sample of 120 micro-enterprises from the Silesian Voivodeship has been selected. The study methods such as an interview and a survey have been used. A questionnaire has been used as a tool. The properly completed surveys have been obtained from 43 enterprises.
Findings: It has been established that depending on the specific nature of a given enterprise and the area in which it operates, enterprises are, to varying degrees, susceptible to the impact of adverse factors related to the emergence of the global coronavirus pandemic, which, in turn, results in the differences in the standing of these enterprises.
Research limitations/implications: In view of the small study sample, the studies carried out do not create a complete picture of the impact of the pandemic on micro-enterprises in the Silesian Voivodeship. They are rather a contribution to further studies. These should be conducted on the basis of a larger study sample.
Originality/value: The global coronavirus pandemic which affected the world in the years 2019-2022 has left a strong mark on many aspects of human functioning, including pursuing business activity. It is important to gain knowledge on the impact of pandemic-related restrictions on the functioning of micro-enterprises in order to develop mechanisms to mitigate the adverse effects on entrepreneurship based on micro-enterprises.

Keywords: small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), micro-enterprise, global pandemic.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The global coronavirus pandemic, which started in the first quarter of 2019, has left its mark on many areas of human functioning, both individually and in a broader sense. Among other things, the economic model developed and established over the years has been destabilised. The adverse effects of the pandemic have been strongly felt among entrepreneurs associated with small and medium-sized entrepreneurship.

This article is an attempt to answer the question of how the standing of small and medium-sized enterprises has changed during the pandemic.

2. Specific nature of small and medium-sized enterprises

One of the manifestations of entrepreneurship is the pursuit of business activity through small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Belonging to the SME sector is determined by the size of an entity. Commission Regulation (EC) No 800/2008 defines the criteria for determining whether an enterprise belongs to the SME sector. These determinants include (SME Sector..., 2022):

- number of employees employed,
- amount of annual financial results.

SMEs employ up to 250 employees and their annual turnover is below EUR 50 million.

The above determinants, the meeting of which determines belonging to the sector of small and medium-sized enterprises, are also the criterion for the internal division of SMEs into the following groups:

- micro-enterprises – entities employing fewer than 10 employees and achieving annual net revenue of up to EUR 2 million,
- small enterprises – employing no more than 50 employees, with annual net revenue of up to EUR 10 million,
- medium-sized enterprises – employing fewer than 250 employees, while their annual revenue may not exceed EUR 43 million.

The largest group are micro-enterprises. They account for more than 99% of all enterprises. In the Silesian Voivodeship, there are slightly more than 473, 203 registered micro-enterprises of various branches in the industrial, service and agricultural sectors (Poland in figures, 2022). The percentage distribution of micro-enterprises by economic sector is presented in Figure 1.

Micro-enterprises are a specific group of enterprises. The nature of their activities has both strengths and weaknesses (Daszkiewicz, 2004; Dylkiewicz, 2008). The former include the significant flexibility of entrepreneurs running micro-enterprises. This flexibility makes it possible to modify the operating profile or even completely change the industry, if necessary. On the other hand, the low inertia in responding to changes taking place in the environment in which they operate results in the fact that adaptation to new conditions may take place quickly (Klimek, 2015; Nehring, 2012).

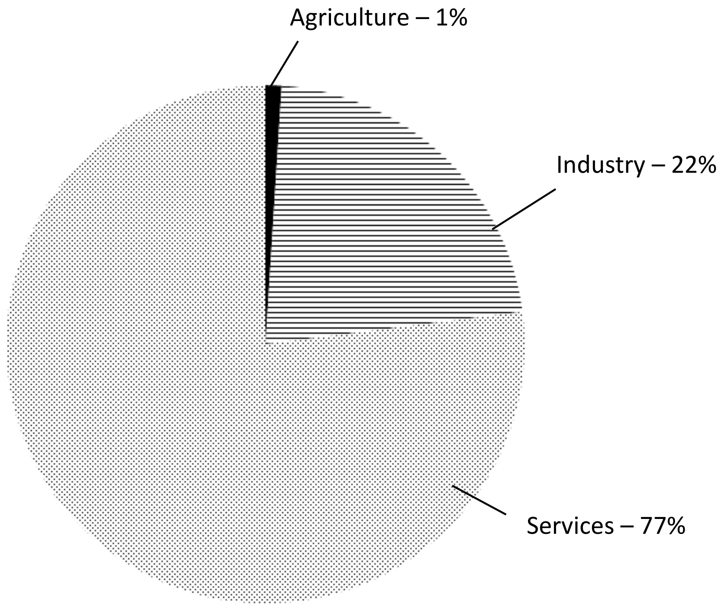


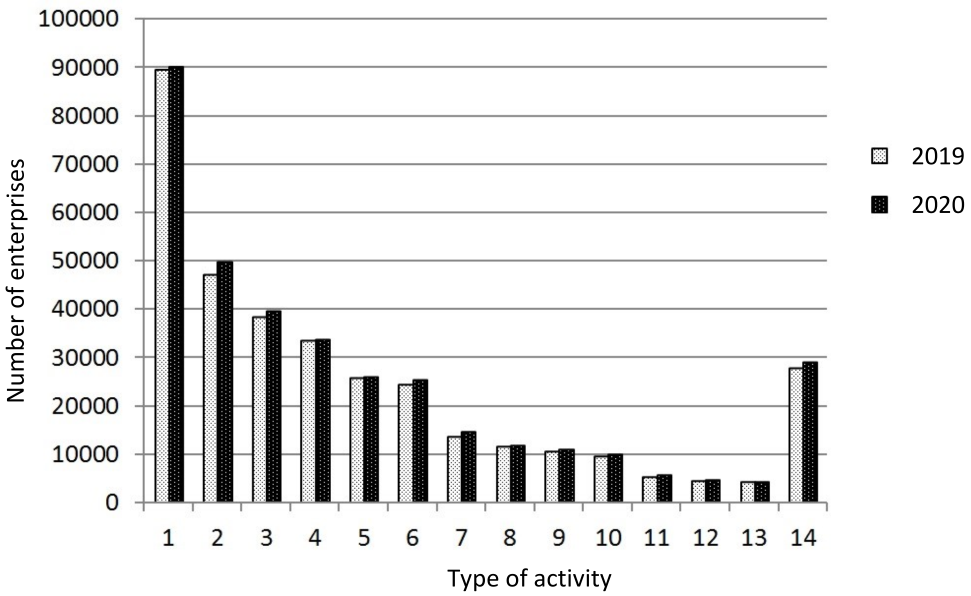
Figure 1. The percentage distribution of micro-enterprises by economic sector in the Silesian Voivodeship. As of the beginning of 2021. (Own elaboration based on Poland in figures, 2022).

Micro-enterprises are often one-person or family undertakings, the motivation to work is high and the costs of workplace(s) are relatively low (Smolarek, 2015; Safin, 2002).

The weakness of the functioning of micro-enterprises is the fact of financing them from own funds of owners, which, in turn, makes it difficult to develop a competitive position among other entities operating in a similar sphere (Smolarek and Dzieńdziora, 2011; Siuta-Tokarska, 2008). A certain trap for persons who are not strategically prepared for pursuing business in the form of a micro-enterprise is the great ease of setting up such an entity. The lack of a prepared plan covering a broader time perspective is most often the reason for the failure of a project (Oniszczuk-Jarząbek, and Gutowski, 2008). For this reason, the fate of a micro-enterprise is determined over the first year. In view of the improper preparation, only 60% of companies are able to get through this time.

Small and medium-sized enterprises serve basically every area of economic activity, and the popular form of entrepreneurship, i.e. running SMEs and, in particular, micro-enterprises, is a reason for which the number of registered entities in the Silesian Voivodeship is constantly growing.

Figure 2 presents the quantitative occupancy of selected types of activities by micro-enterprises in the Silesian Voivodeship over the years 2019-2020. It should be stressed here that each of the given categories of economy is extensive and includes a number of minor fields.



Key: 1 – commercial activities and repair workshops, 2 – construction, 3 – scientific and technical activities, 4 – industrial processing, 5 – transport and warehouse activities, 6 – medical assistance, 7 – information and communication, 8 – financial and insurance activities, 9 – accommodation and gastronomy, 10 – educational activities, 11 – real estate activities, 12 – cultural and entertainment activities, 13 – agricultural, horticultural, fishing activities 14 – other categories.

Figure 2. Comparison of changes in the number of micro-enterprises operating in specific areas in the period of 2019-2020. Own elaboration based on: “Poland in figures”, 2022.

3. Selected study sample, method and tool applied

120 companies in the Silesian Voivodeship have been selected for the analysis aimed at determining the impact of the coronavirus pandemic situation on the functioning of micro-enterprises. The selected enterprises represented three sectors of the economy: service, industrial and agricultural.

The study methods such as an interview and a survey have been used. A questionnaire has been used as a tool. It contains 16 questions regarding the following issues:

1. Age of the company owner (below 20 years, 21-30, 31-40, more than 40).
2. Whether the enterprise is the only source of income for the entrepreneur.
3. Number of employees employed.
4. The length of the enterprise’s operation in the market (below 1 year, from 1 to 5 years.
5. In which sector of the economy the micro-enterprise operates: service, production/ industrial or agricultural.
6. In what field the activity is pursued.

7. Whether the company has been operating in the indicated field since the beginning of its activity, or in the past, before the pandemic, there was a change of industry; if so, in which sector of the economy it operated and what was the profile of the company.
8. What is the method of financing a micro-enterprise from the pre-pandemic period: whether the entrepreneur uses own capital or relies on external sources of financing (EU funds or funds from the state budget, or other funds).
9. Whether the enterprise uses non-financial external support (training, professional consulting, business incubators) (Martin, and Staniec, 2018).
10. Whether the company recorded a decrease in revenue in any months of the year preceding the pandemic; if so, in what period(s) it happened and what the level of the decrease was: below 25% or exceeding 25% of revenue in the same period of the previous year.
11. Whether the company has recorded a decrease in revenue during the global pandemic; if so, in what period(s) and what the level of the decrease was: below 25% or exceeding 25% of revenue in the same period of the previous year.
12. Whether the company applied for financial support for companies affected during the coronavirus pandemic, and whether the company used facilities in the payment of taxes (European Funds Portal, 2021).
13. What were the main burdens during the pandemic: lack of available raw materials/semi-finished products/parts, impossibility to directly distribute products/services, impossibility to perform work in the place indicated by the client, rise in prices of materials/raw materials/products or others – for individual categories, it was necessary to indicate the degree of burdensomeness, using the four-point scale.
14. Whether the enterprise changed its business profile during the pandemic, if so, to what kind of.
15. Whether the entrepreneur, during the pandemic, was forced to close the enterprise; whether burdens resulting from pandemic restrictions were the main reason for ceasing business activity.
16. What was the general, subjective feeling about the impact of the pandemic on the functioning of the enterprise and how this impact translated into the quality of life of the employee(s) in specific areas of life:
    - impact on the feeling of insecurity of own well-being,
    - impact on the sense of insecurity of the existence of the close relatives,
    - impact on well-being resulting from concern about the employees,
    - impact on the feeling of lack of external support,
    - impact on the feeling of the lack of freedom,
    - impact on relationships with close relatives.

The answer had to be given by selecting one option from the five-point scale for each area (very adverse impact, adverse impact, no impact, positive impact, very positive impact).

Most of the questions in the survey were closed, the answer was selected from a list. One question, concerning the determination of factors perceived as burdensome for running a micro-enterprise during the pandemic period, included an additional option, allowing to enter own proposal for an answer. Where it was necessary for the respondent to determine the degree of severity of a specific factor, he/she used the proposed grade scale when answering.

Answers to the questions included in the survey were possible to obtain from 43 entities. The names of the enterprises have not been provided, the basic identification is the area in which they operate.

In several cases, the choice of answers to specific questions proposed by the author of the survey turned out to be insufficient and entrepreneurs, answering the questions, added their own option of the answer. This was due to the specificity and originality of certain solutions applied by them when pursuing business activity.

4. Results, discussion of study results

The subject of the study was to determine the impact of restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic on the standing of micro-enterprises in the Silesian Voivodeship. The enterprises from which answers were obtained on the basis of the survey are dominated by those which, in addition to the owner, had 2 to 5 employees. These companies accounted for 61% of the respondents. 21% are those being one-person initiatives, while 18% are entities employing from 6 to 9 employees.

The distribution by economic sectors is as follows: micro-enterprises representing the services sector are dominant – 84%, the remaining 16% are those in the production sector. Among the surveyed, there are no enterprises from the agricultural sector.

Table 1 shows a comparison of the surveyed enterprises (business profile), the number of persons employed and the period in which these enterprises operate, provided in years.

Table 1.
Comparison of the surveyed enterprises in terms of business profile, number of employees and period of activity

No.	Sector	Type of activity	Number of employees (owner + employees)	Period of operation in years
1	SERVICES	photographic studio	1+3	more than 20
2		photographic service	1	10-20
3		garden services	1+7	10-20
4		computer graphics	1	1-5
5		computer graphics	1	5-10
6		graphic design	1	5-10
7		beauty salon, tattoo studio	1+2	10-20
8		sale of flowers	1+1	more than 20
9		sale of flowers	1+3	more than 20
10		food and industrial trade	1+4	more than 20
11		food trade	1+3	more than 20
12		transport services – emptying cellars	1+3	5-10
13		transport of goods and furniture (removals)	1+4	1-5
14		repair of electronic devices	1+1	10-20
15		computer services	1+1	more than 20
16		interior finishing services	1+2	more than 20
17		repair workshop	1+5	more than 20
18		tyre services	1+1	more than 20
19		wellness and spa	1+2	10-20
20		hairdresser	1	10-20
21		hairdresser	1+2	5-10
22		construction services	1+5	10-20
23		roofing services	1+2	more than 20
24		heating services	1+2	10-20
25		repair of instruments	1	more than 20
26		upholstery services	1+1	more than 20
27		cleaning of carpets	1+1	10-20
28		tailoring and knitting services	1	more than 20
29		installation of lightning protection systems	1+2	10-20
30		installation of garage doors	1+3	10-20
31		work at heights	1+5	
32		installation of alarm systems	1+1	5-10
33		translation of text into a foreign language	1	1-5
34	INDUSTRY AND PROCESSING	production and installation of window mosquito nets	1+6	1-5
35		production and installation of metal garages	1+8	10-20
36		production and installation of fences	1+7	5-10
37		bakeries	1+4	more than 20
38		construction works	1+4	10-20
39		construction and finishing works	1+5	more than 20
40		spring winding	1+3	more than 20
41		bakeries and confectionery	1+5	more than 20
42		artistic blacksmithing	1+1	more than 20
43		ironwork/turnery	1	more than 20

Own elaboration.

For 91% of entrepreneurs, their company is their only source of income, 9% have alternative sources.

Nine entrepreneurs used external financial support in the pre-pandemic period (this accounts for 20% of the total number of respondents), the remaining companies are financed from own capital (Figure. 3).

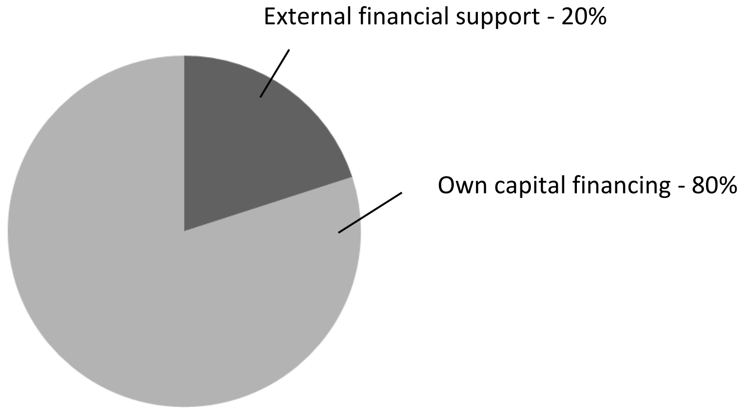


Figure 3. Method of financing of the surveyed micro-enterprises in the pre-pandemic period. Own elaboration.

The enterprises that used external financial assistance included: one service company operating for 1-5 years, three existing in the range of 5-10 years and pursuing service activities, four operating for 10-20 years in the services sector, and one enterprise from the production sector operating in the market for 10-20 years.

The chart presented in Figure 4 shows the interest of the surveyed entrepreneurs in using non-financial support before the pandemic. In drawing up the chart, the entities which used this support at least once have been taken into account.

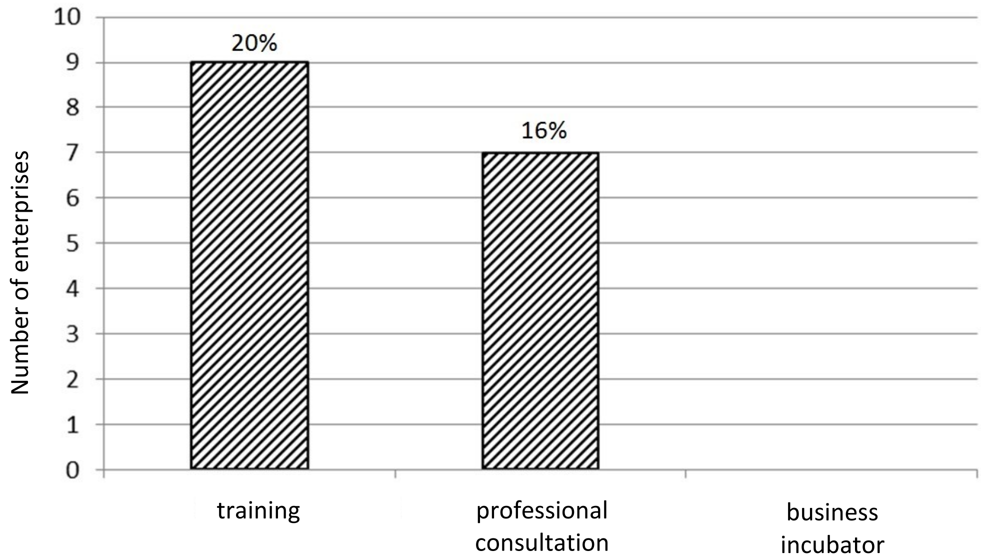


Figure 4. Use of non-financial external assistance by the surveyed enterprises before the pandemic period. Own elaboration.

20% of enterprises used nonfinancial support such as training. These were enterprises from the service industry – one existing in the market for 1-5 years, three for 5-10 years, and five operating for 10-20 years. None of the surveyed companies from the production sector used training. 16% of service micro-enterprises used professional consultation: one operating for 1-5 years, two for 5-10 years, two for 10-20 years and two from the production sector: one existing 1-5 years in the market and the other operating for 10-20 years.

Based on the results of the survey, a comparison of the change in the number of enterprises which experienced a decrease in revenue in 2019, preceding the pandemic (a decrease in relation to the same period of the previous year) to the number of enterprises that recorded a decrease in revenue in the year of the beginning of the pandemic (2020) has been made. This comparison is illustrated in Figure 5.

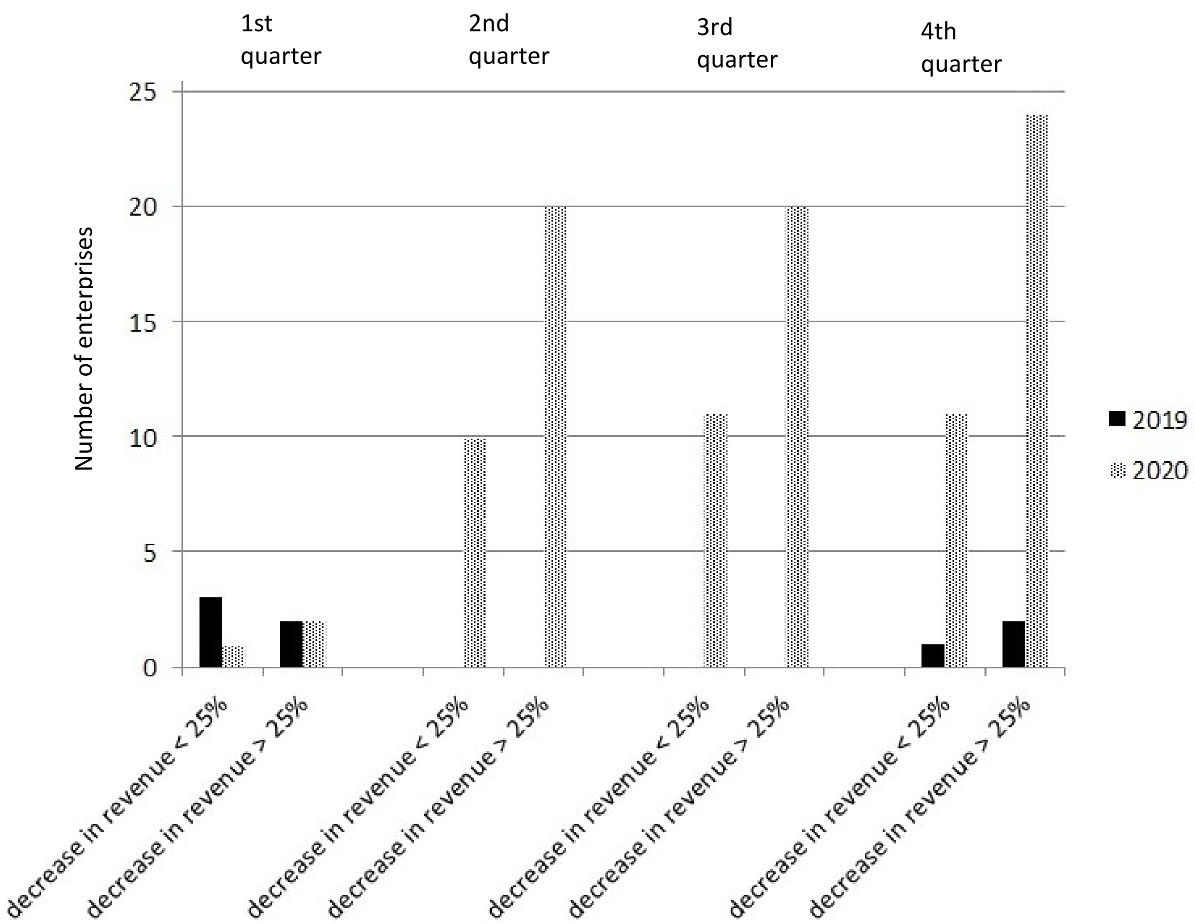


Figure 5. Comparison of the number of enterprises which recorded decreases in revenue in the year preceding the global pandemic and those which recorded decreases during the pandemic.
Own elaboration.

The 2nd, 3rd and 4th quarters of 2020 are marked by an increase in the number of enterprises recording a decrease in revenue. In 2019 - preceding the pandemic, in the 1st and 4th quarters there were also enterprises which experienced a decrease in revenue when compared to the same periods of the previous year. In the 1st quarter of 2019, a decrease of less than 25% affected three enterprises, a decrease of more than 25% affected two entrepreneurs.

In the 4th quarter, one micro-enterprise experienced a decrease below 25%, above this value – 2.

A garden service enterprise is in a specific situation. The basic activity of this enterprise, in the months from December to February, due to its specificity, is suspended. This situation recurs periodically every year (there are deviations, determined by various factors, but these are isolated cases) and the effects that are associated with it (decrease in revenue) are included in the enterprise's strategy of activity. In addition, its owner uses an alternative source of income. Although the winter months entail a decrease in the revenue of this micro-enterprise, the entrepreneur did not indicate this option in the survey due to the fact that every year this decrease remains at a comparable level.

The year 2020 made the number of enterprises recording a decrease in revenue increase significantly. While in the 2nd and 3rd quarter of 2019 the number of entities recording a decrease in revenue was zero, the year 2020 made the number of such enterprises increase to: ten with a decrease below 25% and twenty above this value in the 2nd quarter, and eleven with a decrease in revenue below 25% and twenty above 25%. In the last quarter of 2020, there were eleven companies with a decrease in revenue below 25%, and twenty-four companies with a decrease of more than 25%.

Some respondents did not indicate any burdens related to the restrictions and lockdown. These included entrepreneurs performing commissioned computer work and communicating with clients by phone or electronic media (e-mail, instant messaging).

Many surveyed companies used external assistance due to a decrease in revenue during the pandemic period. Figure 6 shows the percentage of enterprises among the surveyed entities which applied for any form of anti-crisis assistance.

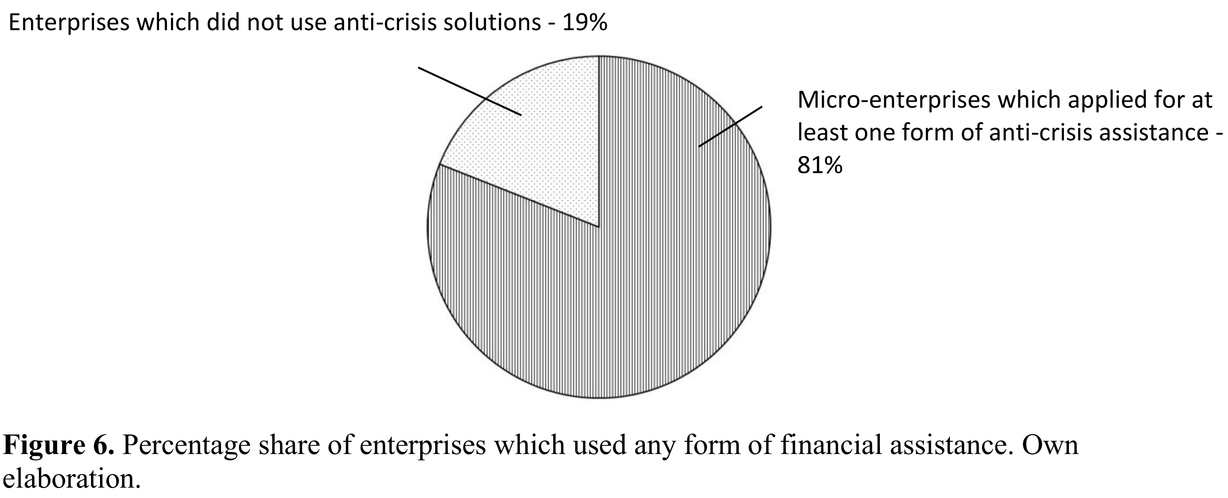


Figure 6. Percentage share of enterprises which used any form of financial assistance. Own elaboration.

The question about the main burdens of pursuing business activity during the pandemic allowed to determine the degree of this difficulty using a four-point scale (from 0 to 3) (0 – no difficulty, 3 – high degree of difficulty). The additional "not applicable" option allowed to disclose entities whose nature of activity meant that they did not participate in a given problem. The structure of the answers is as follows (Figure 7).

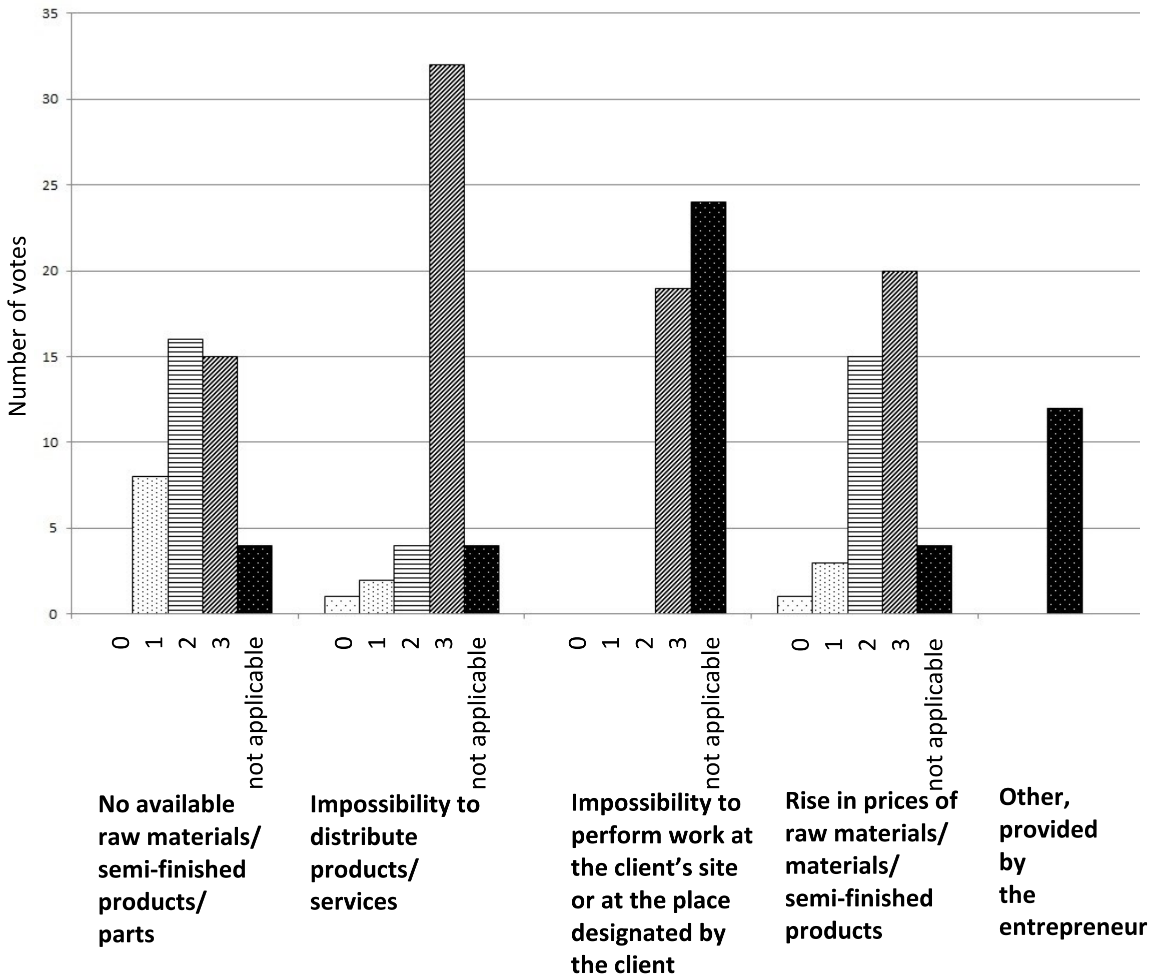


Figure 7. Comparison of factors making it difficult for entrepreneurs to run a micro-enterprise during the pandemic along with the number of votes cast for individual factors. Own elaboration.

The first factor – the lack of access to raw materials/semi-finished products/parts – was not considered by any entrepreneur to be non-burdensome (zero degree of burdensomeness), while four companies did not have this problem at all, as indicated in the survey. One degree of burdensomeness was given to this factor by eight entrepreneurs, for sixteen it was burdensome to the second degree of the scale, while fifteen entities considered it very burdensome (third degree of burdensomeness).

The votes in determining the impact of burdensomeness of the second parameter, i.e. the impossibility to directly distribute products or provide services, were distributed as follows: zero degree – one enterprise, the first degree – two enterprises, for thirty-two entities it was a very burdensome factor (the third degree). Four companies were not affected by the problem.

Nineteen micro-enterprises considered another factor – the impossibility to work at the client's site to be very burdensome (the third degree of burdensomeness), twenty-four did not have this problem.

The rise in prices of raw materials and materials was very burdensome (the third degree) for twenty enterprises, burdensome to the second degree for fifteen companies, for three – burdensome to a small extent (the first degree), one entrepreneur considered that for their enterprise the price rise was not important, while four companies were not affected by this burden.

Entrepreneurs provided their own proposals, including the burden associated with difficult direct communication with other entities and institutions. This issue appeared in 30% of the surveyed micro-enterprises.

None of the surveyed companies changed the profile of their activities during the pandemic period.

One enterprise, with more than 20 years of experience, ceased its activity during the coronavirus pandemic. According to the information that the owner included in the survey form, in 2021 the entity started recording a steady decrease in revenue exceeding 25% when compared to the previous year. However, for reasons not disclosed by the owner, the enterprise did not use external forms of financial assistance.

The last issue that entrepreneurs were asked about was the personal feelings related to the impact of the situation in which their companies found themselves on the perception of quality of life.

The answers regarding this issue turned out to be directly related to the dependence of the existence of the respondent (and their close relatives) on the profitable enterprise, being the only source of income. In many cases, the concern for the well-being of the employees was also important.

Some differences were found in the relationship between the fear for the survival of the company and the age of the owner and the company's metric. There were few (two) people below the age of 20 in the surveyed companies, they were basically at the initial stage of running their micro-enterprises, and in the event of failure they would receive financial support from the family. The comfort of these entrepreneurs in the pandemic situation was relatively high, they did not bear the burden of responsibility for failure. They account for 4.65% of the respondents.

Further age groups (21-30, 31-40 and more than 40) felt the pandemic situation in a similar way between these groups. These entrepreneurs were affected by similar concerns, regardless of their experience and years of work in their enterprise. The exception to this coherence were micro-entrepreneurs acting on their own, whose specific nature of work makes them independent of many crisis situations. They are designers, computer graphic designers, etc. – people whose main domain is to perform computer work, and contact with the client can be easily limited to remote contact. They account for 6.97% of the surveyed group.

The percentage distribution of answers provided by the entrepreneurs in the question concerning the impact of the pandemic situation on the fate of the enterprise, and thus – the fate of the entrepreneur and possibly their family, is as follows (Table 2):

Table 2.
Percentage distribution of the answers to the question regarding the impact of the company's standing on the selected aspects of the entrepreneur's quality of life during the pandemic period

Quality of life aspect	Degree and nature of the impact of the pandemic situation on the selected aspects of the quality of life in the light of the company's standing				
	very negative	negative	no impact	positive	very positive
Feeling of insecurity of own well-being	89%	7%	4%	0%	0%
Feeling of insecurity of the well-being of the close relatives	89%	7%	4%	0%	0%
Concern about the fate of the employees	68%	11%	21%	0%	0%
Feeling regarding external support	0%	65%	17%	18%	0%
Feeling of the lack of freedom	45%	46%	9%	0%	0%
Relations with the family	2%	67%	8%	23%	0%

Own elaboration.

The surveyed entrepreneurs pointed to the complexity of the issues contained in this question, which resulted in some difficulties in choosing a given option unequivocally. An example may be the subsection on relations with the close relatives: two percent of the respondents indicated a very negative impact of the whole situation on these relations, although as the respondents added, in principle, the relations themselves did not deteriorate, there was even some emotional consolidation in a difficult situation, but they considered that their growing, negative mental state, caused by fear for the close relatives, was felt by them as a very negative factor.

Another obstacle to providing an unambiguous answer was the progressive change in the situation in which entrepreneurs found themselves, even because of the aid programmes implemented, which protected 81% from a disaster. When answering, they had to decide whether to refer to the time when they perceived the future of their enterprise very negatively, or to the moment when, for example, they already used external support. So, they often averaged their rating, which does not fully reflect the actual situation.

5. Summary

The conducted studies, due to the size of the study sample, do not fully reflect the state of Silesian micro-enterprises in the era of the global pandemic. Nevertheless, in a cross-cutting manner, they show the diversity of attitudes and actions taken by entrepreneurs in order to keep their companies in the market.

Acknowledgements

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