

Kabinet.bg—a model of an outpatient training clinic in a non-regulated environment of psychotherapy in Bulgaria

Kabinet.bg – ein Modell einer ambulanten Ausbildungsklinik in einem gesetzlich nicht normierten Umfeld der Psychotherapie in Bulgarien

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Kurzzusammenfassung

Der Beitrag stellt Kabinet.bg vor – eine Anlaufstelle für Notfallpsychotherapie und emotionale Unterstützung. Er vermittelt eine allgemeine, nicht abschließende Vorstellung über die Gründe für die Entstehung der Online-Plattform als soziale Antwort auf die Covid-19-Pandemie, in einer Situation massiven Traumas und in einem Umfeld rechtlich unregelter Psychotherapie in Bulgarien.

Die Plattform wurde Mitte 2020 ins Leben gerufen, um auf die Pandemie zu reagieren und die Bedürftigsten sowie besonders gefährdete Personen zu unterstützen. Der Text beleuchtet Ideen, Erfolge und Herausforderungen, denen die Plattform in ihrem Alltag begegnet. Es wird das demografische Profil der Nutzer:innen nach Geschlecht, Alter, Wohnort, Distanz und Verbindungskanal sowie das klinische Profil der Nutzer basierend auf ihren Erstanfragen dargestellt.

Der Beitrag zeichnet die Transformation der Kabinet.bg-Plattform in eine psychotherapeutische Ausbildungsklinik der Bulgarischen Gesellschaft für Psychoanalyse und Gruppenanalyse nach. Dabei stellt der Text Fragen und formuliert Annahmen zu den sozialen Dimensionen der Anwendung von Psychotherapie.

Die präsentierten Daten beziehen sich auf den Zeitraum von der Entstehung der Plattform Mitte 2020 bis Mitte Mai 2022.

Schlüsselwörter

Kabinet.bg, Covid-19, Psychotherapie, Notfallpsychotherapie, emotionale Unterstützung, Ausbildungsklinik, Bulgarische Gesellschaft für Psychoanalyse und Gruppenanalyse

Abstract

The article presents Kabinet.bg—emergency psychotherapy and emotional support. It gives a general non-exhaustive idea about the reasons for the emergence of the online platform, as a social response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in the situation of mass trauma and in the environment of non-regulated psychotherapy in Bulgaria.

Created in mid-2020 in response to the pandemic and to support those most in need and at highest risk, the text illuminates the ideas, achievements and difficulties that the platform encounters in its daily life. The demographic profile of the users is tracked – by gender, age, place of residence, distance, connection channel, as well as the clinical profile of the users – according to their initial inquiries.

The paper traces the transformation of the Kabinet.bg platform into a psychotherapy training clinic of the Bulgarian Society for Psychoanalysis and Group Analysis. The text asks questions and makes assumptions about the social dimensions in the application of psychotherapy.

The presented data is from the creation of the platform in mid-2020 to mid-May 2022.

keywords

Kabinet.bg, Covid-19, psychotherapy, emergency psychotherapy, emotional support, training clinic, Bulgarian Society of Psychoanalysis and Group Analysis

1. Introduction

The online platform Kabinet.bg—emergency psychotherapeutic help and emotional support (<https://kabinet.bg/en>) is a project of the Bulgarian Society for Psychoanalysis and Group Analysis (BSPGA) (<https://groupanalysis-bg.org/>). It is created in the mid-2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a social response to the mass trauma experienced.

Bulgaria is top 59 in the world of number of infections during the pandemic, top 28 in number of deaths and top 2 of number of deaths per 1 million people (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>). 67.91 are the given doses of vaccine against Covid-19 per 100 people in Bulgaria (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1196071/covid-19-vaccination-rate-in-europe-by-country/#:~:text=COVID%2D19%20vaccination%20rate%20in%20European%20countries%20as%20of%20January%202023&text=As%20of%20January%2018%2C%202023,administered%2058.49%20doses%20per%20100>). This puts Bulgaria on the last place in this indicator among the countries in Europe.

There is no legal regulation in the field of psychotherapy in Bulgaria. Psychotherapy is not among the official list of professions. Psychotherapy is represented by 14 psychotherapeutic approaches. Part of the organisations of these approaches, as well as individual psychotherapists, are members of the unifying organisation Bulgarian Association of Psychotherapy (<https://psychotherapy-bg.org/>). Another part are outside it. Psychotherapeutic practice takes place in private practice and within projects, outside the hospital system and without support from the National Health Insurance Fund. Systematic statistics and research in the field of psychotherapy are lacking. The word psychotherapist is often replaced by the word psychologist in the public speech, used as a synonym and to soften the expression. Control over the practice and lay use of the word psychotherapist as part of one's professional occupation is impossible outside of the membership of the unifying organisation. A large proportion of psychotherapy users do not differentiate between a psychotherapist, a psychologist and a psychiatrist.

From August 14th, 2020, when it receives its first inquiry, until the end of 2020, the platform provides online services, with the voluntary work of a team of 26 psychotherapists, united and sharing common ideas in the field of psychotherapy and a common educational tradition. The platform receives a total of 154 single inquiries until the end of 2020. By the time of finishing the current article, Kabinet.bg has 1,224 users.

The model of Kabinet.bg is presented here as a systematic experience in psychotherapy in the non-systematic and legally non-regulated environment in the field of psychotherapy in Bulgaria. Initial conclusions about the possible changes that the model induces and/or initiates in the environment are made. Questions about the purpose and social dimension of psychotherapy are raised.

2. Kabinet.bg

2.1 Social and epidemiological context

Kabinet.bg emerged in mid-2020 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. A time filled with many unknowns, lack of information, a strong external and internal attack on the psychic. Time is marked by the undoing of things we have been accustomed to for decades. The pandemic has affected everyone. Many people remained locked up and in complete isolation and loneliness, others, on the contrary, had to remain in their homes, in continuous physical coexistence with the close ones.

All people were experiencing spatial and emotional anomalies—of compulsion and displacement, from narrow to vast and vice versa, of strong attachment and repulsion, of grief and loss, of the emergence of a new world and life. The outside world, the exterior of our living, became inaccessible for a long time. The mankind was forced to organise him/her-self in the physical space of his/her body in a new way, to defend and protect it from other human beings.

The new situation negatively affected people's mental health to the greatest extent. Until then, "mental health" in the context in Bulgarian remained hidden in offices, behind hospital walls, unmanifested to the point of being unacceptable, it was rather not accepted to talk about it publicly and openly, often or at all. The pandemic brought human experiences to light, made them matter. The topic of mental health has entered the public agenda.

Everyone lived in a new world where suffering, anxiety and fears dominated everyday life and took precedence over the sense of reality and common sense (Iossifova, Tz. (20.10.2020). Syuzheti na straha. BNR. Last visit on 18.06.2023 at <https://bnr.bg/hristobotev/post/101359624>). Many complex life situations were reduced to the drive and desire for physical survival of oneself and the closest. Psychic powers and energies were invested in overcoming the universal inexplicable fear of penetrating the formless body of the unknown and guarding against the looming potential threat of sudden and unexpected personal loss.

2.2 Reasons for the emergence of Kabinet.bg

Bulgaria ranks last in the European Union in terms of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=EU>) per capita. A high percentage of the Bulgarian population lives on the threshold of poverty in isolation, without access to any social infrastructure and psychotherapeutic help.

The appearance of Kabinet.bg is a meeting of several simultaneously manifested human, social and professional needs.

People were experiencing a mass trauma (Ieroham, D. Iossifova, Tz. (08.04.2020). Izvanredno polozhenie: Koy shte otselee? Bulevard Balgariya. Last visit on 18.06.2023 at <https://boulevardbulgaria.bg/articles/izvanrednoto-polozhenie-koy-shte-otselee>), Iossifova. Tz.

(08.10.2022). Veche imame traumatichna istoriya s Covid-19. BNR. Last visit on 18.06.2023 at <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/101353319>) without it being named, thought of and treated as such.

Old and new states of intense anxiety of unexplained origin arose, aggravated and relapsed mental suffering in the whole spectrum of mental disorders. The need for emotional support appeared to be massive, immediate and urgent. It manifested itself in all social groups, ages and existential situations. The pandemic has brought new social groups to light. Hardly until that moment has humanity experienced something that on such a large scale and so directly affected every individual.

Kabinet.bg appeared in response to mass trauma and the need for immediate emotional support. All people experienced it immediately through their human experience. We as psychotherapists also noticed the increase in suffering in daily encounters with patients. The person regressed to a newborn state needed to be emotionally sheltered and protected. We knew we had to think beyond all the things we already know and practice. It was a time to find a new kind of reflex, a new response to the situation and adequacy. Psychotherapy and practical skills had to be able to reach everyone who needed them at that moment. We were experiencing the kairos of psychotherapy (Benyamin, V. Kayros. Sachineniya po filosofiya. IK Kritika i Humanizam. 2014).

Many psychotherapists in Bulgaria at that first moment were not able to adapt to the new situation and had to stop psychotherapeutic practice. The contagion of the man-kind with helplessness also affected the professional community and acquired dimensions unheard of until then.

The situation required a solution that would allow connecting and working with another person regardless of who they are, where they are, what social group they belong to, and what their existential situation is. In many other cases, it was a necessity to continue an already ongoing psychotherapeutic process.

The task faced was at once human, creative and psychotherapeutic. A new 'invention' that would enable emotional support, while simultaneously satisfying the need for mass and easy access to psychotherapy, and guaranteeing full-fledged psychotherapeutic work, in an unusual situation of mass trauma, isolation, crisis, uncertainty, and fear was needed. The users in need of psychotherapy and the therapists must be connected.

Finally, to be mentioned is the inherent need of every training institute, in every psychotherapeutic approach, for students in the process of formation, to carry out practice, to apply the acquired knowledge and skills.

2.3 The team

There is a 13-member professional team of psychotherapists, with many years of individual and group practice and experience of working in the community and with various marginalised groups, affiliated to the Bulgarian Society for Psychoanalysis and Group Analysis at the time and until now. There is also a student group in the process of formation in psychoanalysis and group analysis in an advanced stage of training, which at the time of the creation of Kabinet.bg that is already practicing under supervision. These two circumstances allowed thinking of the whole group as a 26-member team, with greater

professional, time and human capacity that could cope with the implementation of the complex and responsible task of daily service of an online platform for emergency psychotherapy and emotional support.

Another good circumstance appeared to be the fact that the entire group shared common educational, ethical and standards of practicing. The fact that everyone had previous and current group psychotherapy experience also played a decisive role. All this made the whole process—from the creation of the team, through its working together to the immediate contribution of each one in the sharing of responsibilities—possible and less complicated than it would be in a team without shared group experience and knowledge of each one's professional work.

Apart from the uniform educational and ethical standard of work mentioned above, another advantage of the team is belonging to an international educational and professional community and knowledge of many other international practices. This adds strength to our convictions and creates an overall consistent image that the team gradually internalizes. Kabinet.bg supports and offer psychotherapeutic work in six languages—Bulgarian, English, French, German, Turkish and Russian.

2.4 Risks and comparisons

This approach contains risks mostly related to the need to take on new roles and practice them. The team trusts in the knowledge that our experience, although unique and first here, has its analogues in European and world practice. This analysis and understanding, of closer and more distant analogies, came at a later stage, well after the creation of Kabinet.bg. In the beginning, we were driven exclusively by the belief that we were creating something new, interesting, and that matched our professional and human beliefs in a satisfying and fulfilling way.

Gradually, the platform has been becoming more and more popular and took on more and more inquiries. The scale of the undertaking increased; the responsibilities increased. Kabinet.bg started to be thought and seen as a training psychotherapy clinic at BSPGA and to compare it with the ideas and history of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Clinic (Berliner Psychoanalytische Poliklinik) of the 20s of the XXth century. Established on February 14th, 1920 by Max Max Eitingon, Ernst Simmel and Karl Abraham. It has become and is perceived as an institutional triad model for combining the functions of therapy, research and training in one. We also began to explore the practice of Ambulanz (<https://ambulanz.sfu.ac.at/en/>) of the Sigmund Freud University in Vienna. These comparisons further helped develop the venture as a psychotherapy clinic.

2.5 The technological solution. The partners. Infrastructure

In search of 'our approach' to realise the idea of an online platform for emergency psychotherapy and emotional support, various foreign practices were investigated. Our study had a technological and substantive dimension. We made predictions, fantasised, and imagined directions of development in the future. In the end, it turned out that the solution we found was completely our own and unique, and it was as if the research we did remained as a background that warmed us to reach it.

There have been more than one good chance and Kabinet.bg got a lot of support. The idea of an online platform for emergency psychotherapy was proposed to the CEI (CEI-Central European Initiative's COVID-19 Extraordinary Call for Proposals), where it was selected and awarded with 21 other ideas among a total of over 7,500 received proposals from all over Europe. This exceptional recognition provided a powerful impetus for all the next steps we took from here on. The received financial support was for the creation and initial assembly of the invention, as well as the operation of the platform for the first six months. The exceptional recognition of the idea provided energy and became an investment of a lot of responsibility in making it happen.

A part of team already used many digital tools in work and everyday life. We turned these skills into a part of the technical-technological solution. The need to be digital and online—accessible through the Internet, became obvious, especially since at that time only connecting through the Internet seemed to overcome, in some symbolic sense, physical isolation. At the same time, we knew we had to be able to reach as many people in need as possible. Many of those we have in mind and need support do not have digital devices, nor do they have the skills to work with them. The free phone line (+359(0)80020202), although chronologically it appeared last in the ‘assembling’ of the whole invention, became an integral part of the whole solution—for finding and contacting us, but also when we had to work with people, who, for example, only have access to a landline telephone.

A1 Telecom provided an in-kind donation a free telephone number and an IVR telephone exchange, which allows simultaneous operation of four incoming and four outgoing calls. Bulgarian National Radio (<https://bnr.bg/>) and Dnevnik (<https://www.dnevnik.bg/>) became the first media partners of the platform.

With partially or entirely voluntary work, a website as the front end of the platform was created. The back end of the platform was created under the free instruments of Google Suite, where, in addition to the overall working structure of the platform, each psychotherapist from the team has an individual profile. The back end significantly facilitates the daily work, arranges it and professionalises it, even when it is necessary to process a large amount of information. Google Meet is used for the online work with users. Each team member has a different level of access to information according to the functions he/she performs. This allows to maintain complete confidentiality of users, non-interference of information flows and a high ethical standard in work. If online each team member would be able to carry out their duties regardless of the location, they are. Kabinet.bg office is entirely virtual.

2.6 Principles of work. What does Kabinet.bg offer? How does that work? Clinical network

Kabinet.bg offers (emergency) psychotherapy. These can be: - individual; - family and couple; and – group sessions. The individual sessions are 45 minutes in all provided formats—in person, online, by phone, via email, via FB chat. Anyone who seeks support is referred to a psychotherapist and supported. Initial clinical analysis is done and speed clinical referral to the most suitable therapist, confidentiality, protection of personal data, non-interference of information flows. Due to the diversity of activities in the organisation, careful division of team roles is made.

The urgency needs to be clarified a little more. Psychotherapy is usually associated with a lengthy process and 'slowness'. The appearance of the word urgent in the title of endeavor seems to challenge the ideas of psychotherapy. A contradiction between fast and slow appears. We associate urgency with the user who, under the pressure of his/her psyche and inner mental 'urgency', contacts us in search of help. It is a moment and state of the patient's mind at a certain, non-arbitrary moment. This moment could also be seen as a kind of Kairos of bonding, regardless of how the relationship between the patient and the therapist would develop and how the psychotherapy process would unfold for the patient. Urgency is not the same as impulsivity and must be distinguished from it. Urgency is a word, a sign of language that should unlock the moment of awareness in which the patient decides to take an action. Urgency is the very moment of action.

2.7 A daily process

The daily process at Kabinet.bg—from the initial contact and communication to the referral and organisation of the first session is carried out by dispatchers-coordinators from the team who are psychotherapists. Thus, the daily process becomes complete and shared. The work is managed by a clinical director and chief dispatcher. After receiving an inquiry—by phone, through the website or by e-mail, the inquiry receives a unique number and is technically and analytically processed. An initial contact interview is conducted, after which the user is clinically referred based on his/her inquiry. Each inquiry and case are individually tracked.

Psychotherapists receive ongoing small-group supervision, on-demand individual supervision, and large-group supervision. The work has a social focus. Anyone who seeks help, regardless of social status and existential situation is accommodated. Often there are severe cases of people who have never had the knowledge or thought that they could get support or access support or live in places with no health and social service infrastructure. A gradual attempt of creating a network of clinical partnerships (with other professionals or services) in the places where our users are from is made. This, apart from being a very difficult task that does not always succeed, is sometimes imperative and mandatory for clinical reasons, other times there is striving for it to ensure greater sustainability of the work.

3. Therapeutic challenges

3.1 With or without experience in psychotherapy

The challenges in daily work are of a diverse nature. Some challenges are purely clinical; others are social and digital in nature.

The main challenge of a clinical nature is the urgency already mentioned, the mass of inquiries combined with the users' expectations at the entrance. The severe clinical cases that have never been cared by any mental health professionals, and the stigma that must be overcome. The work takes place in conditions of mass trauma. Sometimes the team members are also affected by its manifestation.

Another challenge to be classified as clinical in nature, is the fact that entirely new groups of people have been reached, with no previous experience of psychotherapy (55% of all users), without knowing

or having heard of what psychotherapy is, without having used another social service ever before. With them, through psychotherapeutic work, the idea of psychotherapy, introduce the rules and principles of work are also to be built.

3.2 Social and clinical demographics of users

78% of Kabinet.bg users are women, 20% man, 2% self-identify as other (Figure 1.). The interesting trend here is the change in proportion between gender groups. In the first six months, the number of male users reached approx. 30% of all. In the process of work, also because of the targeted work with specific groups, such as women in difficulty and in need of support (a project developed in partnership with the Bulgarian Fund for Women (<https://bgfundforwomen.org/en/>)), the percentage of female users is rising. The percentage of users self-identifying as Other appears to be lower than expected and observed in our practice with patients. We relate this to the stigma that Bulgarian society places on people with sexual orientation other than heterosexual, as well as the societal rejection of the concept of social gender.

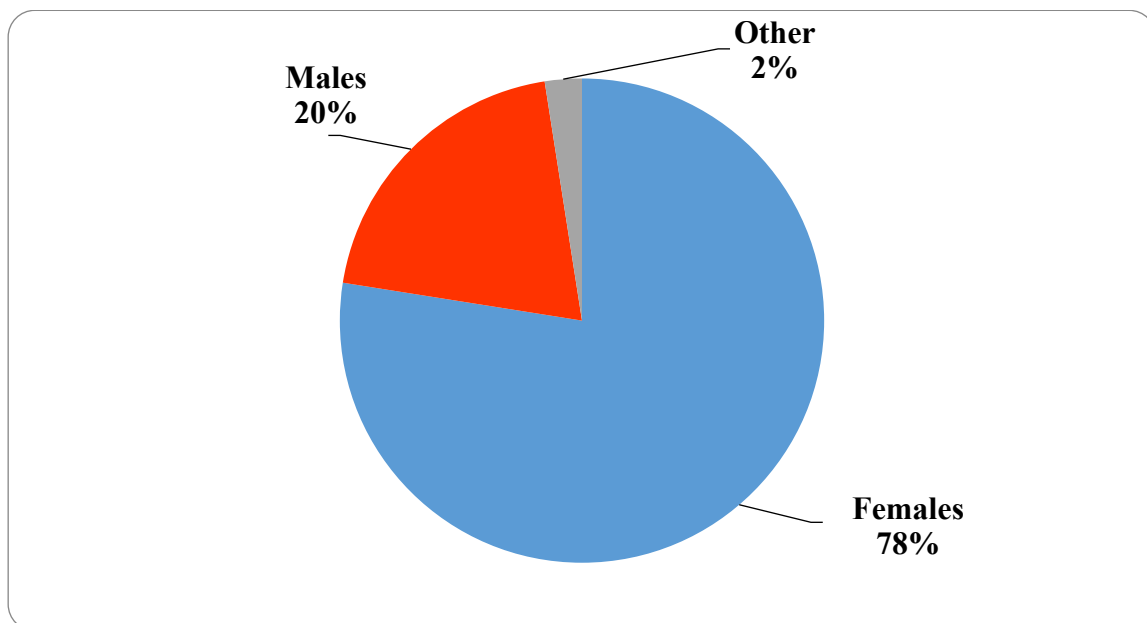


Figure 1. Users by gender

Figure 2. shows that the largest percentage of users (35%) are in the 18 to 29 age group. This is the youth age where one is still inclined to try things, experiment with life and existence, childhood and teenage years have passed, and one has the freedom to make independent choices. This group followed by the next two groups—those of users from the next decades, in the age group of 29 to 39 years (27% of all), and the next—in the age group of 40 to 59 years (26%), where fall two decades. Users aged 60 to 75 are 5%, followed by those after 75 are 1%. Children, worked with after parental consent, represent 6% of all users.

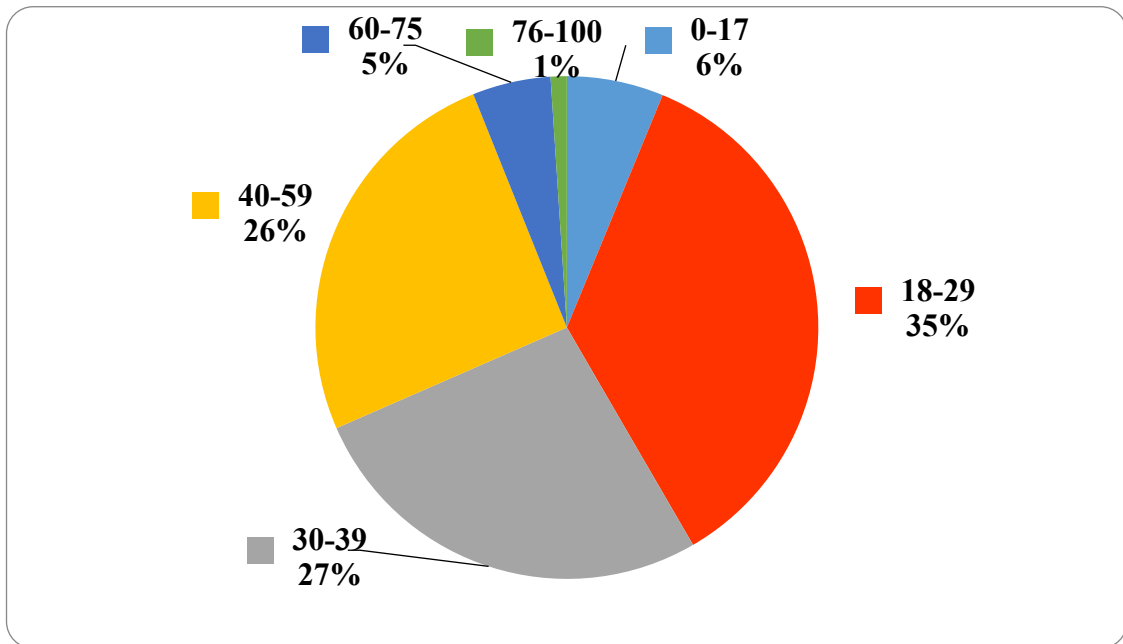


Figure 2. Users by age

According to what users say in their inquiries, 55% of all are in therapy for the first time (Figure 3.). The remaining 45% stated that they had previous experience. Often, when the user's previous experience is explored more thoroughly at the initial contact, it turns out that the experience is not related to psychotherapy, but rather associatively thought of by the user as being psychotherapeutic. Various forms of entrance 'counseling' are also described as experiences in psychotherapy. This process of association thought and considered entirely for the benefit of the psychotherapy process, as well as the cause of psychotherapy and its popularisation.

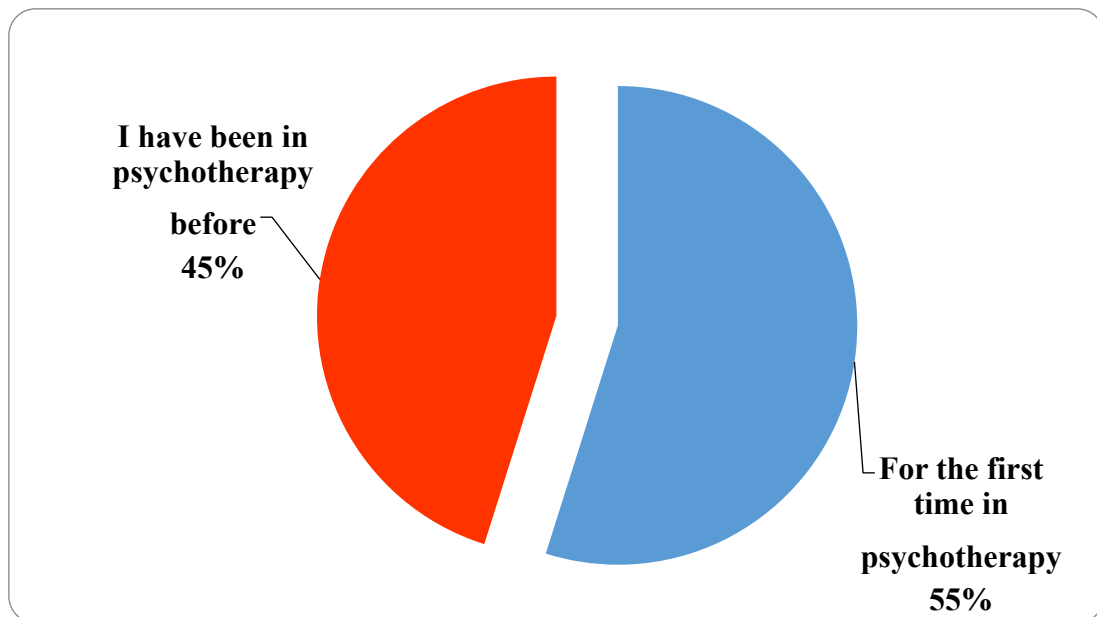


Figure 3. Users by psychotherapy experience

According to the suffering described by the user in the initial inquiry (Figure 4.), the largest share (24%) has sufferings related to general anxiety, panic attacks, obsessive fears. 15% of users indicate as the main reason Covid-19, another illness or they are after a psychiatric diagnosis. The next group (14%) includes problems related to broken relationships with a partner, loved ones, at work, etc. 12% of all describe their suffering as depression, suicidal thoughts and behaviour, self-harm. These first three groups with the highest percentage cover a total of 70% of all requests. 7% of users have requests related to issues of gender, identity, sexual orientation, or declare belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community. 6% are experiencing loss and grief at the moment when they decide to seek psychotherapeutic help, 5% have been the object of aggression or domestic violence. Most inquiries contain more than one affliction and would fall into more than one category in a more extensive and multidimensional analysis. In this classification, the groups according to their most prominent distress in the inquiry is shown.

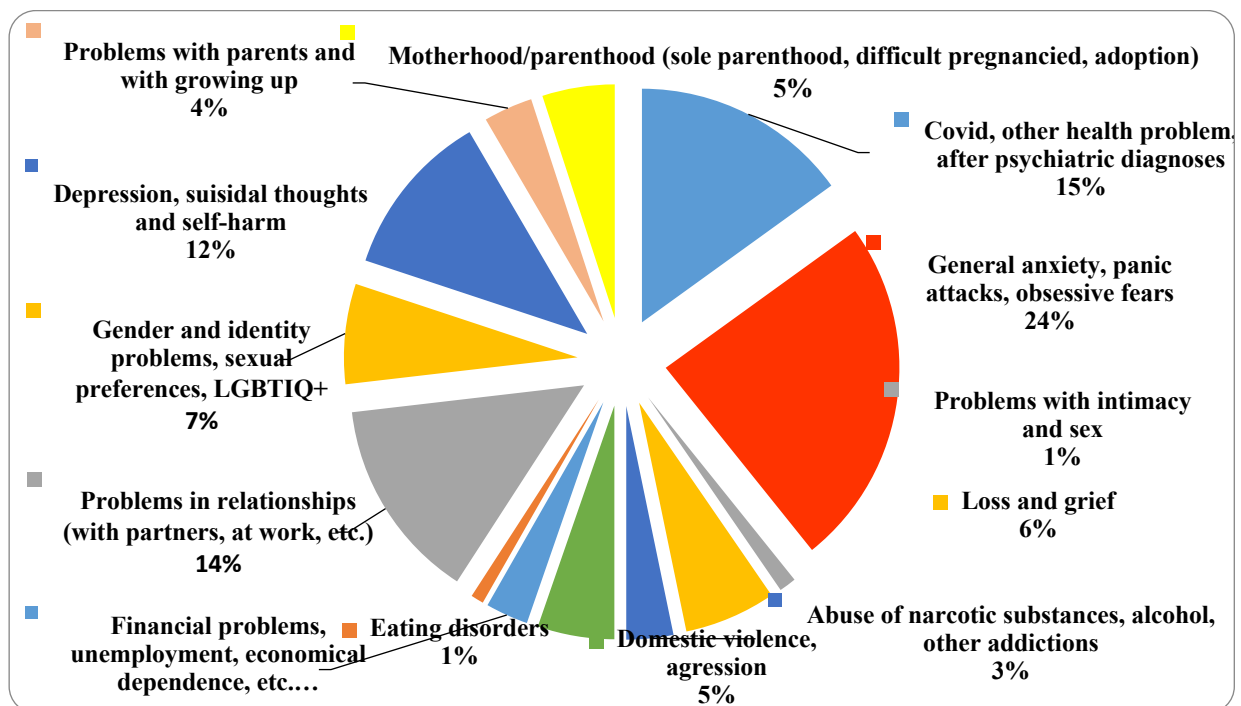


Figure 4. Users by suffering in their initial inquiry

According to the location of the users (Figure 5.) 62% of the requests are from Sofia, followed by 20% of users from a large city, 8% are people living outside Bulgaria, 5% are people from a medium-sized and small city and another 5% are from a village.

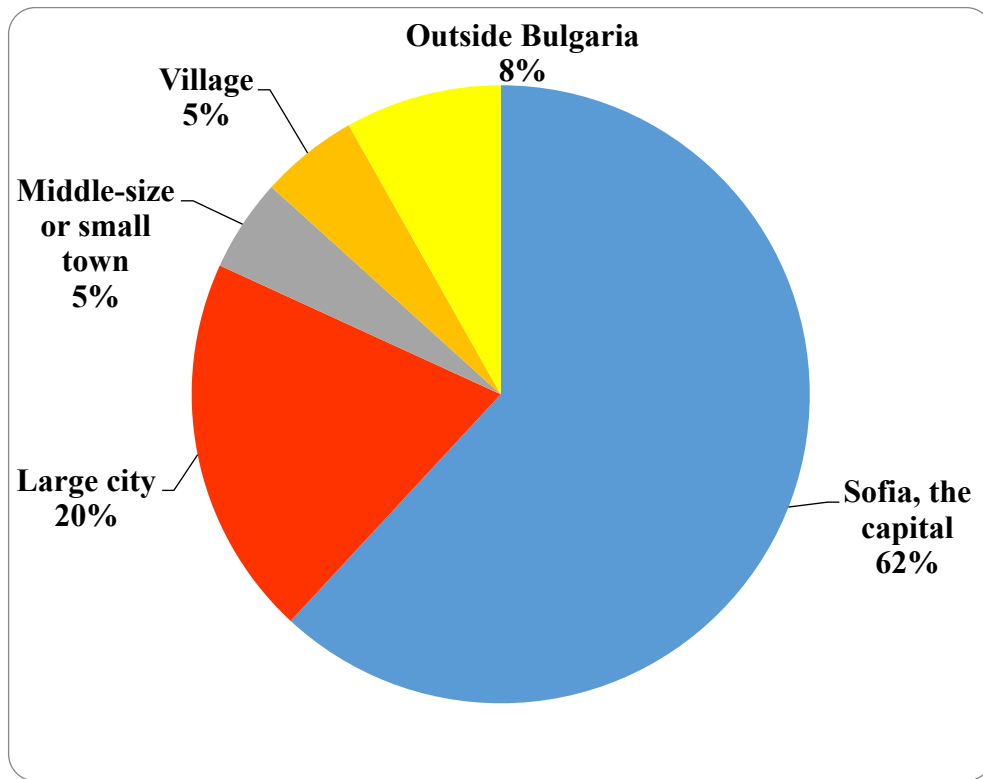


Figure 5. Users by location

According to the way of contact for work (Figure 6.), 57% of users work online, with 32% in person, with 6% by phone and with 5% we work by e-mail epistolary. The important trend here is the increase in the number of people with whom the work is in-person. If a picture taken only referring to the present moment, this percentage would be higher, probably at least equal to the percentage of users we work with online. In this sample, the users with whom the work is online are a higher number because of our first year of operation, when there were consequence of lockdowns and prolonged restrictions on live meetings

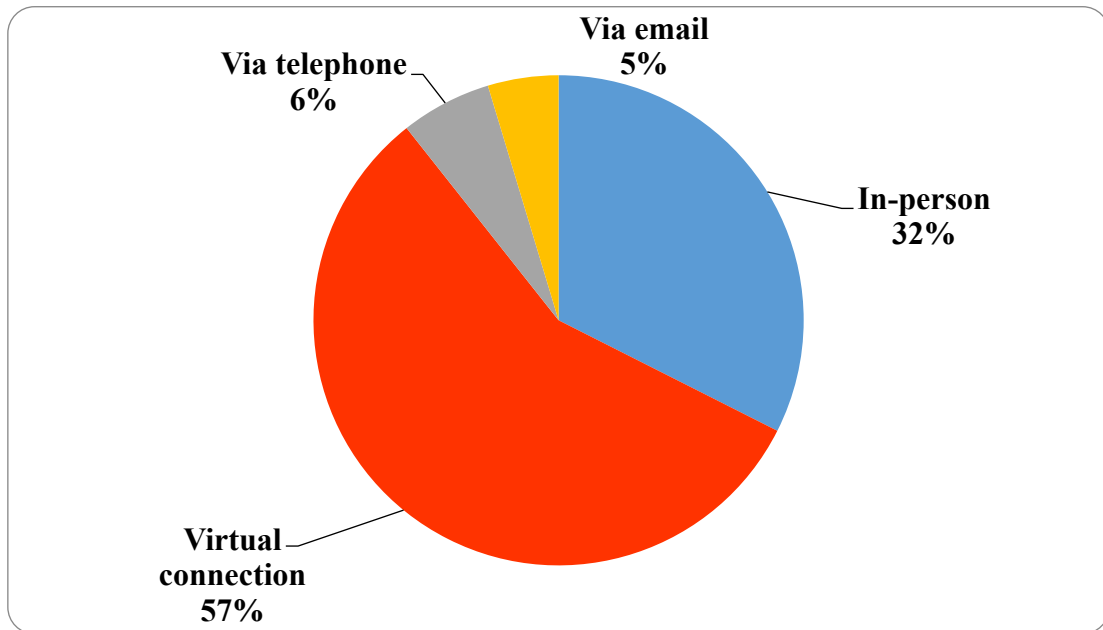


Figure 6. Users by way of operation

52% of all turn to Kabinet.bg on the recommendation of another user (Figure 7.). 24% learned about it from Facebook, 16% from the Internet, from a donor programme 4%, from television 3%, and 1% from the radio.

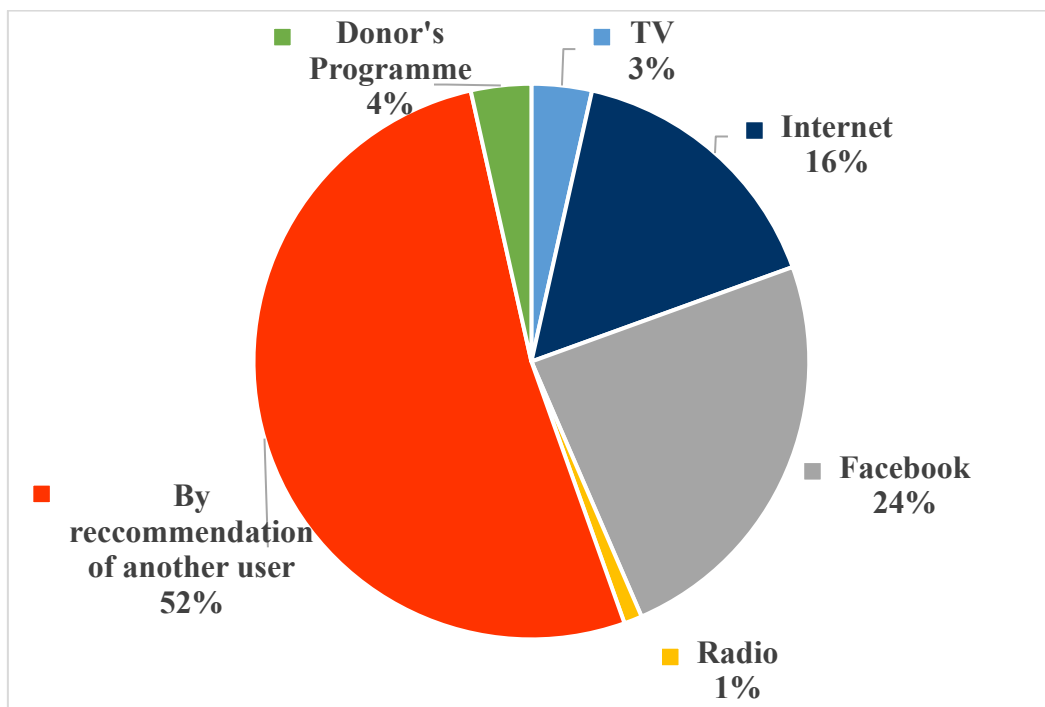


Figure 7. Users by referral method

4. Social dimension of psychotherapeutic work

The social orientation of the work of Kabinet.bg is among its most obvious characteristics. It is also misinterpreted and sometimes most difficult to accept by the professional community. Since its creation, Kabinet.bg has strived to reach people who are at the greatest risk and in the most urgent need of psychotherapy and emotional support, regardless of their social status and economic capabilities, and when they need it.

Achieved by raising funds from various donor programmes like CEI, Telus International Community Board Foundation, CAF, Playtech, BeCause and more. Lasting partnerships with organisations that protect the interests of various marginalised groups, fight for human rights, or those that advocate a certain cause close to ours were created. Some of these organisations are the Bulgarian Women's Fund, GLAS Foundation, the Social Tea House and Karin Dom in Varna, etc.

5. Advocacy and promotion of psychotherapy in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, psychotherapy is not a regulated profession. There is also a lack of legal regulation of the entire psychotherapy field—as an independent scientific field, training, and practice. This often puts psychotherapy in a disadvantageous and predatory position, making it extremely difficult and impossible to publicly affirm it in a good way. The situation can be described as trying to include in life a person who has not yet been given a name and has not entered the world of culture. Wherever this individual is to be presented it becomes impossible or very difficult because he has not yet been born to the outside world.

The promotion of psychotherapy and the activities of Kabinet.bg are delicate and complex task. Trying both be in the modern world, expressing and asserting it through its means, and staying on the delicate line of ethical norms that the team affirms through its work. Various public information campaigns are made to find the right language and messages that affirm the right to psychotherapy as a basic human right and encourage users to make choices that lead to timely professional help. The humble experience of Kabinet.bg can basically be described in five experiences. Two of them—in 2020 and in 2022—are entirely aimed at popularising psychotherapeutic support among women and young girls in difficulty and at risk. This is something done in partnership with the Bulgarian Fund for Women. In 2021 a campaign and programme on mental health for young people was done. In the same year, a series of informational activities and psychotherapeutic work, together with the GLAS Foundation and Bilitis Resource Centre were started. They aimed at young people from the LGBTIQ+ community and was called Rainbow Kabinet. One of other attempts, rated as the most successful, is the information campaign promoting the benefits of psychotherapy and supporting mental health, which we did together with People of Sofia.

6. Conclusion

The cause of Kabinet.bg is that the ideas and practice of psychotherapy reach more people and become available in a timely manner to those who need psychotherapy support, affirming psychotherapy as an independent scientific discipline and a free profession.

Covid-19 gives psychotherapy a chance to enter the public agenda.

Covid-19 serves as an occasion for one to seek psychotherapy. Users otherwise sufferings are the same as in other times.

The dynamics of the development of Kabinet.bg reflects the social processes and the epidemiological situation in the country, as well as the way in which the state fails to take care of the consequences of the pandemic.

The systematic experience of Kabinet.bg in the non-regulated environment of psychotherapy in Bulgaria has a beneficial effect on the recognition and popularization of psychotherapy all over the country.

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