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THE DIFFERENT FACES OF COVID-ERA REALITY

THE EMERGING
CORONA GENERATION
IN THE BALTIC STATES

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1

INTRODUCTION



The goal of this research report is to explore the life of youth in the Baltic states during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021). The report focuses on how young people perceive and make sense out of social as well psychological changes caused by pandemic and how they position themselves in terms of these changes.

The Corona crisis in the Baltic countries unfolded similarly to the rest of the world: with a first wave in March 2020, an almost immediate lockdown, and restrictions (e.g., closed schools and home schooling, no social gatherings, closed restaurants and cafés) led to a significant drop in cases and allowed a re-opening of schools, cafés and restaurants in early summer of 2020. However, in autumn of 2020 (October/ beginning of November), cases started to grow again, and new restrictions were introduced in Lithuania and Latvia. Conversely, in Estonia, due to lower infection rates, there were milder restrictions imposed on public life (permitted restaurants, schools, museums, libraries and spas were allowed to open with a certain occupancy rate and social distance). However, infection rates skyrocketed again in Estonia in March 2021, triggering implementation of much harsher restrictions (see Figure 1).

The focus of this research that was commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung lies on young people between the age of 14 and 29. The report is based on online interviews with 30 respondents that were conducted in April 2021 via the platform MS Teams. Ten respondents were interviewed in each of the Baltic States. They were recruited in order to best map the relevant life circumstances of the youngest generation:

- 14-18 years of age: school education, graduation and first decision-making processes regarding choice of future education and profession
- 19-24 years of age: voting age, first steps to gain more independence by moving out of parents' home
- 25-29 years of age: university graduation, entering the job market and start of family planning

Respondents' gender, residential area, and education/working status was consistently verified in forming the survey sample in all three Baltic countries. For Latvia and Estonia, it was also ensured that respondents from the Russian minority were represented in the survey. For the research in Estonia, the regional focus was on the capital city Tallinn as well as some smaller and poorer regions: Viljandimaa, Põlvamaa, Jõgevamaa and Pärnumaa. For the research in Lithuania, the regional focus was on the capital city Vilnius as well as some smaller and poorer regions: Panevėžys, Šiauliai and villages in Utena County. For the research in Latvia, the regional focus was on the capital city Rīga as well as some smaller and poorer regions: Rēzekne and Kārsava.

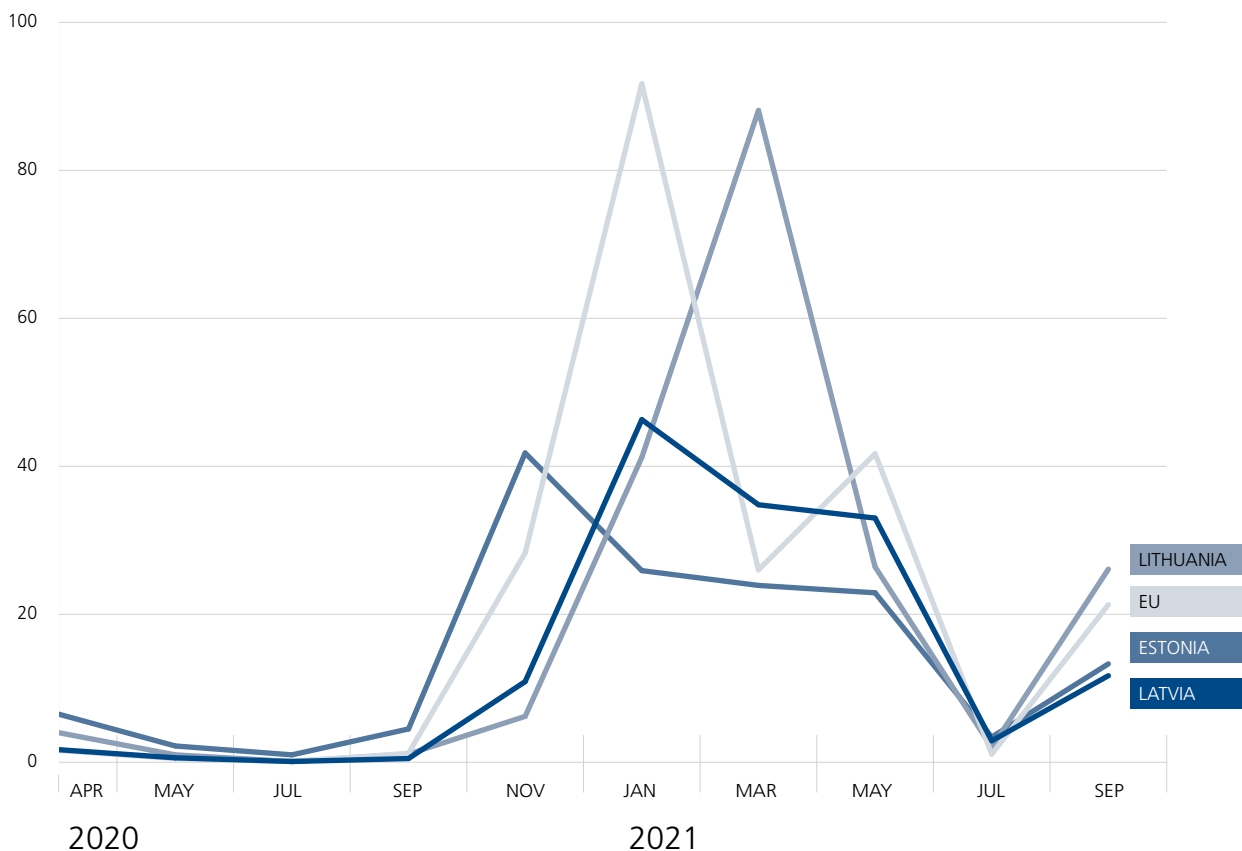
The interview questions focused on the potential impact of the pandemic in particular areas: young people's emotional state of mind, the relationship between generations, patterns of trust in the government, experts, and public institutions, media consumption, education and employment, leisure and free time. The average duration of interview was one hour. Interview transcripts were analysed using the qualitative data analysis software *NVivo 12*. Acknowledging that Baltic respondents represent a rather diverse age cohort and different social milieus, the report intends to highlight shared discourses and practice among Baltic youth or within specific opinion groups of Baltic youth.

2

GENERAL PERCEPTION OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Public anxiety about Covid increased substantially during the second wave of pandemic, making public opinion in European countries, including the Baltic states, more polarised (Devlin et al 2021). In interviews, Baltic youth predominately demonstrate a somewhat responsible attitude towards the pandemic by expressing support for various social restrictions, such as stay-at-home orders or mandates to wear masks in public. This attitude was formed either during the first wave of the pandemic (Winter-Spring 2020) or gradually, along with rising infection rates, during the second wave (Fig. 1). The concerned section of Baltic youth does not bely the fact, however, that it was not easy to accept restrictions, which significantly constrained their routines and habits, e.g. going to the gym, attending theatre, and taking part in various extracurricular activities.

FIG. 1
NEW CONFIRMED CASES OF COVID-19 IN THE FIRST DAY OF EACH MONTH:
SEVEN-DAY ROLLING AVERAGE OF NEW CASES (PER 100K)



Source: FT Visual & Data Journalism team,
 Data starts in April 2020

The most common motif with regard to why young people take the pandemic seriously is a desire to protect their closest family members. Respondents whose relatives or friends work at healthcare institutions and hence are able to relate their direct experience in treating COVID patients are particularly likely to respond to the pandemic with utmost caution. Likewise, COVID patients in the most proximate social milieus (e.g. friends or neighbours) has prompted respondents to take the Coronavirus seriously.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES

“In fact, my perception is quite serious. While many of my friends still believe that it is a useless nonsense, I pay a lot of attention to it, and I am serious. In my family, some work in healthcare, and they encounter it in their daily life. This attitude is serious; I feel rather duty-bound to follow the norms. [...] Perhaps it is rooted in responsibility. For example, when returning home, I realise that not only do I expose myself to the risk, but also those living with me. I call it responsibility.”

Node: Responsibility

(F, 22, Latvia)



“I do not say that this illness does not exist; I say that it is a very serious worry. I can see how hard it is with my old acquaintances who work in the medical field. I do not deny it and I agree to wear a mask and disinfect my hands and keep a distance.”

Node: Serious Worry

(F, 28, Estonia)



“I basically try to not be in any of the two extremes. I understand that the Coronavirus exists, that it is a serious problem, and that it needs to be controlled. On the other hand, there is no need to get too scared or frightened of it. Because I know some people who have some really unfounded fears. So, a healthy attitude that is based on what the government says, what scientists say, an attitude that is based on that.”

Node: A healthy attitude

(F, 22, Lithuania)



To be sure, concerned respondents not only align with a morally appropriate behavioural model in Baltic societies, but they also position themselves against peers who demonstrate recklessness towards pandemics. Respondents regularly mention other young people who, in contrast to them, demonstrate ignorance and engage in mockery towards the pandemic and various attempts to cope with it. This suggests that young people who are concerned with the pandemic are persistently exposed to an oppositional discourse that depicts the Coronavirus as a non-problem.

The oppositional discourse and practices (e. g. hidden youth parties, face-to-face meetings) are also highlighted for boundary-making purposes. Namely, concerned respondents show that they do not ascribe to such a reckless opinion group. Respondents who do not take the Coronavirus seriously account for a minority in the Baltic interviews and are more likely to be observed among young people in their 20s. Their sceptical attitude has either developed gradually as a response to government restrictions or has remained as a profound conviction from the Covid outbreak. Such an attitude largely revolves around two interpretive schemes: 1) Covid is not as dangerous as it is officially presented; 2) infection rates are artificially inflated and hence do not reflect the true situation. These schemes are supported by anecdotal experience and information that is obtained from various alternative information sources (see the section on “Institutional trust”).

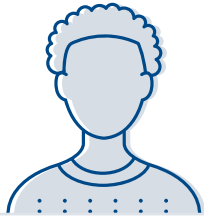
EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES



“Now, to be honest, I can say that I do not believe it all. Because there is, of course, a virus. The fact that there is a disease, I believe. However, I do not believe in how inflated it is. [...] Since I deal with the logistics, I have to see more than a dozen people a day. Everyone, of course, has masks. I also have a mask. However, back then there was no virus and now still there is none. I am not sick. People close to me are not sick. My boyfriend who deals with the logistics is not sick. [...] I feel like it is all inflated. It is all, sorry, nothing but bullshit.”

(F, 27, Latvia)

Node: It is all inflated



"I am not really afraid of it when I go outside. I think it is like flu. People can get infected any time and have different symptoms. [...] I lost my job when it all started last year and all the borders were closed and the goods did not go anywhere, there were no orders. Then I started to research this and was asking my friends and the numbers felt unreal. None of my friends and their acquaintances were ill considering how many people were ill already. [...] Nobody is writing about tuberculosis-related deaths or AIDS-related deaths. I can imagine if it were written about as much then they would also make a vaccine for that. Crazy. Probably it is so blown up by the media and panic is created."

(M, 27, Estonia)

Node: Blown up by the media



"I had fears because a friend of mine got sick and later my father got sick. But now what is weird to me that others also started, my friend was sick, he was living with his girlfriend and, you know, he had positive result, but she had negative, even though they sleep together and so on. And this then became, to me, it was funny, then I was angry because of the implemented lockdown restrictions and so on. It is just too much, considering all those main celebrations, Christmas, New Year, which are family celebrations, but now you had to be isolated, cannot visit the kids, nothing at all. It seems like we would be locked in cages."

(M, 29, Lithuania)

Node: I was angry because of lockdown

Beyond the conflicting representations of the Coronavirus, interviews with Baltic youth also reveal attempts to normalise the COVID reality by highlighting opportunities that these new conditions provide. Youth having to cope with social distancing have learned meaningful new ways how to spend time that some respondents see as more of a positive outcome from lockdown. For example, the new COVID-era lifestyle, among other things, involves more cooking at home, reading more books and watching more movies in English, learning how to dress better, starting a new business or being more flexible about job and life in general. Overall, these resurrected or newly acquired practices convey an image of an emerging trend manifested in an increasing sense of control over one's time and life priorities. It should be noted, though, that such a "normalising" experience is more characteristic of respondents in their 20s who have started young adult life. Perhaps seeing the pandemic as a source of positive change is more common to respondents who were experiencing shrinking autonomy before the Corona outbreak.

3

RESPONDING TO IMMOBILITY: CONSTRAINTS AND AGENCY

Lockdowns after the outbreak of coronavirus in 2020 have severely limited people's physical and social mobility across Europe. The experience of immobility pervades youth narratives in the Baltic States, revealing various emotional consequences inflicted by diminishing social space.

Baltic respondents often recall pre-pandemic travel and social mingling, thus exacerbating their present feeling of imprisonment and isolation. Their sense of immobility, however, is perceived differently. The youngest youth cohort (15–20) associates immobility more with distance learning and lack of everyday socialisation with schoolmates, whereas members of the older cohort (21–29) highlight the heavy burden of restrictions that touch upon a more diverse spectrum of social practices, such as shopping, going to cinema and pubs, traveling abroad, entertaining kids, improving one's professional qualifications, practicing a healthy lifestyle, etc. In other words, young adults who possess more stratified social capital and have obtained experience in the labour market might have experienced more intensive and diverse negative consequences of immobility than older teenagers. By the same token, Baltic youth living in urban areas are perhaps also more inclined to perceive the negative impact of restrictions than those living in sparsely populated rural areas.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES



"I cannot go anywhere; I cannot even go to a clothing store. It feels like we are in prison. They are basically forbidding our freedom, but we have a right to freedom!"

(F, 23, Estonia)

Node: We are in prison



"I really missed the gym. With a lockdown, with the fact that you cannot really go anywhere, outside are not the best weather conditions and you are physically starting to feel lazy, putting on some extra weight. You do not feel as usual."

(M, 29, Latvia)

Node: Extra weight



"And then when the second wave started, when everything was closed, gatherings were forbidden, all that, then, what made me mad was, made me the saddest, that I cannot see my kids. I cannot go see my kids, pick them up, take them back to me. I cannot visit my parents; I cannot go to Vilnius [the capital of Lithuania]. Almost for a whole year I have not seen my parents, well, I just cannot travel."

(M, 29, Lithuania)

Node: I cannot see my kids

Immobility is also associated with routine activities that make life too predictable and mechanical. Regardless of the global shock caused by Coronavirus, Baltic respondents quite often emphasise that no significant changes have occurred in their lives during the pandemic. Hence, daily routine and gridlocked social dynamics contribute to a general sense of immobility. Simultaneously, as some interviews suggest, prior experience of being and working alone and personality traits (e.g. introverted vs. extraverted) should be taken into account when considering which youth categories are emotionally more vulnerable in terms of social isolation.

Fixed notions of private and public life prompt many respondents to use a vaguely defined concept of *freedom*. Pre-Covid freedom is seen as a self-evident element of being human. Baltic youth refer to freedom as an opportunity to disconnect from a routine life by enjoying movement and choice. Freedom as cited in the interviews symbolises an individual autonomy that has been severely constrained during the pandemic. Meanwhile, a handful of respondents believe that freedom will triumph in all its manifestations after the pandemic is over.

Interviews with youth show that a sense of immobility has provoked various emotional reactions that constrain creativity, productivity, and the ability to live a meaningful life worth living. Fatigue and tiredness is a common emotional state, particularly among Latvian and Lithuanian youth. Exhaustion surfaces in the context of slow life, social isolation, and persistent bombardment of information on the Coronavirus. These feelings are also exacerbated by working long hours on the computer and spending too much time online. However, rarely is tiredness and fatigue mentioned in conjunction with performing specific duties at work or assignments at school. A more nuanced analysis of interviews reveals that individual experience is easily transferred to the societal level, meaning that not only *me*, but *everyone* feels weary from Coronavirus and the associated restrictions. Tiredness and fatigue is emotionally related to boredom and dullness, highlighting yet another dimension of respondents' reaction to a monotonous everyday life during the pandemic. Lack of social contacts, as some respondents claim, dampen the motivation and willpower to work or to change something in life, thereby in turn leading to lack of self-discipline and laziness.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES

“When the job became remote, keeping that team atmosphere, that joy of working, planning, allocating work it was a big challenge during the pandemic. You had to start writing a lot of emails, making a lot of calls. That started to become annoying and tiring.”

Node: Annoying and tiring

(F, 29, Lithuania)





“I got tired of sitting at home. And parents are tired. In general, everyone is tired. Everyone wants it to end sooner. To open the border and be able to travel, get away from home.”

(M, 17, Latvia)

Node: Everyone is tired



“I feel isolated and I socialise a lot less with my friends than I usually do. The whole time you sit in front of the screen, whether you are at school or at work. This is very bad for your physical and mental health. People are not created to live or be alone.”

(F, 16, Estonia)

Node: People are not created to live alone

Baltic interviews also shed light on other emotional youth responses. Many respondents admit that they have experienced fear during the pandemic. However, the highest level of *fear* was reached during the first wave of the pandemic, when the Coronavirus was something unknown. Although some respondents still report on the anxiety of being infected or of the possibility of infecting their family members, the general level of fear has decreased during the second wave of the pandemic, with the virus also becoming more infectious in the Baltic States. In fact, Baltic youth refer to various forms of *sadness* more often than to fear. Sadness is inflicted by restrictions and general uncertainty. For example, respondents felt sad when the second wave of Coronavirus became inevitable, forcing them to change their daily routines, such as working together with other colleagues, going to the gym, etc. Other respondents, in turn, were frustrated when they had to cancel a long-planned trip abroad or could not meet a relative who is living in another country. *Depression* as an emotional response to social distancing, and public anxiety also surfaces in interviews. Yet only a few respondents have reported depression as being caused by the pandemic. Instead, depression is more often mentioned as a mental disorder that can happen or has happened with other young people who have lost their job or are feeling lonely due to lockdown. But some respondents even express the criticism that depression is associated with youth by the media. Hence youth depression, which has indeed attracted media attention in the Baltic States, enables social positioning between youth who feel mentally resilient and those who experience mental disorders.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES

“Winter [2021], when it all started again. The extension started again. Another emergency has been extended. Now I can say that I am depressed. I have a depressed state from not being able to meet friends, to organise some birthday events, the barbecue. Everything is reversed. Work, home, work, home, you feel like a vegetable. There is no joy in life anymore. You are lost.”

Node: You feel like a vegetable

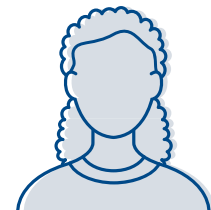
(F, 27, Latvia)



“Some have it quite bad, depression or something like that. They are used to being with other people, with friends, but now that they are alone, they feel really bad. They are such social people, but they are alone and then it gets complicated. The young people in my age have a goal in sight, but they do not have hope because we have not been able to go to school in terms of studying for the exams.”

Node: They do not have hope

(F, 19, Estonia)



“Later, after September [2021] was gone, in October, November, we were locked down again. And rumours were spread that we were coming back into the second wave, I was afraid again, I was very sad again. However, during the summer after the first wave, everything was over, it was really fun, I really thought we would never come back into the second wave, everything was over. We will be able to live just like all ordinary people before. However, we have what we have now.”

Node: I was very sad again

(M, 16, Lithuania)



It should be noted that, along with emotional and demoralising consequences of immobility, Baltic youth also point to various coping practices that help to reduce the impact of restrictions and social distancing. One of the most obvious practices is intentional violation of official restrictions by socialising with friends secretly or not wearing masks in proper way. Even if respondents obey social distancing rules, interviews suggest that non-compliance with lockdown regulations is characteristic of youth across all Baltic States. Apart from these somewhat rebellious practices, one notices various individual strategies illustrating how immobility not only constrains, but also enables agency. For example, young adults who were overloaded with duties in their working and private lives were perhaps on the edge of burnout and thus had no time for self-reflection see lockdown as an opportunity to relax, take up new hobbies, develop new habits, develop intellectually,

practice a healthier lifestyle, engage in sport, get involved in romantic relationships, etc. Likewise, the manner in which lockdown has impacted the labour market has provided youth with new opportunities to earn money in IT or has prompted them to take strategic decisions in terms of future career and professional development.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES



“During the pandemic, I have managed to set my priorities. I probably do not have that many priorities in terms of subjects since I have not decided what I will do in my future yet. I know what I will need less, and I spend less time on that and more on what I will need in the future.”

(M, 16, Latvia)

Node: Managed to set my priorities



“Actually, when the pandemic and the restrictions started, I began making more money because I started working. I also did graphic design online and earned quite a nice amount of money for it. Before the pandemic, when I was in school, I did not have as much time to earn money, so I can see that I became richer because of the pandemic.”

(M, 20, Estonia)

Node: I became richer



“At that time I was studying. Well, my studies, they may sound very nice, but I personally do not enjoy them too much and at that moment I was very tired. Again it will sound weird, but I am very happy that the pandemic started and I could go for the academic leave for a serious reason.”

(M, 23, Lithuania)

Node: I could go for the academic leave

By reducing anxiety and providing motivation to take meaningful actions, the agency of Baltic youth may have reinforced self-esteem and emotional flexibility. There is, of course, a set of contingent factors (e.g. social relations with peers, economic capital, relations in the family, workload and mental health before the COVID outbreak) that may determine who is more likely to be among the more resilient strata of young people who have more successfully adapted to COVID-era normality. The experience of agency that pervades many youth accounts differs strikingly from accounts that allude to psychological adjustment problems. Mass media, NGOs, and youth policy-makers should take these differences into account and should address both the transformative and demoralising outcomes of immobility in their strategies.

4

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT: WINNERS AND LOSERS

Education and employment are two major institutional contexts that have organised everyday lives of Baltic youth during the pandemic. Acknowledging numerous similarities between these contexts, they have generated different formative experiences of social distancing.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on education in the Baltic States. Many parents have been concerned about the quality of education for their children. In the period from March 2020 to February 2021, Lithuanian pre-primary, primary and secondary schools were fully closed for 73 days, whereas Latvian and Estonian schools were fully closed for 43 and 39 days, respectively (COVID-19 and School Closures, 2021). The attitude of Baltic pupils and students towards distance-learning varies from very critical to rather supportive. Respondents who criticise remote education argue that students are not as disciplined and motivated as they were during in-person learning, when a teacher could provide a more comprehensive explanation of the topic and when interactive teamwork was provided. Cheating on tests and assignments are also mentioned as a more salient practice characterising remote studies. Some respondents admit that distance learning causes perception problems, as it is hard to focus on-screen for a long time and immediate feedback from a teacher is not ensured. Sleeping problems in relation to remote learning and increased workload are also highlighted. Moreover, social distancing, as some respondents report, may create communication and interaction barriers with a teacher or between students. Overall, Baltic interviews demonstrate that criticism towards distance education is more common among primary and secondary school students (15–19), where the role of teacher and in-person learning is more pivotal.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES



"A very big impact on education, and the potential after-effects; a very broad impact. [...] Many students now skip studying and just cheat on tests — what kind of studying system is that? What educational achievement? Education is really influenced. The lack of seriousness. The lack of trying to study and just trying to pass."

(F, 22, Latvia)

Node: Cheat on tests



"I do not have good self-discipline yet and the teachers said that now was a good time to learn that. I am still struggling with getting things done by myself and I always have to ask for help from my parents and friends. The most difficult thing for me was having to change my home environment from a relaxing place, where I only studied a bit and mostly rested and watched TV to a place where I now have to study a lot."

(F, 16, Estonia)

Node: The most difficult thing is to change my environment

"I miss my teachers. For example, we had to go to different companies and learn about how different devices functioned. That was really interesting and it was a pity that we missed out on that. We only got to watch videos on YouTube and that is not as interesting as seeing it in real life."

Node: I miss my teachers

(F, 20, Lithuania)



Conversely, respondents who positively assess distance learning insist that it does not create pressure, as one can remain in his/her comfort zone at home and can feel more flexible in individually planning the day and accomplishing assignments. These respondents are more likely to believe that distance learning will to some extent also remain in the future as a convenient way of organising the learning process. Apart from instantly opposing opinions on remote education, some respondents also point to incremental accommodation, which is to say, while initially distance learning had a negative impact on grades, respondents managed to adapt to the new order and did not experience persistent negative consequences afterwards.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES

"I am stressing less about school now comparing to when I was attending it. When I am studying remotely, the stress is less felt. I am more in my comfort zone. Positive is the comfort zone. I should step out of it. Less stress as I mentioned."

Node: Stress is less felt

(M, 16, Latvia)



"Those that I talk to would like remote learning to stay and to stop going to school. [...] Because it is easier. You can get up 5 minutes before school starts and you do not need to spend a whole hour getting ready."

Node: No need to spend a whole hour getting ready

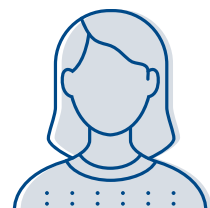
(F, 18, Lithuania)



"In middle school, in-person learning was 99% better. I missed in-person learning a lot in middle school. It was my last year and I was not able to spend time with my classmates. Now I would say that studying is still on the same level. Before, with distance learning, it took me a lot more time, was a lot harder and my grades went down. But now it is like usual."

Node: Now it is like usual

(F, 16, Estonia)



When it comes to remote working, the impact depends on whether respondents' employment is affected by the pandemic. Those affected report that they miss their daily professional routines and a work environment. It should be added, though, that just a few respondents have been made redundant during the pandemic; hence, the unemployment experience is underrepresented in Baltic interviews. Yet some respondents note that the COVID pandemic has helped to reduce the enormous pre-COVID workload, thereby improving the quality of life and mental health.

Even though respondents whose employment has not been affected have experienced pay cuts, especially during the first wave of the pandemic, they are grateful and happy to have a job. These respondents occasionally report about professional advancements, but are more likely to state that their life in general has not changed much during the pandemic. Concurrently, respondents working from home, particularly those who work in the logistics and cargo sectors, state that their workload has significantly increased. Thus, COVID-era employment has become more stressful and exhausting, resulting in a feeling of dwindling leisure time. Remote workers like students also lament that direct contacts with colleagues have decreased. They feel that team spirit is missing in their lives.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES



"The advantage is that we have work, really. It is not like everything stops. Because there are a lot of factories that closed down, many private businesses closed down, but we are still working even with a greater workload. We have work, we are not sitting at home. [...] At the beginning of the first COVID, when it started, we all got a pay cut at about 20%. We thought that it was going to be the end. Our clients started closing down, then all [...] stores started selling through the Internet and then there was more work all of a sudden, a greater one as I call it, we started transporting food which we did not used to do. I am just glad that I have a job and do not have to sit at home."

(M, 29, Lithuanian)

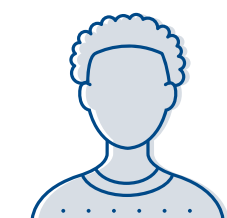
Node: Glad to have a job



"To live stress-free, because as much as I now realise that this stress is abnormal for me, I have to deal with many cargo loads every day. I cannot, even honestly, die peacefully. I have moments when I need my own time and I cannot get that time because somebody has called me. Definitely someone will call. Either the boss or someone from the customs, or one of the drivers, something has to be done, something this, something that. And it is already abnormal stress and I am becoming so super-nervous."

(F, 27, Latvian)

Node: This stress is abnormal



“My mental health has improved during COVID because I had to be moving around all the time before it and really needed some rest and energy. I was very tired before COVID, I had no time to get normal sleep. [...] When I got home, I was exhausted, did not have the energy to do the things around the house that I had to do and suddenly it was midnight or even later again and I had to force myself to sleep. I was working all the time five or six days a week and only had Sunday to rest. So, there was no real time to relax. Now I can wake up whenever I want to, at first I woke up around 10 a.m. or 11 a.m., but now around 8 a.m. because I feel well-rested and it is also nice to work from home, although my productivity has decreased because there are many disturbing factors.”

(M, 21, Estonian)

Node: It is nice to work from home

It can be concluded that the learning and job-related experience of Baltic respondents reveals how the stratified reality of everyday life mediates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While one category of youth has been more successful in adapting to distance learning or saving a job and even experiencing occupational mobility, another category is still coping with remote learning or finding a new job. This partly explains the dissimilar impact of lockdown reality on respondents' lives. But it also suggests that the different perception of life chances during and after the pandemic predate the generational cohesion of Baltic youth.

5

FAMILY AND FRIENDS: CHANGING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Baltic respondents regularly refer to their family or friends in terms of the pandemic. These two categories are relevant indicators of how Coronavirus has shaped youth social capital or relations with relatives and peers.

In interviews, the family is portrayed as a source of stability and certainty. While social distancing has evidently changed everyday relations within the closest social milieu, family relations have not weakened, but on the contrary have often improved and become stronger. An increasing sense of togetherness and closeness in the family marks such changes. Young people who live with their parents are of course more likely to experience greater familial proximity, but those who live in a separate household have also started contacting their parents more frequently. Hence, respondents report that family has become more important as a value in their lives. A commitment to take care of loved ones and to protect them from Coronavirus also affirms this awareness. Some respondents in their 20s underscore that they have started feeling more grown up vis-à-vis their parents. However, Baltic youth also talk about disagreements with parents in the context of the pandemic. For example, opposing opinions on vaccination or wearing masks have provoked conflicts. In order to avoid a bad atmosphere, youth prefer not to talk about Coronavirus in such families.

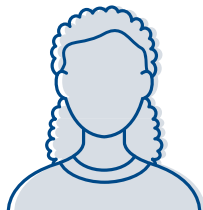
EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES



"I used to underappreciate the time spent together [with my family], just visiting and talking, but now it has changed radically — I want to call them nearly every second day, tell them how I was doing alright at work that day, or I got tired at work, or this and that happened. The togetherness with your loved ones."

(F, 22, Latvia)

Node: Want to call them nearly every second day



"I am in a big fight with my mom, and I have not talked to her since December because she got the vaccine. [...] I had my own reasons why I did not want her to get vaccinated. I was afraid of the negative side effects. I have lost my dad and did not want to lose her too but since she is a medical worker, she does not believe me."

(F, 23, Estonia)

Node: I am in a big fight with my mom

“My mom is older, so there is always this responsibility that if you are doing something, if you are going somewhere, there is always that fear that you are going to infect mom. For us, it is even better if we get sick and recover, but when you live with your parents you try to be mindful of that and just wait for the vaccine until mom can get vaccinated. [...] So, I do feel this burden and responsibility for my family. [...] Our relationship has gotten better, closer.”

Node: I feel responsibility for my family

(F, 22, Lithuania)



Missing routine interaction with friends runs like a scarlet thread through most of the Baltic interviews. Regardless of technological opportunities to maintain remote contacts, they are not able to substitute face-to-face mingling with peers. A lack of in-person meetings, as some respondents suggest, may evoke a sense of loneliness and alienation. Concurrently, in some cases this has also fostered more selective and intimate relations just with a few most important friends. Yet some respondents deliberately disassociate from friends who are sceptical about coronavirus or who attend illegal parties and mock lockdown restrictions on social networking sites. Identification with a certain opinion group in this respect motivates people to maintain closer relations with peers who think and behave alike. This means that the COVID-19 pandemic elicits social comparisons and create noticeable symbolic boundaries among Baltic youth.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES

“I started meeting up with my friends more. I started creating more intimate relationships, since I do not meet up with a whole group of friends, but I meet only two or three friends. I see that as a positive thing. [...] When I think about the people around me, my friends, my peers, we started to value in-person interactions more, because you cannot really feel the person when interacting through the phone, through video.”

Node: Started creating more intimate relationships

(M, 27, Lithuania)

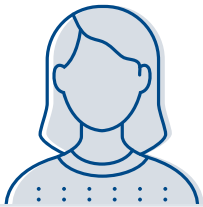




“While reading the Latvian news portals about the illness cases [...] I do believe that information. Yet, at the same time, believing is harder when you have deniers among your friends and acquaintances. They believe it is just useless nonsense. Once – it was perhaps at the start of the second wave when everything was not shut down yet – we went outside and met some friends. And there I was addressed by an acquaintance as “that Covidiot-believer”; I was dumbfounded, and decided I simply better leave.”

(F, 22, Latvia)

Node: I was addressed as that Covidiot-believer



“Even though we want to socialise a lot our parents do not really like us to get together and I would not like to hang out in the city right now, either, but at the same time, you have to study a lot at home anyway. When we have a chance to be together we try to enjoy it as much as we can.”

(F, 15, Estonia)

Node: Parents do not really like us to get together

Overall, Baltic interviews demonstrate that changes in youth social capital are related to potential for consensus as regards Coronavirus and social distancing. The social capital of young people who share similar attitudes within their family as well as with their friends has not changed, whereas the social capital of youth who are exposed to alternative interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened and become more selective.

INSTITUTIONAL TRUST: MEDIA, GOVERNMENT, AND HEALTH- CARE SYSTEM

Institutional trust has decreased in many countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. An attitude towards government, health system, and media – three visible corporative agents – can help to understand to what extent trust in these institutions has helped to legitimise or undermine lockdown policies in the Baltic States.

Information about Coronavirus has played a crucial role in priming and framing COVID-related issues. Baltic youth mention different sources of information and emphasise their ability to combine and balance information from different sources. Many respondents refer to mainstream media in their countries, particularly the largest Internet portals (e.g. Delfi, public broadcasting programmes). However, trust in mainstream media has become more inconsistent and at times deteriorated during the second wave of the pandemic. These changes are vividly reflected in Latvian and Lithuanian interviews. Decreasing trust in mainstream media is coterminous with general exhaustion from the extremely intensive and monotonous everyday flow of information. There are also growing doubts about COVID-19 statistics (infection rate, death rate), which are alleged to be overblown by mainstream media.

Overall, information about the Coronavirus is evidently not as appealing as it was during the first wave of the pandemic, and this has promoted the role played by other sources and channels. In particular, social networking sites, such as Facebook, YouTube and TikTok, constitute an alternative public space where the sceptical section of Baltic youth can feel united. Yet, providers of alternative and often misleading narratives create tensions with those who take the COVID-19 pandemic seriously. Baltic interviews suggest that respondents are largely aware of potential and actual disinformation. This awareness encourages distancing from acquaintances who take dubious information at face value or, in contrast to this, rely on mainstream media and official sources. Obtrusive alternative opinions shared or expressed by acquaintances have also motivated some respondents to limit their presence on social networking sites. Moreover, the declining trust and interest in mainstream media also translate into a growing reliance among young people either on their own critical thinking or on the opinion of their closest relatives.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES



“Well, at first it used to be pretty scary. All those people who were sick, massively were getting sick and so on. The farther away, the more I started to think it was just a too much blown bubble. Basically, I started rejecting everything the media says, like “15min”, “Lietuvos Rytas”, “DELFI”, I stopped looking at those. I just stopped following what is going on, I do not even watch the news anymore like I used to.”

(M, 29, Lithuania)

Node: Started rejecting everything the media says

“When the first sick people appeared, then I waited with the trembling hands every time waiting for the announcement from Delfi, how it will be today and what awaits us next. After that, the second time I was really looking forward to the news, it was when there were so many patients, it was 1000 plus. I waited for that to happen, to close immediately. Now it is that I take all the news quite calmly.”

Node: I take all the news quite calmly

(M, 29, Latvia)



“In Estonian Commune Association and other groups there are actual facts that the members share. I have also shared them. They talk about how it is all planned and it will end in 2025. Facebook has now hired the fact checkers – this already seems so odd. If there is something that is really the truth, the fact checkers mark it as a lie so that no one would believe it.”

Node: There are actual facts that the members share

(F, 23, Estonia)



Local governments have played a pivotal role in handling the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Government policies have differed significantly across the Baltic States. While the Latvian and Lithuanian governments took harsher measures to ensure social distancing, the Estonian government implemented relatively soft restrictions until the dramatic increase in the infection rate in Spring 2021. Moreover, the varying government approval rates that existed before the outbreak of Coronavirus should also be taken into consideration when assessing how Baltic youth treat their respective governments. Estonian society has persistently expressed a greater trust in government and medical staff than Lithuanian and Latvian society.¹

Although some respondents admit that it is not easy for the government to work in such difficult conditions, their institutional trust has changed over time, as many Baltic respondents have become more critical towards official policies. The most common object of criticism is restrictions and how consistently and reasonably the government has implemented them. For example, respondents criticise the closure of retail stores, the temporary closure of beauty and tourism businesses, social distancing requirements in shops, unsubstantiated financial support to some companies, and the delayed reaction to the second wave.

¹ For trust in government and medical staff across the Baltic states, see Standard Eurobarometer 94, p. 44, available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2355>

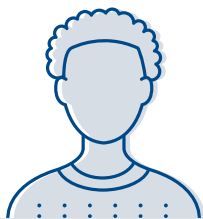
EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES



"They do all this nonsense, these projects of their's. So to speak, I was angry just because when the very first pandemic started, then 8 or 20 people got sick, and then it started, the lockdown, all the restrictions, and when they let thing loosen up, and until the so-called elections they did not do anything, and after the elections they did not know what to do and made things even stricter, so I am very disappointed with the government and I just do not believe a word they say."

(M, 29, Lithuania)

Node: They do all this nonsense



"They managed quite well during the first wave and in summer, even during the start of autumn. Life was quite normal then. But at the end of last year and at the start of this year it went out of control. I also did not see the change of government as a necessary thing because we lost valuable time with it. The new government has made quite a lot of mistakes. Compared to other countries, the restrictions are much looser."

(M, 18, Estonia)

Node: The new government has made quite a lot of mistakes



"Medicine, in the context of COVID-19, is necessary. It was unclear for me what doctors were doing before, but now I understand that there is a lot of work. I think it is hardest for them in the time of pandemic. [...] The medics are doing their best. That is why it is great that things are done regarding the COVID-19."

(M, 16, Latvia)

Node: The medics are doing their best

The local healthcare system, unlike government, receives more consistent support from Baltic youth. The healthcare system, including scientists and hospital representatives, has gained trust in the eyes of the respondents, as representatives of these institutions are on the front line, witnessing the severity and damage wrought by the disease. Some respondents emphasise that they know that the healthcare system in their country is being pushed hard and medical staff are exhausted due to Coronavirus. Nonetheless, the criticism of inflated numbers of infected people that is levied at mainstream media and government is also occasionally directed at healthcare institutions.

7

PROJECTING THE FUTURE: PESSIMISTS, OPTIMISTS, AND PRAGMATISTS

Reflections on the future define a moral horizon. Such a horizon embraces present aspirations, fears, and commitments. Baltic interviews reveal a multi-layered image of what the life of the Corona generation could look like after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Almost all respondents share a hope that along with restoring pre-pandemic social habits (e.g. traveling, going to pubs, attending cultural events, engaging in outdoor hobbies, etc.) the value of face-to-face interaction will significantly increase. This optimistic view contrasts with current anxiety and highlights mundane sources of happiness that young people have been deprived of. The future vision also contains a hedonistic undertone that suggests that life will be enjoyed even more than before the pandemic. Some interviews, in turn, highlight the youth commitment to social and occupational mobility that Coronavirus has put a halt to. The time spent in social isolation has encouraged Baltic youth to reassess their life trajectories. This experience has also made the young generation, as some respondents explicitly put it, better equipped to meet new challenges.

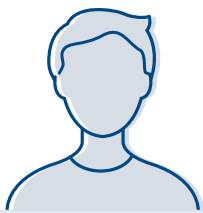
EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS & NODES



"I think not just for me but also for other people they will start to socialise more after Corona. This was kind of a reality check because before everyone took it for granted that they can socialise with other people. Now they feel that they want to socialise even more."

(F, 16, Estonia)

Node: People will socialise even more



"Now the masks have been made a part of our life, and it is a quite effective thing, even though not everyone believes in this. So, I think I could practice that in the future. Well, if I do not feel well, the best thing is to stay at home. However, if I have to go out, then I would make sure to wear a mask."

(M, 23, Lithuania)

Node: Masks are a quite effective thing



"At best, I hope that it will be enough to be able to get vaccinated once a year and there will be no restrictions on the people who will agree to it. However, in order to recover 100% from it all, I think we will not return to what it was before in one, two or three years."

(M, 29, Latvia)

Node: We will not return to what it was before

Acknowledging a considerable level of optimism in youth expectations, the interviews also reveal a rather salient belief that the legacy of COVID will be a lasting one. For example, Baltic youth often mention distance working or distance learning that, in their opinion, will remain an important counterpart to in-person interaction. Some respondents also tend to think that hygienic practices, travel restrictions or wearing masks will persist, implying that awareness of Coronavirus threats will endure in the foreseeable future. This suggests that young people in the Baltic States are determined to accept "the new normal" unless pre-pandemic freedoms and social life are restored. A somewhat pragmatic and conditional approach can also be observed in a commitment to accept a regular vaccination if that can help to facilitate socialisation. Simultaneously, it should be noted that few respondents express extremely pessimistic thoughts about the future, with these for the most part addressing the economic consequences of the pandemic, such as rising prices and general uncertainty as regards employment. Marginal, but markedly pessimistic projections are also voiced in terms of expectations that the pandemic might have lingering emotional consequences, i.e. young people whose formative period is associated with social isolation and distancing may experience a persistent sense of hopelessness and lack of motivation when it comes to achieving something in life.

Varying projections regarding the future once again elicit symbolic boundaries, this time between optimists, pessimists, and pragmatists. To some extent, such divisions reflect structural conditions that influence which path young people are more likely to take. Those who have lost a job or have not socially adjusted to COVID-era reality are more likely not to expect radical changes in the future, whereas youth who have got used to "the new normal" see the future in brighter colours. Such an in-group differentiation suggests that one may expect diverse emotional responses and frustration levels among Baltic youth if Coronavirus continue to influence everyday life and if restrictions on social life remain the same or become even harsher.

CONCLUSIONS



This research report demonstrates how Baltic youth have become accommodated to the COVID-19 normality. Interviews that have been thoroughly explored in the report reveal that young people in the Baltic States have experienced tremendous changes in everyday lives. Immobility – restricted freedom of movement and social mingling – has marked this striking experience. Arguably, the lasting effect of this experience will lead to transformation into vivid formative memories of what can be tentatively called the Corona generation. The report has underscored that, in light of the pandemic, youth in the Baltic States cannot be, and should not be, treated as an undifferentiated group.

Baltic interviews confirm that the pandemic has indeed been a psychological burden on young people. Emotional responses vary from rather natural fatigue, tiredness and boredom to more dangerous mental states, such as sadness, despair, and depression. However, the emotional burden does not overshadow other experiences. There are numerous examples where Baltic youth demonstrate agency and determination to get past COVID-era constraints. By admitting that young people have struggled with mental repercussions, it is equally important to acknowledge intellectual, physical, and social advancements that they have managed to accomplish in these extraordinary times. Moreover, such discrepancies can create symbolic boundaries between youth who see themselves as winners and those who to some extent feel like they are losers due to COVID.

The experience of remote learning and employment illustrates an ability to adjust to new conditions. Yet, the various ways of coping with social distancing again highlight more successful and less successful categories of youth. On the one hand, self-discipline and capacity to manage one's day-to-day life while being at home have enabled many young people to feel relatively comfortable with distance education and work from home. Conversely, students who keep struggling with remote learning are more likely to report on a lack of motivation to acquire education. Likewise, young people in the Baltic States who have lost jobs in the service sector will be less likely to share the experience of a successful adjustment to work from home.

Many Baltic respondents convey a belief that relations with their loved ones have improved and become more intimate since the outbreak of Coronavirus. Families have helped youth to balance the negative impact of social

distancing. Family is seen as a social refuge and as a major source of social responsibility. The same applies to closest friends, who think and behave alike in terms of COVID and lockdown rules. Even if meeting friends is severely restricted, the pandemic has reinforced youth social capital through regular phone calls, chats on social networking sites or through joint violation of lockdown rules. Yet Baltic interviews also offer salient accounts about families and peer circles as sources of conflict when it comes to perceptions of Coronavirus and various restrictions. Controversial opinions that emerge in family and among peers may result in an increasing emotional burden and in shrinking social capital.

The differences between the first and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic have generated inconsistent patterns of institutional trust in media and government. Overall, young people's trust deteriorated during the second wave. After achieving considerable prominence as a reliable source in 2020, the mainstream media have gradually become less popular. This is largely due to the waning interest of younger audience in everyday news about the pandemic. Meanwhile, Baltic governments, like governments in other European countries, have suffered from unpredictable or unjustified policies in their reaction to the pandemic. Simultaneously, the motivation of youth to select alternative information sources on social networking sites has increased. Intensive information and general uncertainty have prompted young people in the Baltic States to engage with alternative, but often also misleading and conspiracy, discourses or to become more ignorant about media news and official sources.

Projections of Baltic youth regarding the future also reveal a considerable in-group differentiation. The interview data show that the visions of the future are shaped by optimists, pessimists, and pragmatists. These categories help to illustrate the symbolic boundaries that divide the Corona generation, shedding light on the varying role of youth agency in dealing with various constraints. The varying representations of the future together with other differentiating properties described in the foregoing suggest that the Corona generation will share a common formative period and memories, but will be divided by dissimilar experience and emotional responses to the pandemic. Moreover, structural differences (e.g. income level, education, family status, residential area, etc.) that are only indirectly touched on in this report will also contribute to the internal diversity of the Corona generation.

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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.

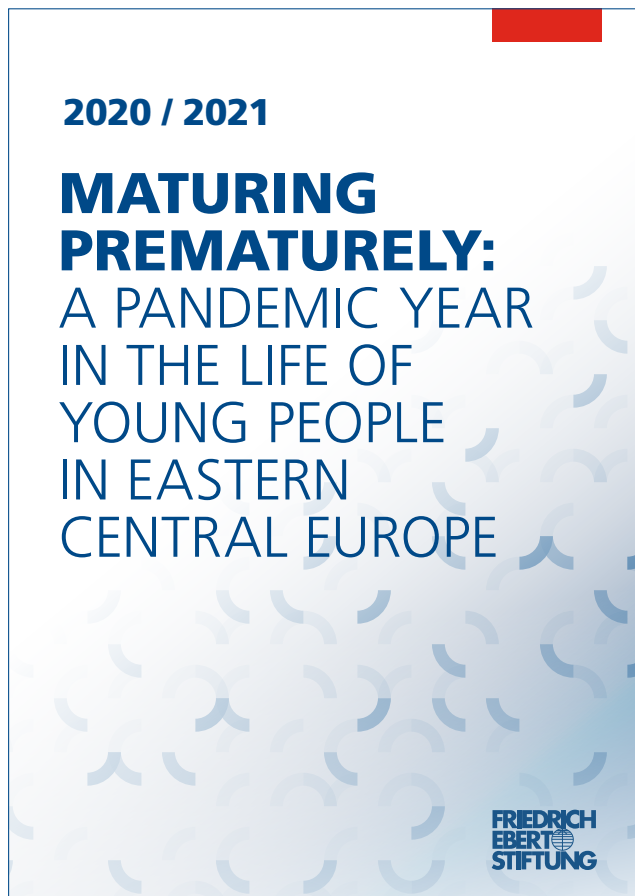
A dedicated Advisory Board (Dr Miran Lavrič, Univ.-Prof. Dr. Marius Haring, Daniela Lamby, András Biró-Nagy and Dr Mārtiņš Kaprāns) supports the methodological and conceptual design of the Youth Studies. The Board consists of permanent and associated members and provides essential expertise for the overall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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

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.

AUTHOR

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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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