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**MATURING  
PREMATURELY:  
A PANDEMIC YEAR  
IN THE LIFE OF  
YOUNG PEOPLE  
IN EASTERN  
CENTRAL EUROPE**

# ABSTRACT

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The coronavirus pandemic has been a great shock to societies in Central Europe. The restrictions it has brought about are extensive, and must have been particularly new for the young generation that cannot remember the eras before the democratic regimes were established in this region. In this report youths' experiences of the first year of the pandemic were studied in four countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted in each country, in which young people talked about a variety of topics and issues that had impacted their lives. In the study, it is argued that in areas like healthcare, inter-generational relationships, and education young people were pushed into becoming like adults, that is, into maturing prematurely.

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Godesberger Allee 149  
53175 Bonn (Germany)  
Email: [info@fes.de](mailto:info@fes.de)

### **Register no.:** VR2392

Bonn Register of Associations  
Bonn Local Court

### **President:** Martin Schulz

### **Secretary General:** Dr Sabine Fandrych

### **Responsible:**

Alexey Yusupov (International Dialogue)  
Phone: +49 30 269 357 734  
Email: [alexey.yusupov@fes.de](mailto:alexey.yusupov@fes.de)

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# INTRODUCTION

Young people are an important part of society, not just statistically (accounting for about one third of the EU-27 population according to Eurostat data (Eurostat 2021) but also materially. One day the young generation will define our world. The experiences, knowledge, skills, and values they acquire during their formative years play an important role in their personality formation and priority settings. Therefore it is important to study how youths are affected by historic events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses on young people and their perceptions of the Corona era in the Visegrad region (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia). It offers insights into various domains of young people's lives – education, employment, political and value orientations, interpersonal relations, daily life experiences.

When the first COVID-19 cases were reported at the end of 2019 in Asia, few people anticipated the virus spreading to Central Europe (as the SARS and MERS outbreaks did not affect the region much). However, the situation changed dramatically after the sudden COVID-19 outbreak in Europe in early spring 2020. Already in March 2020, the Visegrad countries' governments rapidly adopted strict regulations to slow the spread of the pandemic. The list of measures affecting the everyday lives of people in the region grew exponentially, including restrictions on the free movement of citizens, university closures, and the obligation to wear a protective mask.

After a brief lull in early summer, when almost all the restrictions were lifted, the second wave hit the region in autumn 2020. In October (November in Hungary), the schools were closed and education was carried out remotely and most employees worked from home. Curfews were introduced, including bans limiting movement to various degrees. Social distancing, including limits on the number of people who could meet in both public and private, was introduced in each V4 country. Last but not least, entire branches of the economy (like hospitality, tourism, sports, or entertainment facilities) were temporarily or more permanently shut down. The restraints were only progressively loosened with the arrival of summer 2021. However, the current spread of the Delta variant of COVID-19 in Europe may mean the alleviation is only temporary.



## METHODOLOGY

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This study is based on qualitative research – in-depth interviews were conducted with ten participants per country, i.e. 40 interviews in all. The moderator had an interview guide that was the same for all interviews and the moderator followed the guide. The interviews were held online in April 2021 and were aimed at a mix of genders, those aged between 14 and 30, from capital cities and rural as well as poorer regions. The interviews were conducted, translated, and transcribed by Ipsos agency. The authors of this paper then analysed the video recordings of the interviews (in the local language) and the English language transcripts. Authors used Atlas.ti software for qualitative text analysis. The transcripts were coded by authors and then the conventional qualitative content analysis was employed to interpret the data (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

## SCOPE AND FINDINGS

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We focus on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on young people's lives in four areas: family life and relationships with the older generation(s), value changes, education and employment, and trust in media and government. We argue that there is an underlying process occurring in all these areas of some young people's lives – the onset of premature maturity. For young people who participated in this research, the pandemic and governments' responses have contributed significantly to a change in their thinking and partly a change in their values. The change has psychologically and emotionally shifted these young people closer to the adult population.

Our findings indicate shifts in the value orientation and perceptions among the young people under investigation. We argue that the way young people in our sample think and talk about many issues (like job prospects or family relationships) is not typical of their age and would have happened rather later in their life cycle had there been no pandemic. If the COVID-19 pandemic persists, has the ability to adapt, and remains with us for a while, then the Corona era might become the "new normal" and lead to young people permanently internalizing the value and perception shifts described in this study. Thus, from the social perspective, we can argue that the coronavirus pandemic has prompted some part of the young generation to mature prematurely.

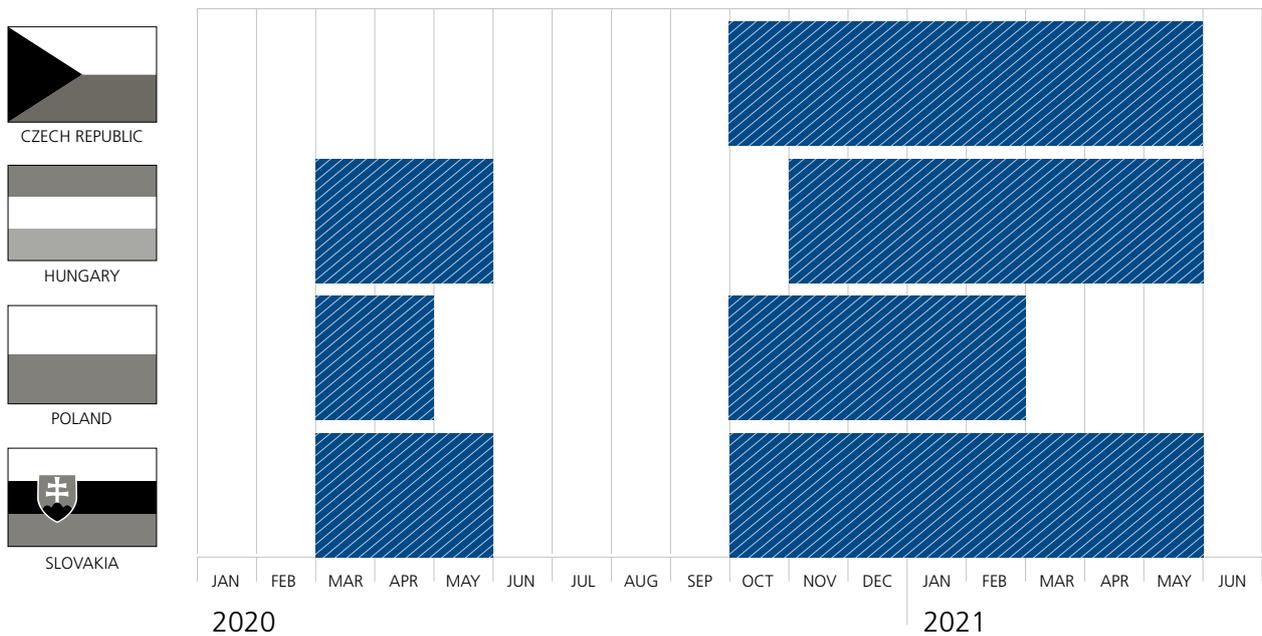
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# LIFE IN THE CORONA ERA

## GREYNESS OF THE DAY

The young generation in Visegrad countries has no direct experience of the communist regime. Some of them may be aware of the restrictions during this period from their parents' or grandparents' accounts. **However, until recently, most of them could not imagine a government having the power to restrict freedom of travel or movement. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, that not only became imaginable but was the reality.** In all four countries measures preventing the spread of infection were imposed at about the same time (for more detail see table 1). **The restrictions included quarantine, social distancing, obligatory mask-wearing, and strict hygiene regimes.** These rules applied to all individuals in the Visegrad countries. Nonetheless, some restrictions had a specific impact on young people, like the ban on travelling outside the district, the curfews, and the closing of facilities including schools.

### LOCKDOWNS IMPOSED IN VISEGRAD COUNTRIES



Infographic 01, Sources: Hungarian Government (2021); Ministry of the Interior and the Administration of Poland (2021); Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (2021); Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic (2021).

Almost all the respondents in the four countries shared negative feelings about the lockdowns. The short period of relief associated with not having to go to school or work and enjoying the sudden free time in the first few weeks of the lockdown in March 2020 was followed by a sober reckoning with the situation. As the lockdown and remote schooling became a more permanent part of life, young people were increasingly deprived of the usual joys of everyday life and were left with duties and chores.

**We spend nearly half the day on the computer, clicking things, making presentations, playing games, browsing websites, checking out YouTube... We sit in front of these screens but it's slowly getting a bit boring. Even these things can get boring... even though it could be a pleasure for most people. I don't feel like clicking on things all the time or sitting at the screen.**

R9, 15 y.o., Poland

**Some of our respondents described the negative feelings they experienced during the lockdowns as the "greyness of the day"<sup>1</sup>. This feeling was associated with the perceived monotony of routine the lockdown brought about.** Every day was seen as being "exactly the same", lacking any escape and/or interesting moments that could be transformed into experiences and shared with others.

For pupils and students the Corona days were alike: "get up in the morning, sit on the chair and open the laptop and you stare at it until the evening because schooling is online. And then, in the evening, you have to do your homework/read articles... again on the laptop. I feel... desperate." (R1, 25 y.o., Czechia) Some working participants felt the same, "constantly working, doing things" with no proper opportunity to relax. Watching the young

**But when I was going to school, every day was a bit different – I mean the lessons as well as what was happening among my classmates, during the breaks etc. For example, something funny happened, we had fun. But now, it's the same all the time.**

R7, 15 y.o., Czech Republic

generation growing up with modern technical equipment and internet access, one might think that relaxing through online entertainment would make the Corona era much easier for them compared to other generations. However, our respondents repeatedly stated they were fed up to the back teeth with the online environment.

Part of the problem with the daily routine under lockdown was the lack of interruption, markers in the day and week. For some of our respondents the markers were returning back home from school or after-school activities (sports, arts, etc). The closure of schools and other facilities deprived them of many extra-curricular activities. They may have had more time (due to saving time by not commuting) but they also had fewer opportunities to spend it in an enjoyable way. As some young people said, even the weekends and holidays lost their traditional appeal (because they were constantly at home).

**I just feel bored.... Don't know how to describe it... Boredom and some degree of sadness, I think. Because this year it's just sitting and sitting... Obviously, we still joke, but we joke much less I think.**

R4, 17 y.o., Poland

Also some older respondents, who had already started their professional careers before the pandemic, referred to the loss of the daily rhythm in a negative way. They missed having the opportunity "to put on a nice dress and shoes, select an outfit and go out, no matter whether you're going to school or work". They missed the things that had seemed mundane in the past and realized they had been a source of the little everyday joys.

Respondents who perceived the "greyness of the day" as a negative impact of the lockdown were not able to say precisely how it made them feel. They referred to "a kind of uncomfortable feeling"; however, their descriptions were close to depressive feelings. They spoke about tiredness, boredom, frustration, despair, resignation, and sadness.

<sup>1</sup> Kouwenhoven et al. (2012) explained that the feeling of "living the life in shades of grey" could be understood as "being confined in a new life-world and losing oneself as the person one knew" (p. 1726).

**The negative effect of the lockdowns and schooling/working from home, felt in the endless tasks and lack of a positive stimulus was not uniquely experienced by the young generation.** However, the impact was in some way more drastic for young people. **What makes this group especially vulnerable was that they didn't have the experience of routine that adult life brings, and that meant the older generation was better able to cope with this dull period. The COVID pandemic**

I think that back then, going out was like 40% of my life, now it's 5%. ... Back then, there was lots going on, my group and get-togethers with friends had a very strong impact on me. And now, it's like, fine, I have a free moment, so why don't I just meet my mate and it's just all ... not like it was before... In the past – we would go out and this was a big part of my life. Now it's practically nothing

R4, 17 y.o., Poland

**changed the daily lives of many kids and students pushing them into premature adulthood, which was something they were not mentally prepared for.** Besides, young people have higher expectations as their youth is seen as a time when they test out new things, meet new people, gain new experiences. Therefore, some felt deep despair: "the feeling that I am losing out on my youth, because I'm shut up in my apartment and can't do anything about it." (R5, 26 y.o., Slovakia)

## LOSS OF FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION

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The second important aspect of the lockdown was its **impact on interpersonal relationships.** The government-imposed closure of institutions like schools and **the introduction of the curfew led to a reduction in social contact, which can significantly increase feelings of loneliness** (Killgore et al., 2020). These new regulations caused unprecedented, rapid, and unexpected shifts in young people's lives. Suddenly, young people had to forgo regularly seeing their peers and other people and

I missed the opportunity to meet up with my friends freely. ... You know, not worrying. Just having the problems people my age should have. Not worrying about diseases or bringing them home and infecting someone else. ... I missed the life I had before.

R10, 17 y.o., Poland

were stuck at home with people they already knew. Although social isolation can be hard on many people, not just youths, young people were specifically affected. Adolescence is among other things a time when young people gain self-knowledge and form relationships. Psychologists underline that positive experiences serve as long-term predictors of romantic relationship satisfaction. As they point out "positive affect in adolescence predicted greater self-rated social competence during late adolescence [23–25 years old] and greater self-rated romantic competence and less partner-reported hostile conflict almost a decade later" (Kansky et al. 2019, p.1). **It is especially important for young people to have the opportunity to form new relationships and deepen existing ones, with a partner but also friendships in general. Being deprived of such opportunities could harm their personal development over the long term.** Our respondents perceived the lack of social contact with peers as the major negative effect of curfews. Although not all of our respondents temporarily halted all contact with friends, "going out" or "hanging out" with friends was not the same as before. Respondents who had a social life even in Corona era only met their friends in small "bubbles" of the same 5–8 people and had to avoid public spaces.

The secrecy and rebellion did not make their actions any more appealing; quite the contrary, they missed out on opportunities to meet out in the open completely legally. In the words of our respondents, they "try to stay safely in touch with others" but that requires various sacrifices like not meeting new people, staying in small groups, and meeting privately and less often. However, even when taking precautions, some young people were not completely comfortable with having to balance the need for peer contact with consideration for their loved ones back home.



## FEELINGS OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

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Although COVID-19 is a newly evolved virus it does not seem to directly cause serious mental illness. Nonetheless, the developing situation (fear of infection) and consequences such as government regulations on social distancing and the lockdown are likely to have varying degrees of impact on the psychological well-being of youths. According to Hajdúk et al. (2020), “given their age, **students represent a population at higher risk of onset of mental disorders**, especially psychotic disorders” and the strict regulations and radical changes to their daily routines may have led to **“feelings of insecurity, worries, anxiety or even hopelessness”** (Hajdúk et al. 2020, p. 520).

Some of our respondents admitted being **fearful of getting infected**. “I was totally scared that I might die and what if that happened... I went out even when there wasn't anyone there.” (R2, 15 y.o., Slovakia) Others **felt anxious because of the risk to loved-ones**, not themselves. “I miss seeing my family without feeling guilty about travelling from Prague, I went by train, I met so many people... is it safe to meet my grandma or grandpa?” (R1, 25 y.o., Czechia) As many of our respondents tried to explain, after the initial uncertainty about the spread of the virus at the beginning of the first wave, they became less stressed after the publicization of studies indicating that becoming infected with COVID had limited consequences on young people. Many of them also adopted coping strategies to “shut out” unsettling information sources reporting the number of cases and deaths. They stated that the internet was their main source of information and allowed them to pick and choose the news they saw.

Nevertheless, youths' psychological well-being can be negatively affected by other aspects.

**The changes induced by the COVID pandemic had a bigger effect on the young generation because of the stage in life they were at and the potential consequences for their future relationships, sense of progress, and consolidation of independence.** The major causes of distress for our respondents were feelings of failure, the inadequacies of online learning and uncertainty about the future, graduation, the quality of

the curricula (for more details see the part on Education in this study), and also the lack of peer interaction resulting in loneliness. Obviously, it is difficult to portray young people's state of mind using short quotes but the distress was captured in our research in multiple statements such as “the whole situation is really taking all my hope away”; “you start getting depressed”; “everyday looks a little greyer”; “I even felt tired, I cannot describe it – this kind of unpleasant feeling”; “being at home I have nothing to look forward to”. The psychological literature shows that these effects may lead to psychological problems such as anxiety or depression (Chandratre 2020), and among students, an increase in psychopathological symptoms, requiring psychological or psychiatric attention, has also been reported in Poland (e.g. Wieczorek 2021), Slovakia (e.g. Hajdúk et al. 2020), Hungary (Lukács 2021), and the Czech Republic (e.g. Trnka and Lorencova 2020).

At the same time, important protective factors such as increased contact with family members or higher social cohesion may temporarily serve as a buffer against the COVID related stressors (Hajdúk et al. 2020). “You start getting depressed. The only person that could mobilize me to do things was my mother or father. If it wasn't for them, I'd be doing nothing in the online classes.” (R9, 15 y.o., Poland) However, the role of family in reducing stress levels is ambiguous as some scholars have pointed out that having to move back in with parents and dysfunctional families contributes to the stressful situation experienced by young people in the Corona era (Wieczorek 2021, Csikós et al. 2020).

Feelings of fear and anxiety can catch young people off guard. The alarming perception that the disease was spreading was heightened by the fact that the current generation of young people in Visegrad had no experience of any kind of natural or social upheaval. The most recent epidemics like SARS or MERS did not hit Central Europe and the oppressive regimes in the Visegrad states (with censorship and ideological restrictions) were overthrown over thirty years ago. So **unlike other generations, many young people were experiencing distress on this magnitude for the first time in their lives. The pandemic thus forced young people into maturing unwillingly and earlier in life than has been the case for youths in recent decades.**

3

# GENERATION GAP

In August 2020, a WHO study showing a significant increase in young people with COVID-19 spread rapidly around the globe. The message that “young people are not invincible in the COVID-19 pandemic” got worldwide attention. Media news reports of young people partying and neglecting to follow social distancing rules offered an easy explanation for such trends.

## BOWLING TOGETHER...

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Negative publicity of irresponsible young people attending big parties despite the lockdowns and curfews spread in many countries, with Visegrad countries being no exception. For example news about reckless young party-goers in Holešov, the Czech Republic (Šimšová 2020), was picked up in neighbouring Slovakia (Topky2020) in March 2020. However, **our respondents did not notice the media or older generations paying special attention to youths, either negatively or positively.** Rather, they noted the dominance of the elderly-focused public discourse as they were the group worst hit by the coronavirus. Most of our respondents showed compassion for older generations mainly those in their families. The pandemic made them think about the fragility of their loved-ones and appreciate more the time they have together. The generation gap was mentioned only rarely; either, as part of a defence strategy “honestly, I see more older people not wearing masks than younger people. Even though the TV presents it the other way around.” (R8, 26 y.o., Poland) or as criticism of the government’s approach: “Everyone is talking about the fact that the first group to get vaccinated are pensioners. I think it’s a bit of a political decision too – to get old people’s votes. But in my opinion, many old people live in retirement homes, and ...can’t walk,... don’t go anywhere. Why should they be vaccinated?” (R10, 26 y.o., Czechia).

Apart from this, **the young people we had the chance to interview spoke highly of their families and thought their relationships with their parents and grandparents were deepening instead of deteriorating.**

I think we respect each other more now. I went home during the first lockdown and I was worried that we would annoy each other being shut up at home, and I was surprised that there was a kind of mutual understanding. I understood that my parents were a bit worried about Covid-19 because they are older.

On the other hand, they understood my frustration that I was stuck at home all the time. I think it deepened our relationship in a good way. Maybe it has shifted to a level of greater understanding

R1, 25 y.o., Czech Republic

Many of our respondents stated that **the coronavirus pandemic had somehow strengthened their appreciation of the family. We argue that teenagers do not tend to show greater acknowledgment and appreciation of their family relationships under normal circumstances; usually that happens when they establish their own families. The lockdowns and isolation under the pandemic thus speeded up this particular aspect of young people becoming more emotionally mature.**



You know, I'm 25 and these are supposed to be the best years of my life. .... If I'm afraid all the time, worried about others, what becomes of me in all of this? Seriously, you can't meet a girl you like because you're panicking, you don't want to bring something dangerous home and then you miss out on this cool stage of life. ... I don't want that to be taken away. I need it. It's something I live for and you know, I don't need to be here in this world. I just have to have that tiny bit of normalcy and freedom. I'd go crazy without it.

R7, 25 y.o., Poland

However, it is too early to conclude that this is a long-lasting shift in their value system. With the curfew limiting opportunities for public leisure time activities and social interactions, in many cases the only diversion from the social isolation was the close family. Young people spent more time with their parents and the existing bond was strengthened. Nonetheless one would have to test the durability of this reinforcement under regular circumstances, where young people lead unrestricted social lives.

## YOU CANNOT TAKE THE FUN AWAY FROM THIS GENERATION

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Our data revealed **a perception that was symptomatic of this young generation: the sense that they were entitled to live their lives fully, which suffered enormously under the pandemic.** Various respondents reported grievances about the situation affecting their generation. They were afraid they would have to spend their "whole life" like last year if the coronavirus continued. Such fears were reinforced by the repeat waves of the pandemic that ended in curfews and home schooling.

**They perceived Corona era as a lost time in their youth that could not be compensated.** "We live only once ... it really influences your whole life. We could have experienced many beautiful moments in our lives... instead of this". (R3, 19 y.o., Czechia).

Some of our respondents explained that they understood why young people gathered together (thereby violating COVID restrictions), or even joined in, precisely because of this perception that young people have a unique status.

Grieving for normalcy was even fostered by the view that young people were making this sacrifice for others, for older people for whom COVID-19 (see also text box above) is more of a risk. They complained that the restrictions preventing them from "going out", going to parties and to meet other people existed "because it's dangerous. Obviously not mainly for us, but for the older age group. I think how we experience it is not represented in the media so much." (R2, 18 y.o., Hungary) At the same time, they perceived their situation to be more difficult compared to previous generations because nowadays young people "know hundreds of people thanks to social media. This was not the case in the past. In the past you knew a few people who lived around you, a few people from work and that was it. .... I can't imagine sitting at home, not going anywhere... You can't take the fun away from this generation." (R9, 23 y.o., Czechia)

4

# VALUE CHANGE

## FAMILY AS A BEDROCK

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Young people's priorities?  
No. Maybe older people have changed their priorities. But looking at my friends – no, I don't think they have changed their values or priorities.

R6, 24 y.o., Poland

I prefer just to try and avoid conflicts more. I used to get involved in every conflict, I always had an opinion and I always said it. Now I prefer to just let it go, it doesn't matter, all that matters is being together.

R2, 18 y.o., Hungary

A few of our respondents – especially those who thought the pandemic was exaggerated by the state authorities and/or media, and who were not severely affected by the disease – did not identify shifts in their generation's value orientation.

However, more of our respondents were aware of the impact the Corona era had on their value systems. Most of them declared that COVID-19 had, to a certain degree, changed their perspective on what was important. They mentioned mainly the importance of the family and social contacts (above all friendship).

The family had been important for most of our respondents even before the pandemic, so one would not have expected a significant shift in this domain. Nevertheless, for many of our respondents, **the family was the first thing that came into their mind when asked about the things they appreciated. The risky and unpredictable nature of the pandemic added a new layer to their relationships with their parents and grandparents.** "I never worried about them in the past. This is new." (R6, 24 y.o., Czechia) They stated that they realized that "some things are more important ...that family is more important now". Even if they did not give much detail about their appreciation, usually the family was perceived as a stronghold, a bedrock they could count on. They realized "how important it is to have a strong and supportive relationship" with their loved-ones. The change in attitudinal level was mirrored in two different approaches, partially dependent on the age of our respondents. Younger respondents pointed out they made an effort to keep a balanced relationship with their parents.

Older respondents who already had their own household spoke about making an effort to spend more time with their parents and grandparents.

"I realized what the real values in life are. Before I was working a lot and didn't have much time to visit my family, so now I'm happy that I can spend time with them, my mum, grandmother, cousins. I missed this." (R3, 30 y.o., Slovakia)

On the one hand, the lockdown and the time the young people were forced to spend with their parents did not lead to inter-generational conflicts. On the other hand, though, it is difficult to assess the durability of the young people's increased sensitivity towards the elderly members of their families. The reason is that the lockdowns significantly reduced young people's opportunities for social contact and leisure activities. Their good intentions to keep up regular family contact will be put to the test once the pandemic and restrictions are lifted. Nevertheless, this **awareness of the transiency of life regarding loved-ones is a life experience that is much more common among adults and the elderly population and this unique experience has left its mark on the young generation**, causing them to mature prematurely.

## AIN'T NO SUNSHINE WHEN YOUR PEERS ARE GONE

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The importance of peer relations during adolescence is well recognized in the academic literature. Although peers can be a source of potential stress and have a detrimental effect on the individual's emotional development (Somerville 2013), the positive effects are permanent. Social interactions among peers can influence opportunities for acquiring positive social skills (Scholte, van Aken 2006), contribute to social development and provide emotional, or even psychological support (Ellis, Dumas, Forbes 2020). Adolescents who felt strongly attached to both their parents and peers had higher self-esteem (Raja et al. 1992). Briefly, **a sense of belonging to a peer community and having friendships can significantly shape adolescents' existence, contributing to the fullness of their life.**

Fewer opportunities for social contact and especially contact with peers under the lockdowns has led to them being valued at least as much as family appreciation. **Many of our respondents admitted they had never realized "how important the ability to meet up with a friend ... have coffee and a cake and talk" is. Before the pandemic they took it for granted and "didn't realize how precious these things are".**

Friendship is characterized by reciprocal feelings and commitment between two individuals who share similar orientations. In certain ways, they can become even more important than family ties. As adolescents struggle to become independent from their parents, their friends – rather than their parents – might become the primary source of interaction and influence. (Meuwese et al. 2017). "I want to spend more time with them, concentrate on them more, we really had some difficult times, so they are going to get more important." (R6, 22 y.o. Hungary)

Recognition of the importance of friendship was evident among our respondents regardless of age or country. However, members of the young generation who were still dependent on their parents during the Corona era felt they were even more deprived of "quality time, not necessarily with the close family, but rather with my friends,

classmates... leisure activities that can be done in groups". And they felt it had an impact on the values shared by "our generation – you realize what's important, social contacts etc. that's very important." (R2, 15 y.o., Czechia)

## NOTHING REALLY MATTERS

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The last topic relating to the changing priorities and values in the respondents' lives was the value of good health. The COVID-19 pandemic made some of them realize that nothing really mattered if they were not healthy. "I value good health more than before. In the past, I didn't take diseases seriously. So I definitely see a shift in this aspect." (R3, 19 y.o., Czechia). **The prominence of staying healthy (themselves and their loved-ones) among young people was usually referenced as being something new, a change provoked by the pandemic.** This notion was expressed not only in relation to last year (the Corona era) but also when looking to the future.

A growing number of studies indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the decline in freedom in many countries<sup>2</sup>, including the Visegrad region, as many government restrictions violated personal freedoms in order to protect public health. Therefore, it would be logical to assume that the young people would complain about such restraints and underline the value of freedom. Surprisingly, our data did not reveal appreciation of the value of freedom as such. Despite some respondents complaining about the restrictions being exaggerated, most of our respondents showed understanding, seeing them as something that was needed at a given time to protect the

**We'll pay more attention to our health after this. That's what I have been thinking too. If we are ever faced with a virus, disease, epidemic or whatever we have to face, and then even in the future, it doesn't matter what conditions we come up against, what matters is how fit and healthy we are.**

R10, 28 y.o., Hungary

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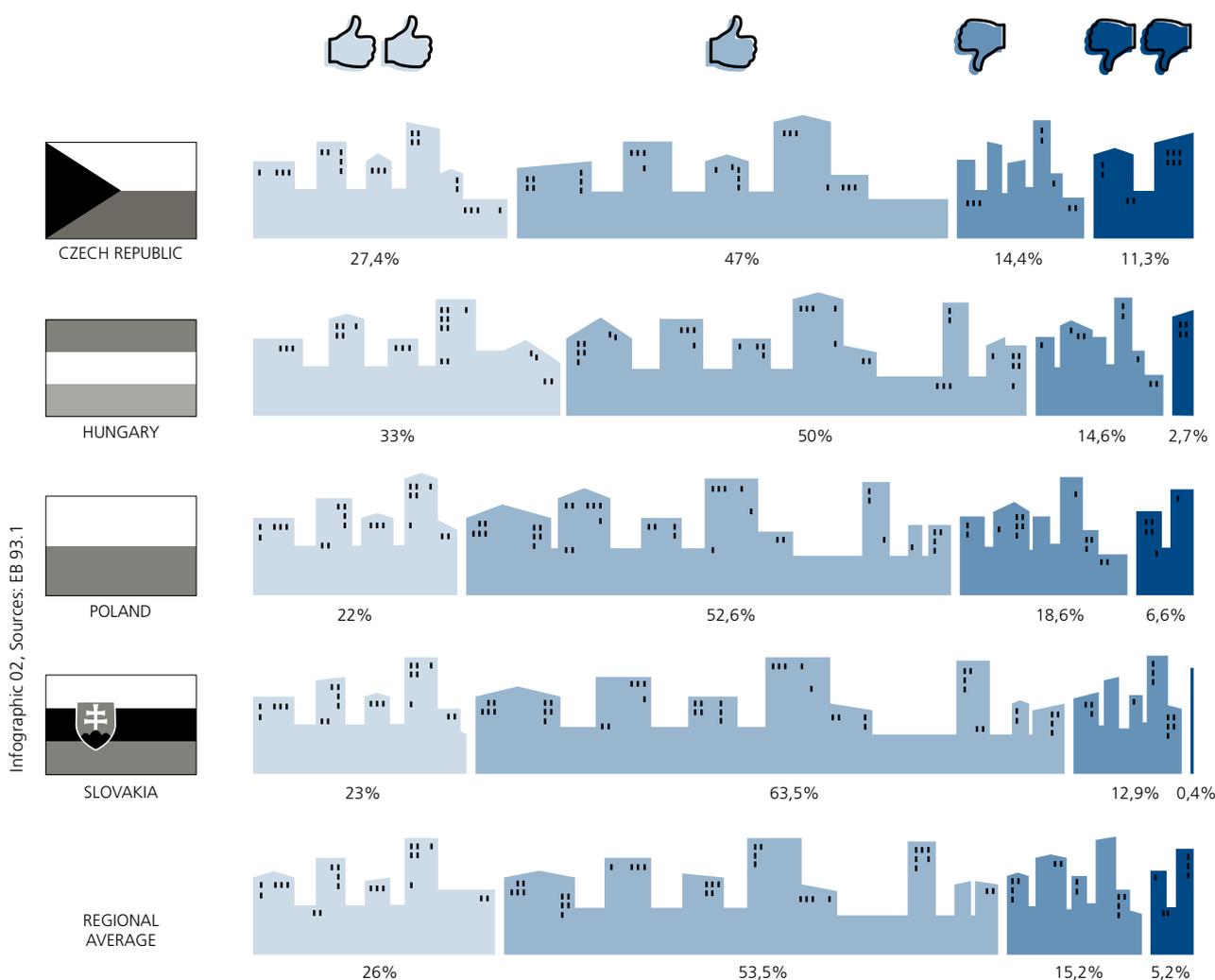
<sup>2</sup> See e.g. the analysis by Freedom House (2020); or the analysis by Zolka et al. (2021).

most vulnerable in society. This observation corresponds with the Eurobarometer 93.1 findings (table 2) showing that the majority of young people in the Visegrad countries though the government-imposed limitations on public liberties were justified. Our respondents missed going to the cinema, shopping mall, school; they missed travelling and spending time with friends but these hardships did not elevate their appreciation of freedom as a value in life.

It is too early to draw any conclusions on permanent changes to the young generation's value systems. However, some studies argue that COVID-19's staying power and ability to adapt may mean that the Corona era will become the "new normal" (Sihombing and Juliana 2021)

and thus changes in behaviour and values might have a longer lasting salience. We can observe small changes or rather a strengthening of the values young people already held in the pre-COVID period, namely: family and friendship. What is new under the Corona experience is the recognition of the value of health and the appreciation of the everyday joys of life (such as meeting friends, going for coffee or to the cinema, travelling). Usually this type of thinking and the appreciation of the "everyday joys" or "a carefree life" comes later, at the life stage where young people have to start taking care of the family, performing the function of care-giver. In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the "young Corona generation" maturing early.

### LIMITATIONS ON PUBLIC LIBERTIES, AGE 15-30



**5**

# **EDUCATION IN THE PANDEMIC**

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, the schools were among the first public places to close and within a short space of time children of all ages had to stay at home. In those first days, many young people did not think the situation was very serious. In all four countries, most felt relieved at the idea of a short holiday. In many youths' eyes, it was just another break that they could enjoy normally. And according to many of the interviewees in our research, many did enjoy that feeling for the first few days.

In total, schools remained either fully or partially closed for over a year from March 2020 to May 2021 (the number of weeks does not include scheduled school breaks). Table 3 shows how many weeks the schools in the Visegrad

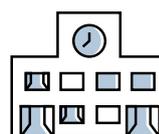
countries were closed in Corona era. While full closures dominated before summer 2020, the share of partial closures was higher from September 2020 onwards.

Pupils and students were in agreement that they had thought the coronavirus-related school break would be a short-term affair, in that it might take a week or a few weeks and then everything would be as it had been before. It was only after about a month that the young people began to realize that the coronavirus was here to stay for a bit longer and that remote education, mostly online, was unavoidable. First, we look at young people's assessments of the remote education and then we show their experiences and the dominant feelings associated with it.

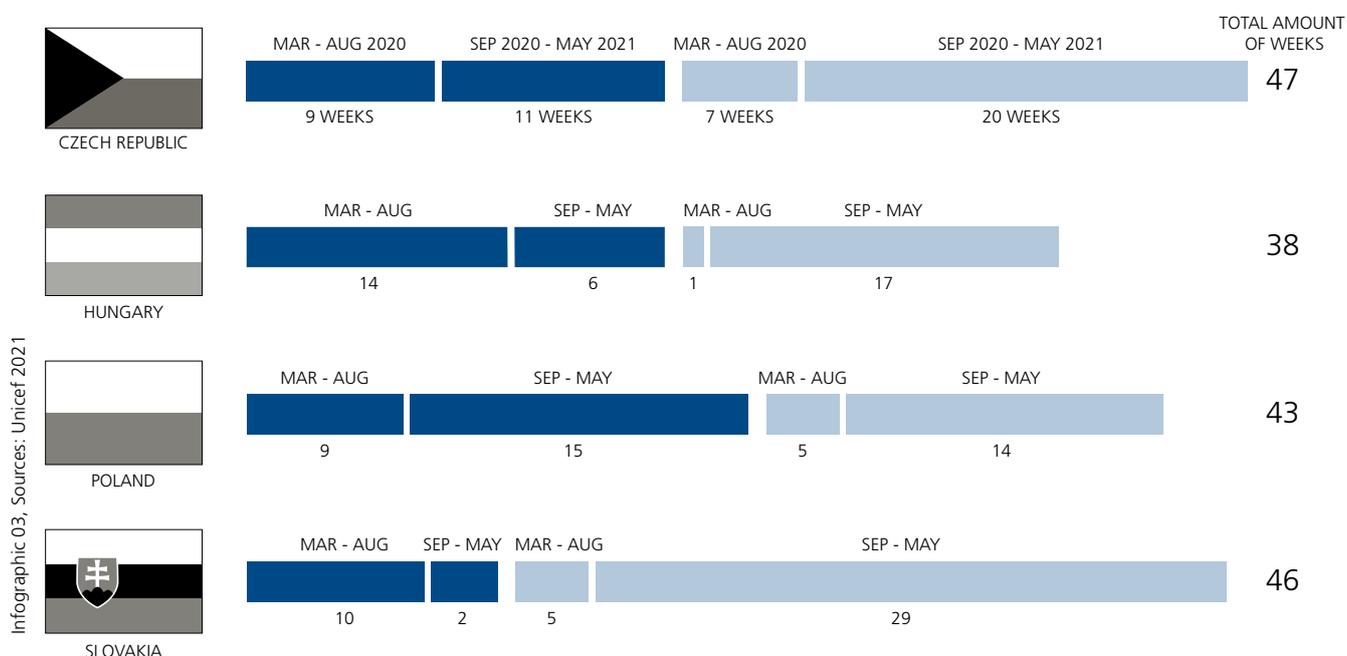
### NUMBER OF WEEKS SCHOOLS WERE CLOSED



FULL CLOSURES



PARTIAL CLOSURES



Infographic 03, Sources: Unicef 2021

## ONLINE EQUALS WORSE

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It is probably of no surprise that **the quality of remote schooling was generally seen as lower, in comparison to the in-person mode**. What is a little surprising though is that there was unanimous agreement on this. Respondents in all countries gave several reasons to support their view, and these can be grouped into two main sets.

The first set of reasons stems from the perception that the **schools were not prepared** for such a situation. Particularly in the first lockdown, our participants noticed that the teachers had very individual styles, both **in terms of the use of equipment and teaching content**. Our respondents put the difference down to the lack of harmonization or coordination by the schools. Often there were no teaching materials and teachers did not have the proper software, etc. In a few cases teachers within the same school were using different platforms, which merely illustrates the lack of coordination and unified approach by the schools. In addition, the students reacted quite negatively to missing out on the practical side. They acknowledged that the schools made an effort to compensate for the lack of practical components by providing online lectures, but at the same time students admitted that they would have undoubtedly gained a higher level of knowledge and skills had there been 'real' practical components.

Also, the practical subjects at high school. You can't learn as much when you can't do the practical side. Even the normal lessons, you don't learn as much as you would if you were at school.

R2, 15 y.o., Czech Republic

The second set of reasons related more to the students and the online mode and the conditions under which the students worked at home. Several young people in each country mentioned practical issues such as being able to ask additional questions after class, which is much easier in person. The fact that all classmates are present on **video-call sessions deterred shy students from asking additional questions**.

Respondents claimed that their **ability to focus on the lesson was considerably lower** than in a standard classroom. Young people said that they felt that having to focus on a live person in a classroom was different from doing so on a computer screen, with the latter being more difficult, particularly if the connection is not perfect. Many participants in our interviews also admitted having **difficulties with self-discipline**, the online lessons provided them with many more potential distractions and it was easier for them to succumb to them. The students frequently claimed that they did not have to turn on their cameras and so the teachers had practically no control over their attention.

Apart from all the negative elements of online schooling, the students agreed there were positive moments as well. **Not having to travel and spend a long time commuting was one of the advantages**. This allowed them to sleep longer in the morning and meant they had more time to themselves in the afternoons. The additional free time in afternoons was also a consequence of students not being able to meet with peers during the lockdown. People mostly used the additional free time to pursue their hobbies or spend more time with family and relatives. People who said they were introverts were relatively satisfied with the online schooling as they did not have to meet other people so often as at school in larger groups of schoolmates. However, even the few introverts who revealed this line of thinking were looking forward to going back to school when the pandemic was over.

... many people will have a different approach to those who graduated now as we know that it wasn't that difficult to graduate..

R5, 15 y.o., Slovakia

## GENERATION A – AFFECTED

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The consensus that remote schooling was poorer quality had consequences for the way young people perceived its impact on the job market. Some were afraid that **the general view that the education and skills received during the pandemic were inferior might lead to employers viewing “pandemic graduates” less positively.**

Respondents also feared that high school graduates might be stigmatized when starting university for not having been properly educated. There was a worry that they would **be seen as an inferior student cohort.** In addition, it is reasonable to assume that some would have psychological issues, particularly those whose online learning experiences were negative. A study by Wieczorek et al. (2021) involving a sample of Polish university students showed that online learning had negative effects on (self-reported) mental health.

We learned a little bit about appreciating relationships, and the fact that we can meet classmates, because when it's normal school, often it's a burden. It's like “Ooh, I have to meet someone I don't like again”. Now I even miss them.

R2, 18 y.o., Hungary

High school students voiced specific concerns. They pointed out that **remote schooling had changed the lessons, bringing them closer to the typical university style of teaching.** That meant self-study and preparation at home tended to dominate, while the online contact between teachers and students resembled one-way lectures rather than lessons with two-way communication. **Thus, many students were forced into independence, autonomy, and self-discipline far earlier than would have been the case without the pandemic. Online education created pressure to mature prematurely.**

As for the future, all school-age respondents declared they would definitely prefer face-to-face schooling, with the opportunity to meet their schoolmates again and simply get “back to normal.”

It is about a stable job. A stable sector. For example, Covid-19 has reassured me that a post in a ministry or the banking sector is a stable job and I'm trying to take that route right now.

R1, 25 y.o., Czech Republic

Related to education, the coronavirus pandemic also changed the way young people thought about jobs and the future. Most of our participants said they had lost part-time jobs due to the pandemic. Some reported a change in their long-term perspective. On the one hand, there were respondents who already knew what type of job they wanted and were studying with that aim in mind, for instance joining the police force or working as a physiotherapist or a pilot. On the other hand, there was a group of young people for whom the pandemic had underlined the need for a stable job that would be shielded from similar crises in the future. In their opinion, **preventing uncertainty and personal and family hardship entailed thinking about which economic sectors would always be necessary and least affected by measures similar to the anti-pandemic ones. Positions that promise stability and reliability, and thus minimize uncertainty, may attract a considerably larger share of young people.**

6

# INFORMATION AND TRUST

The coronavirus outbreak seems to have increased interest in the news, politics and generally being aware of what is going on in society. Although not all participants explicitly admitted developing a greater interest in politics since the pandemic started, they were able to talk about politicians' actions and speeches. Also it was apparent from the majority of the interviews that an attempt was made to follow the latest government measures and restrictions. However, neither the news nor the politicians were the most trusted sources of information.

The interviews with the young people revealed that **direct experience is usually the most credible source of information and the most influential factor shaping their opinions**. The second best information source was direct experiences by family members or close relatives. Although not everyone has a friend or relative working in the healthcare system, participants who did considered them the most trusted source of information on the pandemic. They thought people with direct access to healthcare had seen and experienced the reality and thus knew what it was *really* like. **In addition to first-hand experience, people from within the healthcare system were not seen as having any hidden agendas or interests that would distort their testimonies**. On the other hand, both governments and media were supposedly driven, at least partially, by other interests than just the need to inform the public about the pandemic.

## FAILED COMMUNICATION

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And the way someone claims one thing and the next day someone else contradicts what their colleague said yesterday. It is obvious there is chaos within the government and their strategy.

R6, 24 y.o., Czech Republic

Those who are actually out there in the field and have been redirected to the Covid department, they say different things to the government.

R3, 27 y.o., Hungary

The general consensus among participants was that the governments in Central Europe are not very trustworthy. However, the picture was not completely negative. Young people admitted that the government restrictions were fairly reasonable and they obeyed them, particularly in the first wave in spring 2020. However, **after the first wave young people increasingly perceived the government measures to be excessive and thought the picture painted by government exaggerated**. This last point seems to be linked to participants' attitudes to government measures, i.e. that might have led people to reject the restrictions and underestimate the situation, as they did not take it as seriously as before.

Young people in Central Europe clearly trusted their respective governments less as the pandemic continued and provided several reasons and examples of that. In general, these mostly related to the erratic government communication. First, participants accused **government representatives of sending contradictory and unclear messages** in their statements, such as politicians who changed their opinions and contradicted their statements in a very short time, or two politicians giving different instructions to people. Such communication merely contributed to the uncertainty and frustration among people who had the impression that the government had no clear plan or strategy. Many respondents perceived this type of communication as chaotic and **a signal that governments were clueless as to how to fight the pandemic**.

Second, an important source of lower trust in government and politicians more broadly was seeing **politicians violate the restrictions they had introduced or argued for**. In the public's eyes this reduced both the seriousness of the restriction and the credibility of the politicians and party that pushed it through. Naturally, **lower trust in politicians weakened or subverted the respondents' and their peers' willingness to obey the restrictions**.

Indeed, the Eurobarometer results from August 2020 show low levels of trust in governments in Central Europe among youths. Table 4 presents the tendency to trust government among young people aged 15 to 30. The Hungarian government enjoyed the highest level of trust among young people, with almost two in five youngsters stating they tended to trust the government. On the other hand, only a quarter of young people in Poland stated the same.

It is important to add that for many years the general population has shown low levels of trust in political institutions in Central Europe, and common arguments from the political discourse were made by our participants as well. Many people, young people included, simply do not trust politicians to make decisions that are purely motivated out of public good. Here is just one quote to illustrate this. Respondent no. 8 from Poland was asked who can be trusted when it comes to the coronavirus pandemic, and she answered "No-one. Because it's turned into a... way to make money. In other words, people quite often see ulterior motives or constructive malice in politicians' decisions. Combined with the erratic and self-contradictory communication, this made it difficult to win the public's trust.

However, as we have mentioned, first-hand information was considered the most reliable source of information. That is linked to higher trust levels in medical staff, and overlaps with governments. While politicians' decisions and communication were perceived to have negative motivations, nothing like that was mentioned in relation to medical staff. Medical staff were seen as people who were in a very difficult position but doing their best to help people. To some extent, this public perception helped to improve governments' images in the fight against the pandemic, where decisions were consulted with experts and measures approved in cooperation with medical experts.

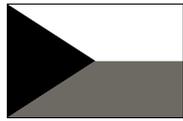
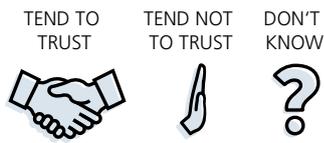
**R: I do trust the government though in the context of the pandemic because they have people who are better educated than me.**

**M: You're talking about medical experts now?**

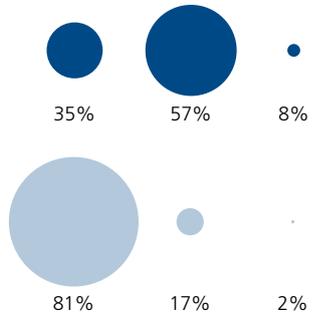
**R: Yes. Nobody makes decisions by themselves in the government. Nobody says that we're closing it all down today, it's always consulted. If they aren't consulting it, then I have no words to describe such behaviour.**

R6, 24 y.o., Poland

## TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND MEDICAL STAFF, AGE 15-30, IN %



CZECH REPUBLIC



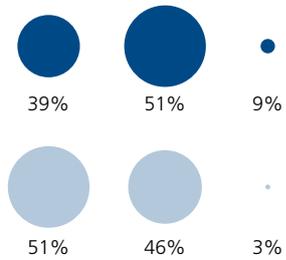
TRUST IN GOVERNMENT



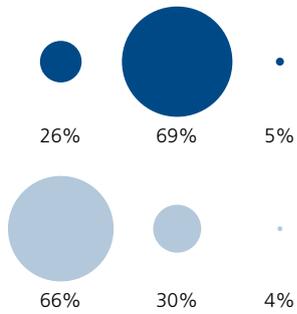
TRUST IN MEDICAL STAFF



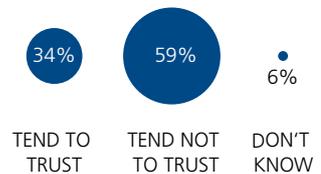
HUNGARY



POLAND



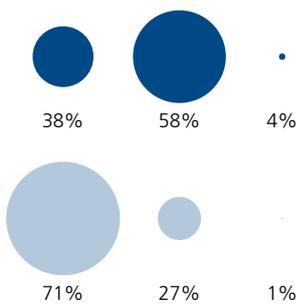
### REGIONAL AVERAGE



TEND TO TRUST    TEND NOT TO TRUST    DON'T KNOW



SLOVAKIA



Infographic 04, Source: EB 93.1

## TRUST IN MEDIA

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The dominant information source on the Covid-19 pandemic in all the countries was online sources. Of course, these varied, with respondents mentioning social media like Facebook and Instagram, but also YouTube, as well as particular newspaper websites or TV stations.

The August 2020 Eurobarometer results confirm that the internet is the primary information channel for the 15 to 30 age group. On average, an **online source is the primary information** source for about three in four youngsters in Visegrad countries, with websites dominating over social media, except in Slovakia. In Slovakia, social media was the single most reported information source among young people.

There were three common features across all four countries that stood out in our research. The first is news consumption by youths. **Shortly after the pandemic outbreak young people (and we believe this may be very similar among the adult population) were avid followers of the news as these were uncertain times and people were in need of information. However, as the pandemic came to occupy most of the news and much of the information changed on a daily basis – regarding the restrictions, rules on schooling, travelling, testing, number of cases and deaths – young people became fed up with the news.** This situation is quite peculiar as usually the young generations are known to consume news less than the older age groups and for them to become tired of it suggests a high level of consumption beforehand.

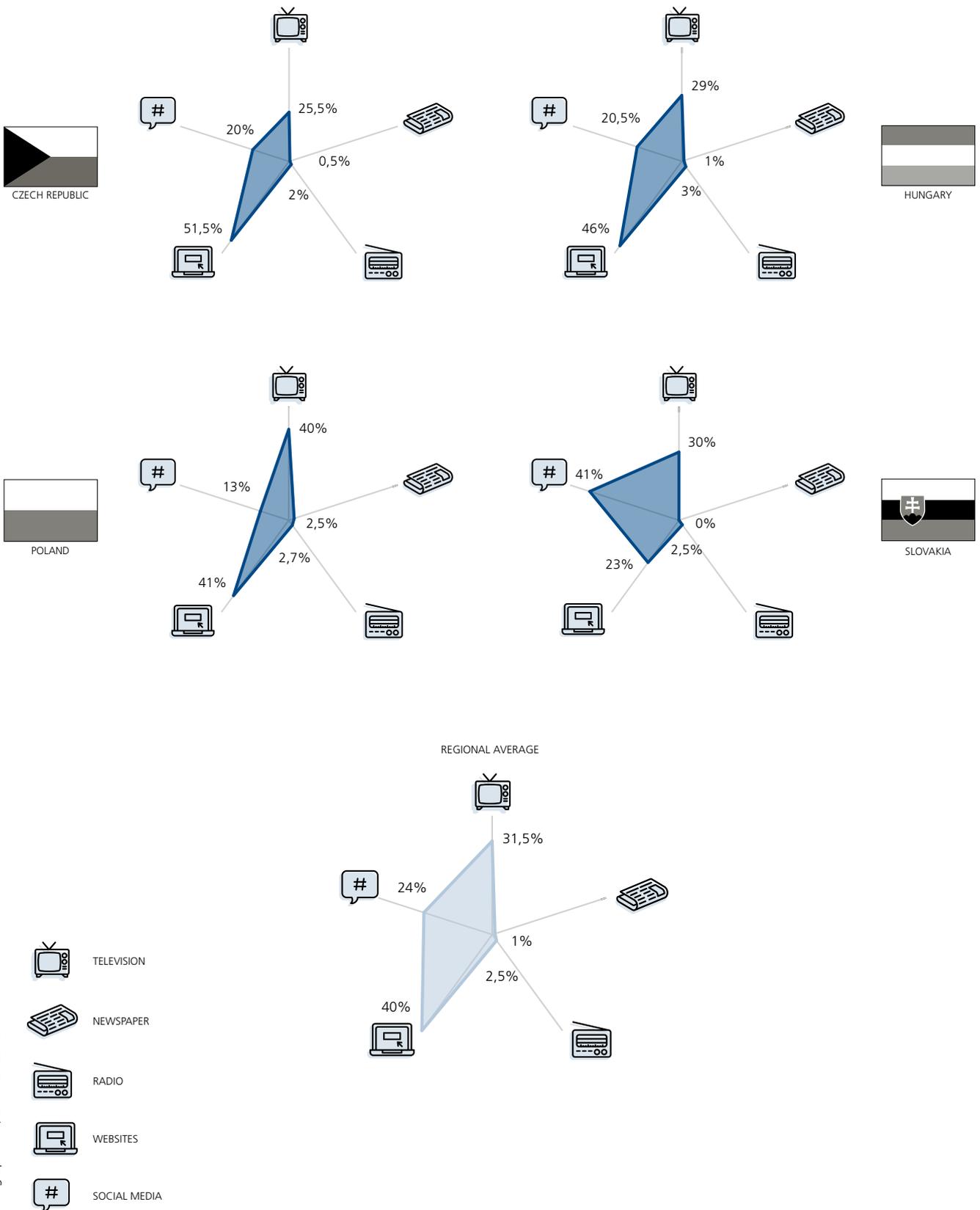
Second, our participants pointed out that information about the restrictions and the Covid-19 situation in ge-

neral (including medical information) was sometimes inconsistent and contradictory. From their testimonies it was, however, clear that many respondents did not really differentiate between the media coverage and the politicians' statements. Sudden changes of opinion, the revision of rules, modifications to the restrictions, these were all sources of the mistrust and annoyance that our participants felt in relation to the media; however, it may have been that the media were just reporting the official government statements.

Third, the **young people in our research were quite confident of their abilities to distinguish between trustworthy sources of information and fake-news.** They claimed they double-checked stories and could tell credible news items from hoaxes. However, when contrasted with other statements in their testimonies as a whole, it became evident that they, too, were **overconfident in their abilities.** This effect is well-known in social psychology and was recently described by Lyons et al. (2021) who showed that overconfidence not only has an extensive effect, but "is also linked to both self-reported and behavioral measures of false news website visits, engagement, and belief." The authors show that overconfidence "may be a crucial factor for explaining how false and low-quality information spreads via social media." (Lyons et al. 2021)

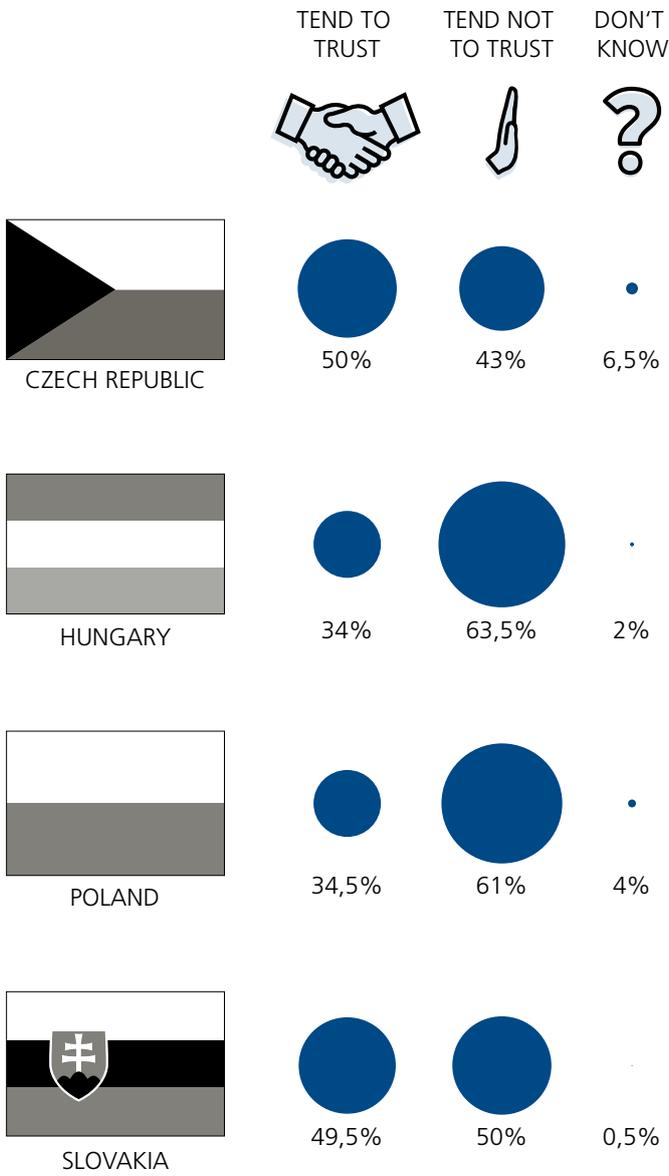
Despite the rather negative tone used by our participants when talking about the media, the Eurobarometer results show a relatively high tendency to trust the media. The reason for this might be that in the in-depth interviews the question was linked strongly to the coronavirus pandemic and it was after the winter when the situation was bad. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, almost half of people aged 15–30 tended to trust the media, while only slightly more than a third of young people in Hungary and Poland did.

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S INFORMATION SOURCES, IN %



Infographic 05, Sources: EB 93.1

TRUST IN MEDIA IN VISEGRAD COUNTRIES, IN %



Infographic 06 - Sources: EB 93.1

## NOT ALL THE SAME

Despite strong similarities among respondents from all four countries, there were also some fairly strong differences. First, the Czech youths mentioned the public broadcaster Czech Television, followed by MP Dominik Feri's Instagram account as being the most credible information sources. This may be an indication that the public broadcaster in the Czech Republic is still perceived to be independent and thus sufficiently credible. This is supported by the Media Pluralism Monitor by Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (European University Institute 2020), which shows that the Czech media are the most independent and considered an authority among the media in the Visegrad four countries.

In Mr. Feri's case, he was very popular and his Instagram profile had over a million followers. According to participants, he gained popularity among young people by publishing very simple, clear messages that contained only facts and were understandable by the general public. Below we show an example of one of Mr. Feri's posts, which usually consisted of a black triangle with an exclamation mark and a simple announcement, set against an eye-catching yellow background. However, after the fieldwork but before this study was published, Mr. Feri was accused of multiple counts of sexual harassment and rape and as a consequence of these accusations he resigned his parliamentary seat. Pending further investigation, he may not continue to be one of the most credible information sources for young people.

We also observed further distinctive features of trust in media in Hungary, compared to other countries. Respondents in Hungary were considerably more trustful of and positive about the Hungarian media and Hungarian officials than their counterparts in other countries. Although this is not reflected in the Eurobarometer results where young people in Hungary reported the same level of trust in media as in Poland, there was an obvious difference in the way they talked about the media. Interviewees from Poland were critical, identified particular media outlets that they thought were influenced by political parties or the government and were able to provide examples. Compared to them, the Hungarian participants were a bit calmer, did not criticise the Hungarian media directly and if they did, they contrasted the media outputs with either

**M:** Looking back over the past year: who did you trust most?

**R:** CT24. Dominik Feri on Instagram. I think that he's a source of information for my generation.

**M:** Why do you think young people trust Dominik Feri so much? Why him?

**R:** He is a member of parliament and he doesn't share disinformation. His position doesn't even allow him to share untrue information.

**M:** Why CT (Czech Television)?

**R:** They seem to be the most trustworthy.

R5, 18 y.o., Czech Republic

social media or first-hand experience. "I know that not every news portal gives you information that you have to believe. I go through them, but I believe Government Info or more official sites more than less reliable sources." (R2, 18 y.o., Hungary).

In all the countries, many of our respondents shared the opinion that both the media and politicians have other interests than just informing people about the pandemic situation and the restrictions. The politicians are mainly interested in their popularity and improving their ratings. Therefore, one should be cautious when politicians provide information about the situation. On the other hand, the media have a tendency to spin the information to gain readers and a higher number of views/clicks. Based on this view, the media and politicians are rather less credible than people working in the healthcare sector, who have first-hand experience and no motivation to be biased.



Picture 1: Instagram post by Dominik Feri saying: "Outdoor pools to open on 31 May"

7

# **MATURING PREMATURELY**

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced life around the globe. It hit populations in various ways with effects on health, the economy, and daily life routines. **The young generation in particular was at a difficult stage of the life cycle, adolescence, with all the baggage of life expectations and visions, and became overwhelmed by the sudden cessation in the way of life that was once perceived as “normal.”** Many of them hope that the Corona era with its various negative connotations is a “once in a lifetime” experience. This study shines the spotlight on some of those negative effects.

The Corona era had a significant impact on education and employment, but not all sectors were affected. The lockdowns impacting hospitality and tourism, sectors employing many young people and a source of part-time jobs, were perceived as being particularly strong. **The young people we interviewed stressed that the pandemic had underlined the need for a stable job that would be shielded from similar crises in the future.** The closure of education facilities was also perceived predominantly negatively. Remote schooling was generally seen as poorer quality compared to in-person mode. **Alongside the difficulties with self-discipline and concentrating in the virtual environment, the main factors contributing to the negative perceptions of education in the Corona era were technical problems and the reduced learning content.** Although we only interviewed young people between 14 and 30, there are studies suggesting that online schooling might have affected children at the elementary level as well (Popyk 2020). The desire to get “back to normal”, back to in-person classes, resonated deeply among our respondents in all four countries.

**The negative effect of the lockdowns** and schooling/working from home was also perceived in terms of **task overload and the lack of positive stimulus.** This effect was not unique to the young generation, but it had a harder impact. What made this group especially vulnerable was that they lacked experience of the routines associated with adult life, which may have better prepared the older generation to cope with the dullness of it. The COVID-19 pandemic brought changes to the daily lives of many people. These changes pushed kids and students into premature adulthood, for which they were not psychologically prepared.

Only a minority of young people rebelled (so far), rejecting some of the restrictions (like social distancing) but this did not cause serious generational conflicts in the V4 region. Rather, **our respondents with regular intergeneration contacts mentioned mutual understanding and respect.** The peace may be disrupted by new waves with government closures in tow.



The coronavirus outbreak seems to have increased interest in the news, politics and generally being aware of what is going on in society. Although not all participants explicitly admitted being more interested in politics since the pandemic started, it was implicit in the interviews. Young people were able to talk about politicians' actions and attempted to follow the latest government measures and restrictions. However, the situation changed **as the pandemic rolled on and many young people opted to "cut themselves off" from most of the information sources intruding on their daily lives and bringing unpleasant news about the coronavirus. This act served not only as a coping strategy for dealing with depressing information but also reflected young people's overall distrust of politicians in the region and partly the mass media. First-hand information was considered to be the most reliable source of information.** This was linked to higher trust in medical staff, and overlapped with government trust, or more precisely, the lack thereof. While there was a perception that negative motivations lay behind politicians' decisions and communication, there was no mention of this in relation to medical staff. In all the countries, many of our respondents shared the opinion that both the media and politicians had other interests than just informing people about the pandemic and the restrictions (interests like gaining popularity, making a profit), which made them cautious about politicians' and/or media accounts of the situation. Based on this view the media and politicians were perceived as less credible than people working in the healthcare sector with their first-hand experience and no motivation to be biased. Overall, **the coronavirus pandemic and political handling/communication of the situation merely contributed to young people's prejudices against politicians and the media.**

The underlying and connecting feature behind the cognitive and emotional shifts we observed is that **the pandemic created strong pressure on young people to mature as they would normally do at a later age. Generally, teenagers have not typically shown an interest in politics or worried about lifetime job stability, family relationships or health concerns.**

The durability of the changes the coronavirus has brought about in the young generation's behaviour and value systems is still unknown and requires more research. However, our findings indicate shifts (in the value of friendship, "normal life" or greater appreciation of their health) among the young people we interviewed. **If the COVID-19 pandemic persists, has the ability to adapt, and remains with us for a while, then the Corona era might become the "new normal" and lead to young people permanently internalizing the value shifts described here.**

8

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# ABOUT FES YOUTH STUDIES

This publication is a part of the FES International Youth Studies. Starting in 2009 FES has conducted numerous Youth Studies around the globe. Since 2018 Youth Studies focus specifically on Southern Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia, Eastern Central Europe and the Baltic States. Further studies are being planned for the Middle East and Northern Africa as well as in individual countries around the globe. The International Youth Studies are a flagship project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in its endeavor to research, shape and strengthen the Democracy of the Future. It strives to contribute to the European discourse on how young generations see the development of their societies as well as their personal future in a time of national and global transformation. The representative studies combine qualitative and quantitative elements of research in close partnership with the regional teams aiming a high standard in research and a sensitive handling of juvenile attitudes and expectations.

A dedicated Advisory Board (Dr Miran Lavrič, Univ.-Prof. Dr. Marius Haring, Daniela Lamby, András Bíró-Nagy and Dr Mārtiņš Kaprāns) supports the methodological and conceptual design of the Youth Studies. The Board consists of permanent and associated members and provides essential expertise for the overall project.

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

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The data that form the basis of this publication were collected in the course of online individual in-depth interviews (n=10 à 60 minutes in average) with young people aged 14-29 years. Various questioning techniques and methods were used in the interviews to specifically address the psychological consequences of Covid-19 for young people. The online interviews were conducted by experienced moderators from the polling agency and research institute Ipsos and local partners. Ipsos Germany, Janine Freudenberg and Laura Wolfs, coordinated the study both in terms of content and organisation.

## AUTHORS

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**Pavol Baboš** is an assistant professor of sociology and political science at the Comenius University in Bratislava. His research focuses on political and social attitudes and patterns of behavior in Eastern Central Europe. Pavol has been a member of the Society for Advanced Studies of Socio-Economics and is in the lead of several research projects at Comenius. He regularly publishes in international scientific journals and participates in public debates.

**Aneta Világi** is a political scientist at the Faculty of Arts of the Comenius University in Bratislava. Her main research area is Slovak domestic politics and the dynamics of European integration. Aneta has led several projects on youth research in Slovakia. She actively participates at public discussions on diverse European platforms and has a strong academic publication record.

