# Employment-to-Entrepreneurship Interface in the Context of Tech Innovation. A Qualitative Analysis in Romania*

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## Abstract:

Tech entrepreneurship grows at a time the notion of work is accentuating its structural shift towards increased precariousness. This research interviewed 53 young people from Romania who received national or international prizes for technical innovations/ inventions. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the processes involved in turning an innovative idea into a marketable product/ business, or the lack thereof. The paper suggests that young people occupy elusive, intricate and sometimes, conflicting professional roles, more complex than the divide employment vs. entrepreneurship seems to suggest. Employment can coexist, provide resources or be a hindrance to entrepreneurship. Interviewees' narratives put into light young people's views on meaningful work and the way employment and the entrepreneurship respond or not to it. Ultimately, it is argued that the frontiers between statuses offer a rich conceptual space, where a more refined understanding of entrepreneurship, employment and youth becomes possible.

**Keywords:** youth entrepreneurship, Romania, tech entrepreneurship, intrapreneurship, employment, innovation.
JEL codes: L26, J24, O31.

Many approaches on youth entrepreneurship tend to use *creation* of new business as the unit of analysis. It has become a concern however, that the area of entrepreneurship studies 'has done everything to draw the attention away from the individual entrepreneur, for understanding the entrepreneurial process' (Steyeart 2007 cf. Landström and Benner 2010). This limitation has been attributed to the methodology used in previous studies, which lacks an in-depth study of the entrepreneur's personality. Yet, by using other methodologies based on narrative approaches, the individual can be introduced into the analysis, in ways that go beyond the established focus on stable psychological characteristics (Steyaert 2007 cf. Landström and Benner 2010).

This paper focuses its sociological lenses on the dynamics involved at the intersection between the labour market and entrepreneurship. It is based on the understanding that the focus on new-business creation in the absence of a cogent debate on where people are at during this process is only part of the story. This research explores the views and experiences of 53 young people from Romania who received formal prizes for an invention/ innovation. Grounded in the assumption that involvement in innovation may create enabling circumstances for

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an entrepreneurial project, the research aims to understand the role entrepreneurship plays in young people's working lives, and in their expected professional trajectories.

The paper suggests that the young interviewees occupy elusive, intricate and sometimes conflicting roles and that entrepreneurship is incorporated in their working lives in ways that are rather amalgamated than dualistic (as suggested by the divide 'employment vs. entrepreneurship'). Employment can coexist, provide resources, or be a hindrance to entrepreneurship. The role of employment needs to be elevated from the level of either antecedent to entrepreneurship, or an alternative to it. The two may coexist, feed each other and integrate other working possibilities such as freelancing, work in the grey economy, volunteering, intrapreneurship etc. Overall, the frontiers between statuses offer a rich conceptual space, where a more refined understanding of entrepreneurship is possible.

## I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *Entrepreneurship, technology and work*

By and large, entrepreneurship refers to individuals and groups seeking and exploiting economic opportunity (McKenzie et al 2007). However, entrepreneurship has also been described as a vague, elusive phenomenon, inherently unable to attract some scholarly consensus on its meaning (Venkataraman 1997; Alvareza and Busenitz 2001; Bridge et al 2010; Peredo and McLean 2006; Hulme 2000). According to Schumpeter, the founder of modern entrepreneurial theory, it involves 'creative disruption', 'new combinations' of goods, services and organizational forms in the service of a relentless drive to create (Schumpeter 1934:93). Schumpeter was the first to treat innovation as an endogenous process – with the entrepreneur as an innovator and prime mover in the economic system (Van Praag 2005 cf. Landström et al 2012). He believed that entrepreneurs are innovators and entrepreneurship is revolutionary by its ability to bring about something new: a production method, a technological development, product/service, distribution system or even a new organizational form (Schumpeter 1954 cf. Tilley and Young 2006). As new types of entrepreneurship enter debate, innovation is considered to be 'high-level entrepreneurship' (Casson 2005).

It is notable that Kirzner, Knight and Schumpeter saw entrepreneurship as an economic function, not an employment category. From these perspectives, issues like self-employment or the type of firm (e.g. start-up company, spinoff) are not relevant. The main effect of the entrepreneurial function is market equilibration (Foss and Klein 2010). Still, the most common understanding of entrepreneurship remains very narrow: exclusively the processes of business creation (Bridge et al 2010).

The absence of a scholarly consensus on the meanings of entrepreneurship has also been regarded as an advantage. For some, the pressure to reach agreement over one type of entrepreneurship results in the acceptance of the idea that there are "'many' entrepreneurships in terms of focus, definitions, scope and paradigms" (Steyaert and Hjort 2003: 5). Technology entrepreneurship (or tech entrepreneurship) is, thus, one possible form of entrepreneurship, which holds values of liberalism: free markets, self-development, profit-making, private property rights, free will and the ability to determine one's own future (Tilley and Young 2006).

Tech entrepreneurship was established in Silicon Valley and was rapidly embraced by worldwide communities of practice and individuals. In essence, it starts with a technology idea capable of addressing market disequilibrium. The next stage involves securing human and financial resources for turning the idea into a marketable product. This stage may entail securing trust and identifying potential investors. Entrepreneurs then need to find the most efficient ways to market and sell the idea and to manage growth.

Tech entrepreneurship usually involves the creation of companies. Its growth led to the development of complex support systems, geared to assist particularly young people in the process of taking their invention to the market. We are now witnessing a growing trend towards business incubators, resource hubs, business accelerators, crowd funding platforms, training courses and inspirational events. Start-up competitions and invention contests with coaching/ mentorship/ business consulting components and teamwork, are increasingly popular among young people. Companies also seem keen to contribute to such activities which, in turn, respond to their more practical interests (promotion, recruitment, collection of original product ideas).

Tech entrepreneurship is growing at a time when the nature of work, and the way people think about work, is undergoing a structural shift. Traditional industrial work in the West has ceased to be a major economic force; jobs tend to be more precarious: short term and part-time, unstable, underpaid, alienating and with a weakened sense of a collective identity (Winlow and Hall 2013). Serial employment is the norm; the positive symbolic value traditionally attached to industrial work has given way to an instrumental value of work, which is now 'a way to pay the bills' (Koeber 2002) or to maintain a lifestyle (Winlow and Hall 2013; Southwood 2011; Lloyd 2012).

On the other hand, technological advancements create the promise of liberating potential in terms of flexibility, control overwork, focus on innovativeness etc. There are, nevertheless, advancements that position much of the computer-based work, for instance, in a more privileged area. Yet, a large part of programming work is still subject to the same pressures as manufacturing jobs and is increasingly precarious (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2013). Reasons are linked

to;increased outsourcing of software development, the decline of standard labour contracts, firms' avoidance to assume the costs of employment by crowd sourcing and the long working hours at the expense of family commitments even for the elite programmers (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2013; McDowell and Christopherson 2009; Sweet and Meiksins 2013). Elements of Post Fordism are incorporated in computer programming jobs, whilst much of the IT work is not innovative but redundant, time consuming and based on raw coding. Moreover, it seems that the very tasks computer programmers are structurally positioned to do across the world, differ: from being creative and innovation-oriented in advanced economies, to being tedious in developing countries (Sweet and Maiksins 2013).

Against the above background, youth entrepreneurship in general and tech entrepreneurship in particular, have emerged as salient notions. Unlike employment, entrepreneurship speaks a compelling language of youth agency, need for achievement, autonomy and control over the process and rewards of work (Sukarieh and Tannock 2009). Youth entrepreneurship has become such a potent concept that it is almost impossible to have some level of disagreement on its necessity (Cho 2006). There is, according to some authors, a strong undercurrent endorsing the so called 'Panacea Hypothesis' when referring to the potential for societal transformation through entrepreneurship (Hall et. all 2010). The powerful discourse drawing on young people's capacity to become entrepreneurs, has permeated the broader policy environment dealing with youth, work and education, as well as the media and daily practice in education. Ultimately, the discourse of youth entrepreneurship parallels the one on the economic crisis[1], with youth entrepreneurship being regarded as part of the solution to this by the UN, for instance (UN 2013). But it is also becoming increasingly evident that we need a radical departure from the current innovation frames, in the sense of moving from 'creating the next cheap app' (Markowitz 2013) towards bigger and fundamentally newer ideas.

Previous research, examining where entrants in high tech entrepreneurship come from, argues that they often leave their employers to start firms in the same industry (spinoffs). Despite the policy rhetoric, a 2001 literature review (Klepper 2001) indicates that spinoffs are generally not more innovative or ambitious than their parents, whilst a commonly reported drive to start a spinoff is frustration with the parent firm. Nevertheless, it seems that risk-averse employees would still remain with the employer (Klepper 2001).

1 Whilst the policy discourse is always careful to make it explicit that entrepreneurship is not an alternative to unemployment, an ambivalent relation between the two is tacitly reproduced, especially when trainings on entrepreneurship address disadvantaged young people as a priority.

The distinction between entrepreneurship as a choice and entrepreneurship out of necessity (Naude 2008) has been proposed in order to understand the dynamics at play when people opt for entrepreneurship. Growing research revolving around this or similar distinctions has emerged: opportunity vs. necessity (Perry et al. 2007; Fields 2012; Poschke 2013; McKenzie 2008), choice vs. constraint (Baliamoune-Lutz et. al. (2011), exit vs. exclusion (Perry et al. 2007; Margolis 2014), subsistance vs. transformational entrepreneurs (Schoar 2010). Overall, research links entrepreneurship by necessity with structural unavailability of wage employment, especially in developing countries and with some level of disadvantage that reduces one's employability, in developed economies (a migrant or minority status, women with care commitments). That being said, entrepreneurship by necessity and entrepreneurship by choice can coexist in any given country (Margolis 2014).

### *Gaps in knowledge*

There are many studies suggesting students' propensity (intentionality) for 'entrepreneurship', but there is less research examining whether, and to what extent, this propensity is indeed leading to 'entrepreneurial behaviour' (Pittaway and Cope 2007). More bluntly, we know little about whether, how, and to what extent dreamers become doers and what goes on in this process.

Whilst some links between entrepreneurship and previous employment have been made, the evidence is still varied. Some research suggests employment holds value in entrepreneurship performance (Lin, Picot and Compton 2000; Corbett 2005) because of acquired technical skills, knowledge of markets and networks of trust. Others contest the relevance of employment for entrepreneurship, by arguing that the two are built on different logics. It also seems that even when young people work, they are structurally positioned at a distance from the managerial circles of power, where strategic decisions take place and entrepreneurial skills can be learned. Conversely, there is insufficient research on how entrepreneurship impacts employment. How do entrepreneurially minded people perform, act and react on the labour market?

It is obvious that the creation of new businesses is a process, but there is little research on the labour market's main ingredient involved in this process. Although there is mounting literature on the steps/ stages of new business creation, there is less research contextualising this process: where are young people at, by the time they 'enter' entrepreneurship? In order to understand the entrepreneurial behaviour, one must understand the external environment, the competing options in a calculus of opportunities and the constraints young people need to respond to. Despite mounting research, several limitations, dating back to 1991, are still valid. One such limitation, is that youth studies tend to focus on employment and only very recently, on youth entrepreneurship. Another is that because

entrepreneurship is associated with economics and politics, there is a general distaste from social scientists for this (MacDonald and Coffield 1991; McKenzie 2007). Calls for 're-socialising entrepreneurship' are emerging They refer to the need to contextualize entrepreneurship, to challenge the dominant research frames and to see it as a social, and not only an economic phenomenon (Landström and Benner 2010; Hjorth et al 2008; Bjerke and Karlsson 2013; Beyes 2007).

This is where the current paper aims to contribute. It seeks to uncover the socio-economic context in which tech entrepreneurship is embedded and to provide further insights into the processes involved in developing an entrepreneurial project, or refusing it altogether. Unfolding the dynamics involved in the professional choices of innovative young people, is an important exercise, as it speaks about the complex sets of expectations that they respond to and the structural constraints shaping their options. Ultimately, this can inform further policy making in the area of labour market, education and youth entrepreneurship by large.

## II. AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

This paper explores young people's narratives on their anticipated professional futures, in order to gain a better understanding on the place of entrepreneurship. In particular, it looks how young people with high innovative potential negotiate their way into tech entrepreneurship, or avoid it altogether.

The research is based on 53 in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews with young people from Romania that received formal recognition (prizes) for an invention/ innovative technical project, usually a software or robotics prototype. At the time of receiving the award (2010-2015), no interviewee was affiliated with a research institute. The level of competition ranged from national (e.g. Ministry of Education, national innovation fair) to high level international competitions (e.g. NASA, RobotChallenge, Geneva Innovation Fair etc).

Interviewees were generally aged between 17 and 25 years old, with three in their early 30 s. The large majority seem to have had an early interest in technology and a history in participation in robotics clubs. Over time, their performances received media coverage. Many repeatedly participated in competitions at different levels. Some interviewees had even lost count of the number of competitions entered – a few estimations went above thirty. Given that innovation or robotics is still not part of the school curricula, participation in such competitions required a high level of family support, individual motivation and financial backing. With these structural constraints in mind, it is not surprising that a large majority (n=46) are living in cities. Participants were recruited from the award lists of technical competitions at national or international level, from media reports searches, social networks and snowball strategies. Given the critical underrepresentation of girls (n=13), proactive strategies were used in order to incorpo-

rate their experiences (e.g. snowball strategies, gender-sensitive internet searches etc). Overall, their age, gender and educational status were as follows:

- 20 people, 17-19 years old (7 females and 13 males): in high school
- 28 people 19-25 years old (4 females and 24 males): 20 students or graduates; 8 gave up university or never enrolled.
- 5 people, 25-33 years old (2 females and 3 males): 4 graduates; 1 without a degree.

Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours, averaging on 70 minutes. Skype/ telephone interviews were carried out for participants living abroad or long distance. The themes of the interviews revolved around young peoples' views and experiences on turning their innovative idea into a marketable product/ business. All data is anonymous and has been analyzed in NVivo10, based on successive comparisons.

The paper is based on the major categories that have been thus generated. The research looked to minimise several fundamental limitations of entrepreneurship research, especially the biases toward high profile achievers, towards spectacular and highly visible entrepreneurs (Stryjan 2006). The recruitment strategy incorporated various situations: from the experiences of young people who made a conscious choice to go for employment, to the experiences of those who gave up employment and, at times, education, in order to pursue their entrepreneurial intentions. The research was interested in the meanings young people attach to their choices, regardless of their nature.

Romania is an interesting case study for research on youth technology entrepreneurs. Participants from Romania hold a reputation for winning technical competitions focused on innovation. The country holds 5% of the offshore market and is the third leading state in export of IT after India and China (Capatana et al 2012). There is a tendency to move from outsourcing towards small and medium sized businesses, but, a high number of operations employing less than 30 people, actually work on a project basis either for foreign or larger Romanian firms (OBG 2008). Romania is the second-poorest member of the European Union, but incomes in IT are much higher than the average salaries. Besides considerable (and contestable) state incentives for corporations, individual IT workers are also exempted from income tax since 2001. Software developers face legitimate dilemmas whether to be employed or to join the growing wave of tech entrepreneurship.

Despite several particularities of Romania's IT market, the research does not intend to be 'national' in outlook. The purpose is not to advance a self-referential case study, but to examine how global trends in both employment and entrepreneurship are reflected in the experiences of a group that holds 'innovative potential'. The ultimate goal is to understand how young people's choices are

shaped by broader social and economic dynamics and what this tells us about young people's notion of work and entrepreneurship.

Grounded in a constructivist perspective, the paper relies exclusively on young people's reported experiences. Many other interpretations are missing (employers, business partners, mentors, experienced entrepreneurs etc). The research is not interested in establishing 'the truth' about the ways employment and entrepreneurship intersect. It focuses instead on young people's perspectives (partial as they may be) that have their own validity (Punch 2002). This may explain the occasional differences in this paper when compared to research with established software developers and experienced entrepreneurs.

## III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The next sections will analyse young people's perceptions on the ways entrepreneurship intersects employment. It is based on the main categories that have been generated by successive coding in NVivo10. They reflect the different roles entrepreneurship plays in young people's lives: from 'employment as a moratorium to entrepreneurship', to successive entries and exits in employment and entrepreneurship (see section below on 'Employment and entrepreneurship as revolving doors'). The interviews also reveal the power of employment in acting as a structural constraint, limiting the possibility of developing an entrepreneurial pursuit (see the category 'Trapped in employment'). Importantly, entrepreneurship was also seen as a reaction to precarization and lack of dignified work ('Entrepreneurship and the search for meaningful work'). Some interviews suggested two uncompromising departures from the *status-quo*: 'Entrepreneurship or nothing' and 'Employment as a response to entrepreneurial failure'. Nevertheless, the divisions made are more of an artificial approach for facilitating understanding than a clear-cut and exhaustive mapping of the relationship between entrepreneurship and other available options. The order does not suggest some level of priority or succession.

### *Employment as a moratorium to entrepreneurship*

For many interviewees, employment seemed like an opportunity for gaining (technical and soft) skills, and for developing a better sense of their interests and needs. For others, employment responded to mere survival and was not related to deeper, entrepreneurial intentions: *Certainly, the status of employee does not satisfy me. I will never remain at this stage. Employment is something intermediary; I have to sustain myself somehow* (George, 23).

The general impression from the interviews with young, employed and entrepreneurially minded people was that unlike their peers, they may occasionally accept precarious working conditions for more complex reasons than unavailability of choice. Harsh employment conditions are often incorporated in com-

plex calculus of opportunities. A young student, passionate about game development, for instance, traded his well-paid IT job for the otherwise unsatisfactory working conditions of one of the very few competitive companies active in the industry:

> *The boss had no consideration for his employees whatsoever. It was shocking to realise what this dude was able to do: 12-14 working hours including weekends; payment less than twice that of a regular company, just because he could. But he was a smart guy, because there are only three good game development companies in Romania. If you want to learn this, you have to do it there. So I did that and at the end of the day, I've learned a lot (Dan, 24).*

When the ultimate goal is to launch a start-up, the financial pressure of the otherwise precarious employment, may be stretched to the maximum: *As long as I have something to eat, to pay the rent and the internet connection, I'm fine.* Time is also a challenge when employed and the start-up becomes a 'night project':

> *I: How would you see the relation between your project and what you do at work?*
>
> *David: I'm thinking about this often. It's better for my boss not to know about it [laughs]. But this will not last long, as I'll have to devote to one. The start-up is my dream. But for the moment, it's good how it is (David, 25).*

Interviewees shared the understanding that IT programming poses high burnout risks that render entrepreneurship as a 'natural' development after relatively consolidated employment experience: *Technology evolves. At 40, one cannot keep up with what is going on. The majority of good programmers start up their own company and hold coordination roles* (Alex, 23). While this confirms the conventional interpretation of spin-offs, the move towards entrepreneurship is still related to the possibility of re-inventing oneself in a way that is perceived as personally meaningful: *I also know people who, after working 10-15 years in IT, want to leave as soon as they can: to become actors, chiefs or such* (Elena, 23).

A shared understanding among those with a longer entrepreneurial background is that there may be other, more fluid ways of profit gain than employment: freelancing, contracting small coding projects or work in the shadow economy with low profit margins. These may precede an entrepreneurial project.

### *Employment and entrepreneurship as revolving doors*

Interviews suggest that entrepreneurship and employment are neither mutually exclusive nor strictly linear. For many interviewees, there are recurrent entries and exits between the two. When distrustful of potential investors or when the amount necessary to develop a project is manageable, young people enter work to secure funding and resign in order to work for their project:

> *Real robotics costs money. A micro-plate is 40 Euro. My job is a strategy for this. The aim is not to make a million, but to make this robot function. I just like to make stuff, it doesn't matter what;*

*it's how my brain functions. I would have liked to have a job and that's it, but it's much more complicated [laughs] (Sebastian, 23).*

Sebastian did not go to university. Instead, he had different jobs which helped him develop relevant networks, learn innovative technologies and earn enough to sustain his projects:

*I'm a bit of everything. I'm hired, but I'm an innovator and an entrepreneur, as well. I've changed five jobs. I can go for an interview whenever I need a job and get it. I've never been on the dole. I need money – I can get a job tomorrow (Sebastian, 23).*

This shifting notion of work commitment parallels employers' weaker investment in work loyalty. Interviews seem to confirm previous research (Sweet and Meiksins 2013) indicating a slight move from policies meant to reward employee loyalty, toward endorsing looser commitments:

*I have a good friend who worked since 2005 for [company X]. One of the first in the firm. When he asked for a pay rise, he was told it's impossible. But he knew the company had huge profits. So he left and the boss accepted that without blinking an eye (Sorin, 23).*

Will the promise of entrepreneurship hold? Most probably, many young people will never reach a financial level that is necessary for opening up a business in the way they want to. Social class and gender remain important lines that frame young people's experiences in Romania. Besides, transitions to independent life bring additional pressures: *Doing this back and forth thing is ok when you're 24 and have nothing to lose. But once you have a family, children and a mortgage, it becomes really hard to take a risk and you start fitting in, playing with the rules* (Luca, 24).

### *Trapped in employment*

Many interviewees expressed their sense of being trapped in otherwise 'good jobs', which do not allow their innovative promise to bloom. There is a high demand for competent students in Romania's small and medium (off-shoring) companies and many find the promise of early employment at relatively high salaries appealing. However, this often adds limitations to their possibilities of learning and experimenting, attending start-up events, meeting potential investors, mentors etc. Whilst disagreeing that their performance at innovation contests was a 'happy accident', many seem to have come to terms with their employment status. At the same time, they would not dismiss the hope of working in innovation-centred companies that value intrapreneurship.

Nonetheless, entrepreneurship is also a function of the lucrative opportunities' (Shane and Venkataraman 2000).Young people with an interest in astrophysics, for instance, may resent the weak market opportunities for their field and assume the risks of 'being trapped': *If you are interested in stars, spatial colonies, or some similar SF topic, you cannot make a business. Nobody is interested in*

*investing in stars. Except Branson [laughs]* (Claudia, 22). The available options are research and employment (abroad).

Whilst not completely excluding entrepreneurship, many interviewees postpone this indefinitely. In principle, young people find the idea of having a business appealing, but are less clear about where to start and if technology would even be a priority:

*Eugen: I think I will own a business one day, but really, cannot tell…*

*I: What if there would be an opportunity to open a nice restaurant?*

*Eugen: Yes, why not?*

These ambivalent attitudes may indicate market versatility, but also a broader uncertainty over what entrepreneurship actually entails. In Romania, as many as 73.6% of adults (18-64) consider entrepreneurship to be a 'good career choice', compared to the EU average of 56.9 (GEM 2015).When asked about their interpretation of this data, the majority of interviewees saw it more as a reaction to unsatisfying employment status, than as a purposeful endeavour. A small minority associated entrepreneurial intentions with a vibrant environment particularly in technology, whilst another minority (more experienced in carrying out a business) interpreted the statistics as a clear indication of ignorance over what entrepreneurship actually entails. These attitudes will be touched upon in the sections which follow.

### *Entrepreneurship and the search for meaningful work*

Young people's interviews were sometimes troubling accounts of employment experiences that incorporate power, domination, suppression of voice and clustering in routine jobs which do not involve a high level of creativity. Despite relatively high salary levels, participants expressed disappointment over the altering relationships between employers and employees. Even when not working in deskilled jobs, young people feel the effects of a Taylorist distribution of work: from the weakened capacity to manage the time and the tasks, to a pervasive ethos that treats their competencies with reserve. For older participants, concerns over work-life balance seemed to emerge.

Consequently, young people need to choose between the financially appealing offer of non-innovative, code writing jobs (a choice many do embrace) and their personal drive towards innovation, autonomy and status. They seem prepared for innovative work in a labour market that has few of such jobs. Although a growing portion of the IT industry in Romania is getting closer to the innovative sector, the larger part remains involved in operations that are often perceived as redundant and time consuming. For many interviewees, the search for meaningful work brings them to entrepreneurship. In this sense, entrepreneurship also

speaks about the explicit refusal of professional dynamics that put the control in the hands of managers who lack technical knowledge:

*I've passed through all the stages. I prefer to focus on my project alone and not to be distracted by other stuff […] In 2-3 months I see myself as the founder of a project that hopes to change the meaning of 'social network'. Depending on how this project will go, I will become a CEO or a programmer. At the moment, I cannot conceive the idea of being employed. The labour market in Romania is quite a-technical. The employers are very well trained, but the managers…not really. And I don't find it fair to receive recommendations from such a person. I prefer my own project for which….I can give everything (Cristian, 24).*

In a similar way, Silviu refused employment offers at reputable companies, informed by a strong need for autonomy and control over his work:

*I received a proposal to work for Google in Switzerland when in high school. But I didn't want to be one of the 700 000 wheels in the system […] The biggest challenge for an engineer is to create work places. This is what I intend with this start-up (Silviu 20).*

For some, entrepreneurship holds a deep sense of identity that transcends the notion of work:

*I like to ask people of my age what their aim in life is. What would need to happen in your life for you to say that you could die peacefully? My girlfriend who is at Medical school says she will save people. I say: this is the aim, but what is the event or the moment that would give you the feeling of being fulfilled? My aim is AIAS Hall of Fame […] Sir Peter Molyneux received the Order of the British Empire for the game industry he developed. My aim is to have my portrait near his, maybe a little bit higher [laughs] (Dan, 26).*

On the other hand, interviews suggest that entrepreneurship has similar concerns as that of employment: investors' interference and control over the project development, symbolic ownership etc:

*Businessmen don't really trust an idea, they are reluctant and very few invest in an innovation. And even from those that do, very few arrive at a finite product. Many stop, either because what they want to develop doesn't fit the budget, or because the Chinese developed the product faster and cheaper […] This is how a project of mine died. After it worked well for one year, they started to make modifications, to increase the price (Teo, 27).*

In many ways, the above experience resonates with the classical concern over mission drift in the social enterprises that involve partnerships with the private sector. Nonetheless, firm creation remains a powerful status indicator:

*And there is also this thing: they dream of becoming a star. For them 'what would you like to be when you grow up' is still an important question. At school and then at work, you are treated as you are treated…You want to get out of this and to say: I am somebody (Cristina, 22).*

For very few however, entrepreneurship is far from being the 'ultimate' 'meaningful' endeavour. On the contrary, it is perceived as time consuming and stressful. The search for meaning goes far beyond:

*I will continue for two, three, four, five years in this company, after that, I will change my career altogether. Having a company is not easy. I would like to reserve time for other things, something to fulfil me spiritually. I'm not a person who finds his peace in coding. I would like to read, I like*

*Humanities, and I would like to merge my interest in technology with archaeology, for instance (Sergiu 23)*

At the end of the day, a question arises: Does the distaste among young people for current labour relations suggest that they intend to propose structurally changed working relationships when they themselves become employers? For the time being, the support for this conclusion is mixed. Interviewees' discourses on change is less precise, ambiguous and rhetoric at times. They intend to have a different business to the ones that already exist, but see this mainly in terms of better services/ products, rather than in terms of reformed organisational culture/ workplace practices/ democratic/participative ownership structures etc. Moreover, this type of input emerges only when prompted by the interviewer. Very rarely, some projects with obvious social value are reflected upon in terms that do not prioritize financial gain or involve deeper sensitivity to human relations. This is, for instance, Ana's situation who patented a device for the assistance of children with physical disabilities. Her intention is to introduce the appliance to special needs schools, without major financial reasons attached. However, she had to face allegations that she was not the author.

### *Entrepreneurship or nothing*

The ultimate manifestation of entrepreneurship seems to be the deliberate rejection of any other normative expectations such as education and employment. Higher education and employment are sometimes suspended or given up, because they are considered to subjugate the ego at a time when the prospects of development are very high. Steve Jobs, Gates, Zuckerberg and Branson are powerful social signifiers. For many interviewees, entrepreneurship speaks a powerful language of self-sufficiency and agency. In the process of individualization, employment does not respond to this need as much as entrepreneurship does.

Cristi, despite high academic performance, gave up the idea of obtaining a high school certificate and embarked on a major entrepreneurial project leading to the creation of an affordable spaceship. He is now a regular speaker at TedEx events in the US and is actively searching for potential investors. Robert dropped out of university and quit his part time job in an attempt to develop his own company: *'I want to work with corporations, not for them'*. He cherishes insecurity as a main driver of his choices: '*Some fear insecurity, not having a job…One day I may not have enough to eat, or to pay the rent, but I know the next month, I could earn a lot. It's a hard, but pleasant feeling'* (Robert, 24).

Several interviewees positioned themselves as part of broad, revolutionary trend that obviously exclude employment:

*In New York, I can see trends in society, how the third revolution is being made right under our noses. I'm fascinated by technology and how it influences our lives. We are living in a time of*

*tremendous change. I watch documentaries about Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and see what trends were active when they were my age and those that are active now and how big they are. I want to be part of this trend (Cristi, 23).*

Entrepreneurship is often a reaction to the unifying spectrum of employment, to the increased work precariouseness of work even at professional levels, and an expression of the tense relationship with authority:

*I : What do you dislike so much about being employed?*

*Sorin : The salary. Someone telling you what to do. The schedule. I cannot stand the idea of a fixed schedule. If I work best at night, what's the problem? And I cannot stand the idea of making someone else rich (Sorin, 24).*

On the other hand, a more experienced entrepreneur suggested that previous working experience is instrumental in gaining a basic work ethic, discipline and a sense of responsibility: *I worked from the age of 18. My partner has never been employed. Those that have not been employed seem more spoiled, have never had to grit their teeth, to meet a deadline…*(George, 33). He argued that early firm creation can sit at the core of entrepreneurial failure, as it involves high costs: 'hiring people and subcontracting an accountant' should only come later, if at all.

However, a question arises on the social and health costs attached. As entrepreneurship may deprive young people of some of the social experiences enjoyed by their peers and sometimes, lead to burnout and illness, is it still meaningful work? Several narrations can be subsumed to an understanding of hard work as *habitus*:

*I worked enormously. An enormous ambition, I would say. I started working hard at a very early age and my brain remained accustomed to this kind of life. I fainted when working, several times and ended up in hospital. Now, I cannot do it any longer. One night of work and I'm done (Gabriel, 23).*

*I like working a lot. Honestly- I could work from morning till noon. But the stress intervenes and the brain cannot detach itself and relax. The gradual transition from work to sleep is not made. And from here, you get panic attacks, anxiety and so […] Now, I'm struggling with psychological treatment and counselling. I don't want to take pills […] medicines take you away from work. Psychologists believe you are a public danger and you need to be removed (Claudia, 23).*

### *Employment as a response to entrepreneurial failure*

Several of the interviewees decided to go for employment, once their entrepreneurial endeavours failed. Some came to the conclusion that the personal and financial costs of running a business were higher than those involved when employed:

*You have to work more for your own business in order to have a salary you can get as an employer. Many don't see this. They think they can work two years in a garage and then settle in the Bahamas. But it's not so. The sooner they understand this, the sooner they may find a good workplace (George, 33).*

*After five years of being my own boss, I gave up. For me, I was the worse boss I have ever had. I worked too much: the technical part, the management. Then, I decided to do what I am good at, so I got a job. Salaries in IT are above average, many facilities, good life. Corporate spirit, right? (Doru, 27)*

There are also structural constraints that may push towards employment. After embarking on an entrepreneurial project, some young people discover the unanticipated pressure of entrenched incumbents:

*One cannot fight with Google. And you cannot control the things people want, unless you make huge marketing investments. Corporations can do that. All I can do is to make an upload on App Store and wait (Laci, 21).*

## IV. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This research started from the assumption that for the young people with innovative potential, some prerequisites for developing an entrepreneurial project are present. They do have, for instance, a technology idea that is able to address a market disequilibrium. They are part of the first cohort that studied entrepreneurial education in school (Faludi 2016) and have a –higher than average- exposure to entrepreneurially minded persons, or mentoring as part of some technical competitions they attended. However, the options that unfolded suggest that more variegated trajectories than entrepreneurship (alone) are envisioned and ultimately, possible.

This research suggested that there are more fluid work-entrepreneurship arrangements than conventionally assumed. The paper added sociological support for arguing that dividing the world into entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs is artificial and unrealistic: many entrepreneurs are employed, go back and forth, postpone their new business creation or deliberately reject employment and see this as a powerful status indicator. Against the backdrop of motivational approaches for encouraging entrepreneurship, this research regarded young people's choices as (re)actions to complex labour market dynamics. It provided qualitative support to the idea that youth entrepreneurship is not necessarily an alternative system, motivated by boldness of an idea alone. It confirms that 'we have "sacrificed" a more variegated picture at the cost of stories which univocally provide confidence and hope' (Dey 2007: 127).

The research resonated with previous assertions that (tech) entrepreneurship expresses itself in a variety of places that go beyond incubators and science parks (Bjerke and Karlsson 2013). For instance, according to the overwhelming majority of interviewees, in 5 years' time, around 80% of them will be hired in multinational companies (in Romania or abroad). Indeed, many find the economic and social returns of corporate work appealing. Would this be tantamount to them as losing their entrepreneurial intentions? According to Kirzner, Knight and Schumpeter, entrepreneurship is an economic function, not an employment category; entrepreneurs do not need a firm to exercise their function (Foss and

Klein 2010) and their decision to go for employment would not equate with an ultimate defeat of their entrepreneurial potential. Yet, they would need enabling circumstances to express and develop as entrepreneurs in the workplace. The concept of intrapreneurship[2] may add a new layer to this analysis. This research calls for further studies examining employers' capacity to draw on young people as an entrepreneurial resource and on companies' intrapreneurship practices.

For the time being, however, it is becoming obvious that we are witnessing a decline in individual's ability to control the conditions and rewards of work. Engaging in meaningful work and being able to determine the contours of work/life balance – not to say, manifesting entrepreneurial intentions- are luxuries that many people are unable to afford (Sweet and Meiksins 2013; Dempsey and Sanders 2010). The process of de-industrialization, the race to the bottom, high inequalities in regional economic development, all shape the general capacity of young people to pursue meaningful working lives.

However, the above structural constraints were almost absent from interviewees' narratives, infused by a compelling language of self-determination. For instance, almost all interviewees tended to condemn peers' victimization; youth unemployment was denounced as a personal choice, opportunism, mediocrity, or a combination of these. A cross-cutting theme was the almost unanimous denial of the economic crisis (described as a media phenomenon/ scheme or even a deliberate conspiracy likely to prompt major innovative technologies). This situates interviewed young people in a rather distinct position (when compared with their peers) and may legitimize a tendency to see them as a distinct group, acting in a bold way, as presented in the classic literature on entrepreneurship. For many interviewees, entrepreneurship brings the tempting promise of personal achievement and a sense of individualization.

Importantly, however, youth entrepreneurship is an area where we can fall too easily into rhetoric (Ridley-Duff and Bull 2013). The focus on individual entrepreneurs need not overlook the compelling force of the market, structural constraints (e.g. crediting, potential investors), the more general social environment and the policy 'regime' on youth. This paper could, at best, provide some input on young people's views at a very early stage of their (entrepreneurial) career. It suggests that for a relatively successful elite group, meaningful work is a pertinent concern which may bring them to entrepreneurship. It remains to be seen whether this promise will hold.

As this paper suggests, entrepreneurship is no exception from the precariat. On the contrary, the notion of 'entrepreneurship by necessity' may also apply to a group that is highly employable. This confirms pervious research about increas-

2 It refers to 'employee initiatives in organizations to undertake something new, without being asked to do so' (de Jong and Wennekers 2008: 4).

ing levels of precariousness that are incorporated in apparently stable and secure ‘middle class’ jobs (Standing 2011; Winlow and Hall 2013; Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2013; McDowell and Christopherson 2009; Sweet and Meiksins 2013). Indeed, it was rather an exception for the interviewees to argue that employment offered the enabling circumstances for their entrepreneurial inclinations to be manifested. The general sense was that entrepreneurship is at best, a parallel project, or, if not subversive to the current status, at best, postponed.

At the end of the day, a thought-provoking point emerges: are interviewed young people winners in the 'policy crusade’ on entrepreneurship, advocates of a progressive understanding of employment, or are they closer to victims, actively searching for alternative escape routes from a precarious and unfriendly labour market? The answer is ambiguous. Based on this research, it is hazardous to assume that young innovators are also fervent entrepreneurs, eager to trade the security of good jobs, for the entrepreneurial status. At the same time, they are not victims in the way that many of their peers are. They could find employment and could, probably, to a higher extent to their peers, negotiate the terms. It is thus, important to avoid over simplifications which are so potent in today's policy and media discourses.

With the inherent limitations involved in a small-scale qualitative research, yet with an ‘elite’ group of young people, this research interrogates some potential shortcomings of Romania’s entrepreneurial environment. One may ask whether the early entry into IT employment is a solution to be celebrated, or a mixed blessing. Despite the strong social prestige and financial gains attached to it, for the interviewees that see their real potential elsewhere, early employment may also carry a subjugating load that hinders the growth of tech entrepreneurship in the long run. Yet again, the seduction of employment needs to be situated in a context of weak supporting mechanisms for tech entrepreneurship: crediting systems, mentoring, investors, a vibrant economy interested in transforming an innovative idea into a marketable product etc.

Future longitudinal research may be able to determine whether we witness a trend towards employment drain that is counterproductive for individuals’ professional development and limiting for the overall innovativeness of Romania’s tech sector. For the time being, the story of emerging tech entrepreneurship seems to be shaped by increased interest in innovation with remarkable accomplishments on the one hand, and a convoluted search for finding a meaningful entrepreneurial expression, on the other.

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