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Critical, connected and caring: older adults' agency during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Considering (1) the current context of social and economic polarisation in Eastern Europe, which represents older people as experiencing 'red nostalgia' and presents them as passive citizens, and (2) the increased vulnerabilities of older people during the COVID-19 pandemic as a main target of restrictive policies, we explored the experiences of older people during the COVID-19 lockdown period in Romania in 2020. We carried out 12 semi-structured interviews with older people from rural and urban areas to understand how they experienced the lockdown period and made sense of the pandemic. We perceived the pandemic as a holistic experience that affected different aspects of social life. We learned that older people manifested their agency in multiple forms. First, they were critical of lockdown measures imposed on them while at the same time understanding the need to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus, signalling a more complex political subjectivity among this group than popular narratives suggest. Second, older people made heavy independent use of information and communications technology. Lastly, all interviewees shared a sense of care for people they considered to be more vulnerable than themselves, illustrating that older people are not only the target of care and empathy by others in society but also the source of care and empathy for others in society. These aspects situate older people as active citizens, critical of the state, engaged in the use of technology and caring for people other than those in their immediate circle – all signs that they are actively part of the flow of society.



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