

Crisis perceptions and experiences of resilience among young people in the early and late stages of the coronavirus epidemic

Válságpercepció és rezilienciaélmény a koronavírus-járvány kezdeti és lecsengő szakaszában

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Abstract: Based on data from the large-scale youth survey conducted in the autumn of 2020, a volume of studies entitled *Hungarian Youth during the Coronavirus Epidemic* was published in 2021. In his opening paper, Levente Székely also raises the possibility of interpreting the epidemic as a generational experience – while indicating that the period between the beginning of the epidemic and the recording of the data has not yet been clearly defined, at least not yet in terms of the significance of the impact of the events on younger generations. In this paper, we follow in the footsteps of the findings of the Youth Survey 2020 and other national and international research to examine how young people experienced the epidemic (how much it affected them) and to what extent they can be considered a ‘crisis-resilient’ group compared to older age groups in the light of their experiences and lived experiences; and which groups of young people are at highest risk. The results of a questionnaire survey carried out by Századvég in the summer of 2021 showed that 18–29-year-olds were the most vulnerable of the adult population. They typically experienced the greatest degree of change, had the most difficulty finding their way back to ‘normal’, and had the least ‘resilience’. The analysis showed that the subgroups that were particularly vulnerable and “inflexible” were those in higher education, those living in the capital, those suffering from reduced social contact and even from direct exposure to the coronavirus, and young women.

Keywords: youth, generation, coronavirus epidemic, COVID-19, resilience, coping

Összefoglaló: A 2020-as esztendő őszén felvett nagymintás ifjúságkutatás adataira támaszkodva 2021-ben jelent meg a *Magyar fiatalok a koronavírus-járvány idején* című tanulmánykötet. Ennek nyi-

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tó tanulmányában Székely Levente a járvány mint nemzedéki élmény értelmezési lehetőségét is felveti – ugyanakkor jelzi, hogy a járványhelyzet kezdetétől az adatok felvételéig tartó időszakban még legalábbis nem dőlt el egyértelműen, hogy az események hatása mekkora jelentőséggel bír a fiatalabb generációkra nézve. Jelen tanulmányban az ifjúságkutatás 2020-as eredményeinek, valamint további hazai és nemzetközi kutatási eredmények nyomvonalán haladva megvizsgáljuk: miként élték meg a fiatalok a járványhelyzetet (az mennyire viselte meg őket); ebbéli tapasztalataik és megéléseik fényében mennyiben tekinthetők – az idősebb korcsoportokhoz képest – „válságálló” csoportnak; valamint hogy melyek az ifjúság legmagasabb kockázati szinttel jellemezhető csoportjai. A Századvég által 2021 nyarán végzett kérdőíves kutatás eredményei azt mutatták, hogy a 18–29 évesek voltak azok, akik a felnőttkori népességen belül a legnehezebben élték meg a változásokat. Jellemzően ők érzékelték a legnagyobb mértékű átalakulásokat, ők találtak vissza legnehezebben a „normál” kerékvágásba, és az ő „rezilienciaélményük” volt a legcsekélyebb mérvű. Az elemzés tanúsága szerint különösképpen sérülékenyek, „rugalmatlannak” mutatkoztak a felsőfokú tanulmányokat folytató, a fővárosban élő, a társas kapcsolatok beszűkülésétől vagy éppen a koronavírussal való közvetlen megbetegedéstől szenvedő alcsoportok, illetve a fiatal nők.

Kulcsszavak: ifjúság, generáció, koronavírus-járvány, COVID-19, reziliencia, megküzdés

1. Introduction: generation and epidemic

It is both rewarding and difficult to use generations as the usual categories of classification in sociology.⁴ It is easy to capture the members of each generation as groups who, because of their age and the way in which institutions operate, have a good chance of benefiting from similar ‘packages’ of experiences. Such seemingly stable cohorts are particularly tempting subjects of study for social researchers at a time when life choices and paths seem less and less determined. Ancestry, gender roles, family formats,⁵ beliefs,⁶ class and social status⁷ have historically become less and less determinative of the content of individual choices and their chosen identity. In this context, ‘generations’ seem to be a concept which, due to the nature of individual human development, have a biological basis and, through the disciplining, standardising procedures and institutions of modernisation, a socialising-schematising force – that is, are reflections of the multi-level system of circumstances which can be conceived as human constants in a rapidly changing world. However, the generational approach has its limitations. While strong arguments for its relevance promise that we can create usable categories with realistic grounding, the need for exact delimitations runs up against the limits of social reality and observation. The recurring, seemingly insoluble questions are those of genealogy: what makes a generation (what are the characteristics that constitute its specific essence, who decides on the definition of the significant features, and where are the boundaries)?

4 The authors of the volume also point out the unsteadiness of the foundations of stratification studies and the necessarily constructed nature of the respective concepts (Gondi-Bokányi–Gyorgyovich–Pillók 2021: 46).

5 For more on the pluralisation of family forms, see Somlai (1999).

6 For more on the diversity of beliefs and religious plasticity, see Gyorgyovich–Kollár (2020) and László (2020).

7 For a comprehensive, roughly chronological overview of the most important relevant writings, see Angelusz–Éber–Gecser (2010).

Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, but their formulation seems to be a good starting point for the next theoretically oriented introduction to our next topic: to what extent are long-lasting and mostly generation-specific life experiences necessary for the development of generational consciousness (Mannheim 1969; Somlai 2014: 12) on the one hand, and historically significant events, dynamic social changes, and short but all the more intense periods of crisis on the other? The popularity of the generational approach in recent decades has been based largely on the former assumptions.⁸ According to this view, knowledge and creativity are valorised in the capitalist societies of late modernity (Florida 2002 – cited in Kiss-Kozma 2021: 137), which is closely linked to the fast-paced technological developments of internet-based new media, their changing culture of use – and the associated labour market demands. The new watchword is no longer efficiency but flexibility (Boltanski–Chiapello 1999) – the main human driver of which is young people with quick perceptions and a constant readiness to change and adapt. The members of the new generation, the ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001), are not only associated with negative stereotypes but also with newly formulated expectations and expectations. They are often expected to help older people socialise, to initiate them into the online (or ‘onlife’ [Floridi 2015]) world, while they are left without guidance and models regarding the complexities of life management and lifestyle and their (media) literacy is questioned.⁹ The other side of the coin can be seen as the generational side of crises.¹⁰

The Great War embedded the first elaborate theoretical approaches to generations,¹¹ and the post-World-War-II-related intergenerational value conflicts and their globalising expansion the related empirical research¹² – and it is perhaps in the thematic trajectory of the coronavirus epidemic that the sociological imagination of generation formation and global social reality first truly meet.¹³ However, its significance should not be overestimated. While it is true that a good part of 2020 and 2021 was dominated by the COVID-19 epidemic, 2022 – at least in Hungary and the region – was much more dominated by the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, the related energy crisis and inflation, and at the time of writing, in the summer of 2023, it can be said that the coronavirus epidemic no longer has any impact on the everyday life of the majority of society (or, more precisely, its direct effects are hardly perceptible).

8 See, for example, perhaps the most common generational divide (McCrindle 2014), in which the characteristics of younger generations are, to a large extent, determined by the (media) technological changes of the past decades.

9 For more on this issue, see Aczél 2015.

10 *“The basic idea of Strauss and Howe (1991; 1997) is that the character of a generation is shaped by the changing mood of society and that the socialisation of generations with their silent traits takes place in times of crisis”* – quotes Székely (2021a: 19), own translation.

11 In this field, the pioneering work of Károly Mannheim (1969) is inescapable.

12 The most widely used division is that of McCrindle (2014) – based on birth years: anonymous generation (–1924), veterans (1925–1945), baby boomers (1946–1964), generation X (1965–1979), generation Y (1980–1994), generation Z (1995–2009), alpha-generation (2010–).

13 *“The self-focused perspective of the developed world used to talk about generations in an expansive sense, but this was difficult to accept because of the different economic, social and cultural conditions. However, the coronavirus epidemic is indeed a planet-wide phenomenon and can act as a defining point, a stage in the lives of young people in particular, for whom it can be a generational experience”* (Székely 2021a: 9 – own translation).

2. Findings from the Hungarian Youth Survey 2020

In 2020 and 2021, however, domestic sociology was still all about the coronavirus epidemic, with little exaggeration.¹⁴ This was the mood in which the volume of studies on the results of the sixth wave of large-scale youth surveys in Hungary, entitled *Hungarian Youth during the Coronavirus Epidemic*, was published. A total of 8,000 young people aged between 15 and 29 were interviewed in Hungary (Székely 2021c: 7). The fieldwork, originally planned to start in spring, was postponed to autumn due to the epidemic, and between September and December 2020, during the second wave of the coronavirus epidemic (Székely 2021a: 10), the data collection was carried out following suggestions made during the professional consultation (Székely 2021b: 263), making it possible to investigate not only the usual thematic issues, which are more or less invented for time-series comparisons but also the most topical issue, the perceived impact of the epidemic (Székely 2021b: 266). Despite the fact that the search for respondents was more successful than in previous waves (Székely 2021b: 270), the data collection process took considerably longer than usual (Székely 2021b: 269).

Among the documents published in 2021 on the results of the *Hungarian Youth Research 2020*, the volume of studies edited by Levente Székely (Székely 2021c), one review, one methodological and nine thematic papers formed the main literature basis of our analysis. In the following, we will review how the authors of the analyses think that young people were affected by the epidemic situation, how their habits and opinions had changed (if they changed at all) by the time of the measurement compared to previous trends – and, in order to properly contextualise the most important related results, we will occasionally look at further attempts to explain the situation in the literature and empirical research. We feel it is important to state upfront that we focus on those parts of the systematically processed studies where changes that are in some way related to the coronavirus epidemic in Hungary starting in 2020 are discussed or where such effects are assumed to be behind them – i.e., we do not discuss findings or texts that are less relevant to our analysis.¹⁵

Most of the analyses presenting the results of the 2020 Large-Sample Survey of Youth are only tangentially related to the coronavirus epidemic.¹⁶ Trends presented by the authors of the studies reveal, among other things, the following. In terms of health behaviour, it is noteworthy that for 15–29-year-old respondents who reported their habits during the epidemic and the severe restrictions that accompanied

¹⁴ The Hungarian Sociological Association's 2021 annual meeting was entitled *The Impact of the Pandemic on the Socialization Processes in Hungary* (Magyar Szociológiai Társaság 2021), but the joint work of researchers from several social science disciplines is also the result of the *White Paper on the Socio-economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Horn–Bartal 2022).

¹⁵ Specifically, (social) resilience during the coronavirus epidemic was the subject of the large-scale questionnaire survey conducted by Századvég Konzorcium in 2021. Drawing mainly (but not exclusively) on the results of this survey for the 18–29 age group, the next chapter of this study, following the thread of the latest volume of studies on the results of youth research, will look at how young people (young adults) experienced the epidemic; to what extent they can be considered a crisis-resistant, resilient group in the light of their experiences and perceptions; and which groups of youth are at highest risk.

¹⁶ For example, the study on social mobility in the context of the coronavirus epidemic is of little relevance (the results of the trend analysis show that there was no significant change compared to the measurement four years earlier [Gondi-Bokányi–Gyorgyovich–Pillók 2021: 36]).

it (which had been going on for months by autumn 2020), the recent decline in smoking (except in groups with poorer financial circumstances) seemed to continue, but alcohol consumption did not decrease significantly (Susánszky–Székely 2021: 168; 174; 175). Although not explicitly tested, the authors indicate that it cannot be ignored that the measurements in 2020 were taken during the coronavirus epidemic. *“The changes in lifestyle and consumption habits that we have observed in risk behaviours cannot be dissociated from the health crisis situation, its social, economic or even psychological and mental consequences, or the reduction in objective opportunities, e.g., in terms of sport.”* (Susánszky–Székely 2021: 186 – own translation)

In terms of religiosity, we see a slight increase in the proportion attending mass more frequently (Gyorgyovich and Pillók [2021: 243–244] also mention the International Eucharistic Conference, postponed during the period of data collection, possibly as part of the preparation for which the number of mass attendees may have increased, including among young people), and a renewed increase in the proportion of young people who define themselves as uniquely religious (Gyorgyovich–Pillók 2021: 239). The fact that the proportion of smokers was highest among those who could not define themselves in terms of religiosity (Susánszky–Székely 2021: 168) also fits into a broader pattern, which can be described as a general sense of insecurity. This formless contingency is also reflected in the change in the problems perceived by young people in recent decades: “clearly identifiable, concrete problems – apart from material difficulties – have been relegated to the background at the expense of more elusive, more volatile problems” (Székely 2021a: 13 – own translation).¹⁷

In the world of education and work, the pluralisation of life paths is increasingly striking, making life stages less rigidly separated. Perhaps the weak threat of the final status gap has also contributed to the fact that more and more young people seem to be taking up jobs – in 2020, there was no sign of a decline in the respective statistics due to the crisis situation (Kiss-Kozma 2021: 119). In terms of the proportion of so-called NEETs,¹⁸ which are considered socially problematic, Hungary was positioned in the middle of the European average in 2020, showing only a marginal increase compared to four years earlier (Eurostat – cited in Kiss-Kozma 2021: 126).¹⁹ However, the literature suggests that in the future, there will be an increase in demand for highly skilled, flexible and talented workers, which may make groups that are not in education, training, or obtaining work experience even more vulnerable (Kiss-Kozma 2021: 137).

A related issue is the difficulty of the potential parallelism between long-term labour market entry and family life. That this is a real and significant challenge for young adults is borne out by the results of the youth survey: *“[T]he difficulty of reconciling career and private life can also lead to relationship breakdown”*, according to a significant proportion

¹⁷ A similar threat is reflected in the visual discourse of resilience (László 2021: 156).

¹⁸ Young people not in employment, education or training.

¹⁹ Hungary will remain in the “middle” in 2022, with the share of NEETs remaining essentially unchanged (Eurostat 2023).

of respondents²⁰ (Engler–Pári 2021: 101). In the 2010s, the rates and indicators of marriage and divorce among young people improved in demographic and population policy terms, but it is questionable whether the difficult period that began with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic will break the trend towards more childbearing that has been boosted by the expansion of the family support system (Domokos 2021: 71). This is difficult to answer on the basis of the 2020 data, but it may be a cause for concern that for a significant proportion of young people, owning their own home is a particularly important precondition for having children (Engler–Pári 2021: 95) – the drastic increase in the cost of borrowing seen in recent years is a serious challenge to the ability to secure this conditionality, especially for members of the 25–29 age group, which has stronger expectations in this regard (Engler–Pári 2021: 96).²¹

In the context of social resilience in the demographic sense, which is also similar to the conceptual apparatus employed in this paper (Bourbeau 2013; Longstaff et al. 2010 – cited in Domokos 2021: 60), the demographic situation of young people, their family formation strategies and their role in social reproduction deserve special attention (Domokos 2021: 60). In this respect, the trends that can be identified in relation to the number of young people, their share in the population and the increase in the values of the ageing index are ominous (Domokos 2021: 60–61). *“It is obvious that in ageing societies, the ability to adapt and renew [respond] to external and internal changes is much weaker, and the local, territorial effects of this can now be seen within Hungary”* (Sebestyén Szép et al. 2020 – cited in Domokos 2021: 60).²²

At several points in the volume, the (sociological) essence of the coronavirus epidemic is addressed, such as the lack of social contact. In 2016, 40 per cent of the surveyed age group did not have any relationships, which was true for almost half (47 per cent) of the respondents by 2020 (Domokos 2021: 70). Moreover, according to some research, the delay in childbearing was more specifically due to the lack of relationships than the evolution of value preferences. (Kopp–Hofmeister–Tóth–Neumann–Bódi 2008; Kapitány–Spéder 2012 – cited in Engler–Pári 2021: 94). Related to the same phenomenon is the increase in time spent at home (in front of screens) among young people (Székely 2021a: 18) and the fact that fewer and fewer

20 It is worth noting here that the difficulties of adapting to transitional periods and life stages do not seem to be taken into account by the long-established system of ‘additional leave’ (for the current system, see, for example, Dr Babati, undated). The extra days that automatically accrue with age are mainly supplemented by additional days for those with children. However, neither are the years of entry into the labour market (when, in addition to finding a partner to start married life or have children, studies that could still potentially run in parallel would justify more time off and flexible time units) nor preparation for the less productive period of retirement (the number of days of extra leave under the system reaches its maximum well before retirement) particularly well supported by traditional labour law (the above elements of which have been in place since 1992). Here, thanks are due to Zita Gondi-Bokányi for jointly drafting the original comment on this issue.

21 The fact that almost two-thirds of the respondents think that the (desired) norm is cohabitation before marriage (associated with the idea of owning or at least renting a home) (Engler–Pári 2021: 100) draws the outlines of a value system that is not conducive to the positive goal of what Tamás Domokos calls demographic resilience.

22 In our view, the concept of “demographically resilient communities” (Domokos 2021: 83) offers a well-thought-out theoretical framework for policy-making and community development, but the phenomenon is difficult to measure in social research, and its axiomatic assumptions are not necessarily reflected in statistics. Older age groups are presumably more experienced with social change; their needs (and prospects) are more (limited); their lifestyles are more predictable and stable; and they are therefore better able to adapt to changes that are most likely to be felt in the wider social environment (or even to the lack of need to adapt, which may be even more likely to result in the absence or mitigation of adverse consequences). The issues of resilience, the experience of resilience, and age groups will be discussed in more detail later.

of them are planning to move out of their parents' home (Székely 2021a: 17). One of the main features of the epidemic situation was precisely that it reinforced these trends: many of those who had not previously been 'at home' were forced into this lifestyle. The curfew-related restrictions were accompanied by a scarcity of meeting opportunities that may be reflected in the research findings: a large number of young people mentioned the provision of the necessary social venues as one of the forms of help needed to find a suitable partner (Engler-Pári 2021: 100). The data on leisure time also shows that young people are looking for offline opportunities to connect with friends – which may have manifested in the circumvention of lockdowns during the coronavirus outbreak (Székely-Veszelszki 2021: 197). Overall, however, the importance of internet use and online content consumption continued to grow during the COVID-19 epidemic, not least due to the importance of working and studying at home (McClain et al. 2021 – cited in Székely-Veszelszki 2021: 205).²³

A particularly noteworthy result was presented by Andrea Szabó and Dániel Oross, who investigated the reasons for the increase in interest in politics among young people at the time of the 2020 survey (Szabó-Oross 2021: 219). The researchers concluded that the coronavirus epidemic may have played a role, if not a direct one, in the turn towards public issues. Thus, in the sense that those who had previously remained aloof were also affected, government decisions (quarantine rules, curfew restrictions, etc.) affected almost everyone (Székely 2021a: 14). Even otherwise apolitical groups of young people were not able to exempt themselves from the consequences of the epidemic (Szabó-Oross 2021: 229). Although the epidemic itself did not directly influence the change of interest in politics (Szabó-Oross 2021: 221; 223), youth "relegated" to the family environment and forced to change their day-to-day lives²⁴ were inevitably confronted with public affairs and became participants in the relevant discussions²⁵ (Szabó-Oross 2021: 228–229).

The studies published in the volume *Young Hungarians in the Age of the Coronavirus* have the merit of thematising the significant changes that affected the life of society and thus of youth in the year 2020. The authors have raised questions such as how much the epidemic will affect the lives of the generations entering adulthood (Székely 2021a: 26) and how much their thinking will be influenced by the related experiences (Székely 2021a: 28) – but there is no or only a limited possibility to answer these questions at the moment.²⁶ In 2020, the lack of friends and communities climbed

23 In addition to the hardships associated with the coronavirus epidemic, activities such as watching film series proved to be part of forward-looking coping strategies (Kollár-László 2023).

24 The inability to change one's external circumstances and the lack of a sense of control may also be reflected in the result that fewer 15–29-year-olds in 2020 than in the past thought that young people had a say in national and/or local public affairs (Szabó-Oross 2021: 217).

25 It is important to note that the research examined public and political interest with the same question (Szabó-Oross 2021: 228), so these two items – presumably – were not separated in the results, reflected in the answers, or limited to the range of meanings that can be exclusively linked to the political sphere, but not to the wider social public sphere.

26 The 2020 generation survey by Századvég, whose data collection also coincided with the emergence of the coronavirus, can provide further insights into generational experiences. The results of the survey indicated that the coronavirus epidemic appeared to be an event that could potentially shape the experiences and "we-consciousness" of the generation in question in a meaningful way, primarily among members of the so-called "limbo generation" born between 1985 and 1994 and the "beanbag generation" born between 1995 and 2002 (Bauer et al. 2022: 380–381).

up to fourth place on young people's problem map (Székely 2021a: 13), which also suggests that the need for personal encounters has strengthened – researchers also raise the possibility of the “return of the analogue”; of its becoming fashionable (Székely–Veszelszki 2021: 208). Even if only intermittently, the weight and direction of the changes – already visible in 2020 – have been accompanied by an increase in political (or perhaps more accurately, public) interest among young people, which may be attributed primarily to the curfews (Szabó–Oross 2021: 229). Multi-level interpretations of the impact of the coronavirus and the epidemic situation were already outlined in 2020 (Székely 2021a: 24): in addition to the immediate health and mental health impacts,²⁷ in the longer term, individuals' financial situations and social relations, as well as future visions, are among the areas that may become problematic in the absence of appropriate responses.²⁸ Despite this, and although some international studies suggest that the effects of the coronavirus epidemic are felt most by young people (OECD 2021b – cited in Székely 2021: 20), in the report of the 2020 Youth Survey, researchers reported with surprise that the majority of young respondents in Hungary at the time of the survey did not really perceive (for themselves) the effects of the epidemic (Székely 2021a: 10; 20).²⁹

3. Hungarian youth in the waning phase of the epidemic

Reviewing the studies presenting the results of the sixth wave of youth research in Hungary, we could see that certain changes were already noticeable and measurable during the initial phase of the epidemic, a few months after the appearance of the coronavirus in Hungary. However, based on the above, we have little evidence to conclude how and to what extent the direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 epidemic, including its perception, have transformed the lifestyle, outlook – and generation-specific experiences – of Hungarian youth. The detection of trends is not only affected by the changes in the content of the youth research questionnaire, the methodological limitations of comparability (Székely 2021a: 16) or the time constraints of data collection in the initial period of the epidemic but also by the simple fact that the effects of the coronavirus epidemic were not originally the focus of youth research.

27 According to the 2020 Youth Survey data, satisfaction with health status is weakly but significantly associated with exposure to the epidemic: “those who have experienced the impact of the epidemic tend to be less positive about their mental health” (Székely 2021a: 24–25 – own translation). An interesting addendum to this may be that a survey conducted by Századvég in 2021 among the adult population showed that those who had been infected themselves demonstrated greater resilience than respondents who had not (yet) been infected with coronavirus (and/or did not know they had been infected) (Kollár–László 2023).

28 “The immediate effects of the pandemic were not only on our health and healthcare, but also on our daily habits, and the economic, political and even linguistic (Veszelszki 2020) consequences were almost immediate.” (Székely 2021a: 19 – own translation). In line with the above, László (2022) suggested the use of the term “epidemic situation”, which is more expressive of the specific circumstances and sociological aspects.

29 At the same time, Szabó and Oross have already pointed out on the basis of 2020 data that “less than half of young people were affected by the coronavirus epidemic, but at the same time, with a few exceptions, these changes were experienced in a fundamentally negative way by 15–29-year-olds” (Szabó–Oross 2021: 230–231).

In the Youth Survey 2020 questionnaire, the researchers asked directly about the (perceived) impact of the coronavirus epidemic and its direction (positive or negative).³⁰ In contrast, the 2021 survey by Századvég investigated the experiences and perceptions of the (adult) population according to a different underlying concept: the survey was based on whether the occurrence of various stressors, traumas and/or the period of time for processing them roughly coincided with the epidemic situation – i.e., we did not ask respondents to establish a causal link and assess the consequences (and focused unilaterally on negative events). In addition, also given that we had relatively more experience with the epidemic situation in 2021, we had much greater scope to explore the actual correlations from multiple directions and with multiple questions when designing the survey. Above all, we tried to do this according to the concept of resilience, which is the guiding principle of the research.

The epidemic situation, resilience, and resilience experience

Among the authors of the studies that have reported on the 2020 Youth Survey, Tamás Domokos explicitly built on the concept of resilience in his analysis. Domokos tried to conceptualise both its individual³¹ and communal ‘sides’ and its level. According to his ideas on the latter, “*there can be resilient communities that have few resources but high adaptive capacity, and there can be resilient communities that have low adaptive capacity but an abundance of resources that compensate for the lack of adaptive capacity*” (Domokos 2021: 60 – own translation) – in other words, groups that are able to survive crises, events, and periods in one way or another can be considered resilient according to Domokos.

The concept of resilience is a popular one in the social sciences (Xu–Marinova–Guo 2015), especially in the context of crises that test resources and community solidarity.³² The use of the term has many critics³³ – and it is true that the measurability of the phenomenon to be expressed and the usability of the term for scientific purposes is at least questionable (but in our study, we only seek to refer to the existence of these criticisms and debates). In the research of Századvég, which is of central importance for our further analysis, we have captured resilience by means

30 “»And finally, in relation to the coronavirus outbreak, I would like to ask if the following has changed in your life? As a consequence of the Coronavirus outbreak, have you changed...?» The 13 areas listed are: work (e.g. lost, new job, new work schedule, etc.); relationship; place of residence (where you live); financial circumstances; relationship with your family; (further) education plans; plans to start a family; exercise habits; eating habits; amount of time spent online; your attachment to God, religion, spirituality; community involvement (e.g. volunteering, helping others); time spent discussing public and social issues” (Szabó–Oross 2021: 219 – own translation); “In your assessment, did the coronavirus epidemic change in a more positive or more negative direction as a result of...?” – this question was asked about the areas that respondents defined as changed in the previous question (Magyar Ifjúság Kutatás 2020).

31 “In terms of life strategy, resilient individuals strive for intimate and lasting partnerships, and at the cognitive level, they are also characterized by foresight, conscious and consistent planning skills and population awareness (Kállai et al. 2019).” (Domokos 2021: 83 – own translation)

32 For more detailed theoretical overviews, see, for example, Békés (2002); Székely (2015).

33 Among others, Chandler–Reid (2016; 2019); Neocleous (2013).

of two dimensions – namely, the sense of agency³⁴ (the sense of being able to act) and the ability to cope with difficulties (or coping,³⁵ to use the technical term).³⁶

Among the main early lessons of the research results – relevant to our topic – we should mention the methodological and conceptual insight that the cross-sectional survey-based study does not actually measure resilience but the so-called “resilience experience” (László 2021). This is also important because it highlights that in analyses based on a single data collection event, it is worthwhile examining the existence/lack of resilience to crises in the context of several variables. The analysis presented in the following pages has been conducted in this spirit.

Perception of crisis and experience of resilience among young people

One of the stereotypes about young people is that they are flexible and can adapt easily to change. This argumentation is supported by the results of generational research, which show, for example, that members of Generation Z are characterised by multitasking, networking and interactivity (Farkas 2018: 19).³⁷ The ‘myth’ of elasticity seems to be justified in that the determinants (and statistical explanatory power) of socioeconomic status are increasingly giving way to the role of values (Domokos 2021: 80–81). At the same time, the age-group trends for supportive relationships and vulnerability during the coronavirus epidemic showed that those younger than 30 years of age were characterised by a loss of relationships after the initial increase in support³⁸ (Bartal–Lukács J.–László 2022a; 2022b).

Between 5 July and 17 August 2021, the Századvég Consortium conducted a representative questionnaire survey of the Hungarian adult population in relation to the most important sociodemographic criteria (gender, age groups, highest completed level of education, type of settlement, region). A total of 20,000 people were interviewed by telephone (“CATI”³⁹). In analysing the survey database, we aim to increase our understanding of how members of the 18–29 age group differ from

34 According to research by Welzel and Inglehart (2010), as life opportunities increase, ageing becomes increasingly important in terms of its impact on people’s life satisfaction.

35 Coping is closely related to the context of stressors and having insufficient resources to deal with them, in which the choice of alternative coping strategies is of great importance for the well-being of the individual (cf. Lazarus–Folkman 1984; Scheier et al. 1986).

36 The relevant statements were: “*I am in control of my life, it’s up to me how it goes*”, “*Despite the hardships, I am steadfastly moving towards my goals*.” – Respondents were asked (in addition to the don’t know and don’t answer options) to answer the question “To what extent do you feel the following statements are true or not true about yourself?”; the response options were: not at all (1), rather not (2), rather yes (3), completely (4). (Századvég Consortium 2021 – own translations) In the present analysis, we have combined the two variables to form a simple index, which we interpret as an indicator of the experience of resilience (the “resilience experience”). The experience of resilience expressed by this variable thus captures both the successful coping with (and recovery from) difficulties and the stresses they entail, and the experience; the feeling of being able to control, or at least influence, one’s own immediate life circumstances, of being an active shaper of one’s life path (not merely enduring events and circumstances).

37 In Domokos’ words, “*the search for solutions is facilitated by the fact that the age group can easily connect to distant cultures, information, news, social innovations and new answers reach them faster than ever in real time. As a result, members of Generation Z tend to be more open and actively involved in advocating for fair and equal treatment of others, which increases the resilience of the local community*” (Domokos 2021: 80 – own translation).

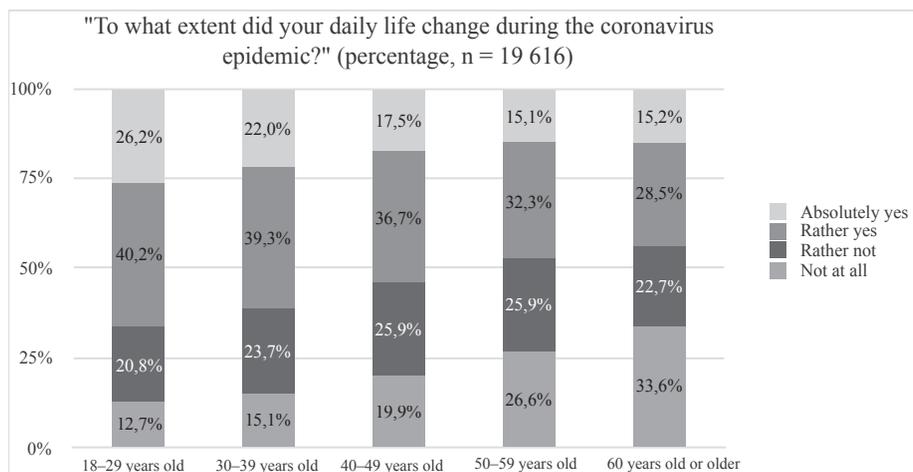
38 “*Although the 18–29 age group received the most help both before and during the epidemic, this support, mainly emotional support from parents, friends and relatives, was exhausted by December 2021. By that time, 51% had no support links at all.*” (Bartal–Lukács J.–László 2022b – own translation)

39 Computer-assisted telephone interviewing.

other age groups in their experience of the epidemic and whether we can draw some conclusions about their relative resilience.

If we look at the more simple descriptive statistics, we see that the 18–29-year-olds experienced the greatest degree of transformation⁴⁰ (Figure 1); they were the most affected by the epidemic⁴¹ (Figure 2); they were the group that had the most difficulty in finding their way back to “normal”⁴² (Figure 3); and they had the least “resilience”⁴³ (Figure 4).

Figure 1: Extent of change in everyday life by age group (own translation)



Source: Századvég 2021 – own ed.

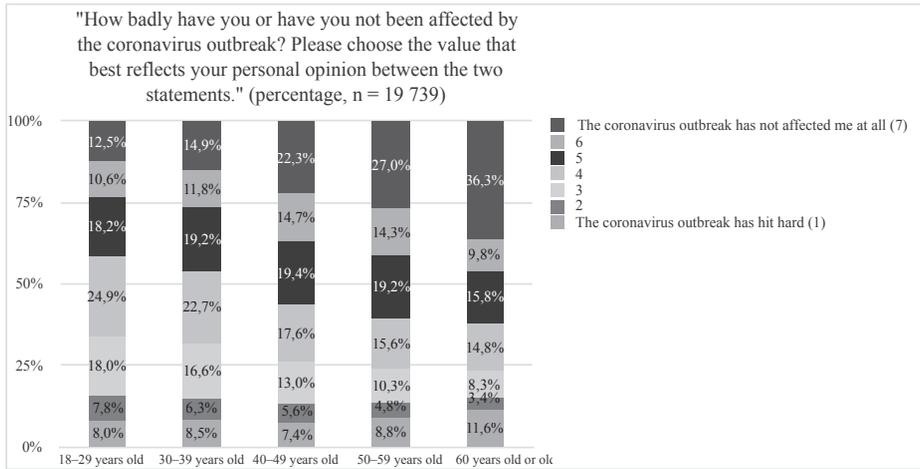
40 Between 1 and 4, the group average is 2.8 (2.68 for 30–39-year-olds, 2.52 for 40–49-year-olds, 2.36 for 50–59-year-olds and 2.25 for 60+-year-olds).

41 In the five age groups studied, from the youngest to the oldest, the group averages were 4.19, 4.33, 4.69, 4.82, and 4.95.

42 The group averages are 2.74 for 18–29 year-olds, 2.85 for 30–39-year-olds, 3.09 for 40–49-year-olds, 3.27 for 50–59 year-olds and 3.34 for those aged 60 and over.

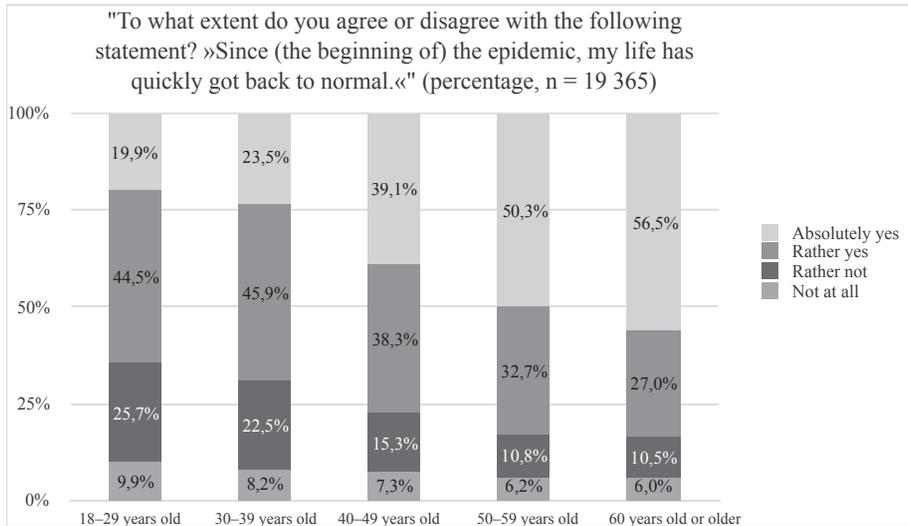
43 The average value of the seven-degree index (2 to 8) is 6.21 for 18–29-year-olds, compared to 6.27 for 30–39-year-olds, 6.6 for those in their 40s, 6.72 for those in their 50s and 6.68 for those aged 60 or over.

Figure 2: Negative effects of the epidemic situation by age group (own translation)



Source: Századvég 2021 – own ed.

Figure 3: Return to (or a new) state of equilibrium by age group (own translation)



Source: Századvég 2021 – own ed.

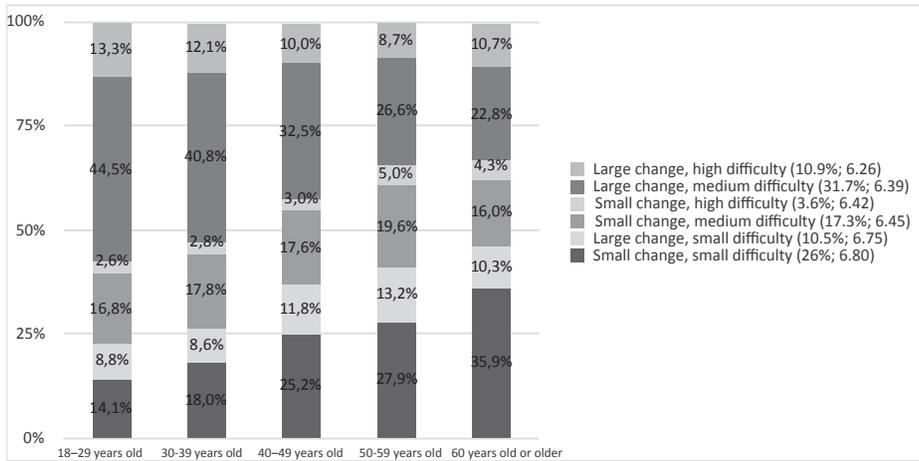
Figure 4: Resilience experience by age group (own translation)



Source: Századvég 2021 – own ed.

From the available set of variables, we combined several questions to create groups based on theoretical insights, which provide a basis for further analysis. The original four-item variable indicating the percipient degree of change was recoded into a two-item variable (no or little; or more or very much changed during the coronavirus epidemic), and the seven-item variable indicating the percipient experience of the coronavirus epidemic as difficult was recoded into a three-item variable (very hard; moderately hard; not very hard). The resulting categories can be used to group, using a single variable, different combinations of experiences of people with different subjective experiences of the changes and difficulties experienced in daily life during the epidemic. The six groups described with combinations of small/large change and small/medium/high difficulty were ranked according to the average extent to which each category was associated with the experience of resilience, also measured by two variables (~agency and ~coping dimensions) (Figure 5) (see more details in the relevant chart). By the summer of 2021, only a good third of the Hungarian population had managed to survive the coronavirus epidemic with minor difficulties. One in five people had experienced only minor changes but still considered the period of the epidemic a moderate or major ordeal. However, a relatively large number of young adults under 30 years of age were represented in the categories that had experienced major changes and moderate or major difficulties in their own lives. This suggests that, at least during a crisis such as the COVID-19 epidemic, the young generation can primarily be associated with vulnerability rather than resilience.

Figure 5: Groups according to variables and difficulties, by age category (percentage, n=19,467 – proportions in the total sample in parentheses after the group names; and the average of the Resilience Experience Index) (own translation)



Source: Századvég 2021 – own ed.

Both surveys, the youth survey and the Századvég Resilience Survey, used different questioning methods, but both covered – more or less in a similar way – changes in the world of work, relationships and the place of residence, and potential stressors. Of these areas, the least change of residence was experienced by 15–29-year-olds until autumn 2020 (4 per cent were affected) – for 18–29-year-olds, 24.1 per cent of respondents had changed their place of residence by summer 2021 (in relation to the previous two years) (a significant difference, even taking into account the small differences between age groups). In terms of relationship changes, 6 per cent of the age group surveyed in 2020 reported a change (51 per cent in the negative) – and in the two years prior to the data collection, 13.2 per cent of 18–29-year-olds surveyed in 2021 had experienced a relationship breakup. Negative changes at work (loss of job, new job, new work schedule, etc.) affected 12 per cent of young people in 2020 (and the direction of change was negative for 83 per cent of those affected), while in 2021, 9.3 per cent of young adults under 30 said they had lost their job in the previous two years (Századvég 2021; Székely 2021a: 22–23). Of course, these differences in the figures do not represent actual shifts, as they are derived from the observation of slightly different populations using different questioning techniques, but they provide important additional information on the events experienced by young people in successive phases of the epidemic.

Flexible and rigid youth groups

In 2020, the sociodemographic characteristics of the youth groups that perceived the effects of the coronavirus epidemic and those that did not (still) hardly differed from

each other (Székely 2021a: 20–21). No statistically significant correlation was found between gender and age groups, but only a few statistically significant correlations were found for educational attainment (a larger proportion of those with a high school diploma experienced a change). Larger differences were found by region, with young people living in the provinces and the lowlands experiencing the effects of the epidemic most strongly. The conclusion based on the analysis of the early data is that *“the analysis by sociodemographic characteristics shows an overall limited impact of the epidemic rather than highlighting groups where an increased impact could be expected”* (Székely 2021a: 21 – own translation).

Based on our data for 2021 and using the categories of changes and difficulties presented earlier, we have attempted to reproduce the previous analyses in terms of content to illustrate the sociodemographic characteristics (and experience factors) of the youth groups that were more and less change-sensitive, more resilient and more rigid, and their composition, in the “waning” phase of the epidemic, among 18–29-year-olds.⁴⁴ The category of young adults was split into three age groups for a more differentiated analysis, making it possible to compare subgroups of 18–21, 22–25 and 26–29-year-olds with potentially different experiences. The adjusted standardised residuals provide a simple yet plastic way of expressing which groups/cells in a cross-tabulation analysis are statistically significant (and to what extent).⁴⁵ We will consider groups identified by values between 2 and 3 of the adjusted standardised residuals as significantly over-represented, groups identified by values between 3 and 5 as moderately over-represented and groups identified by values above 5 as highly over-represented (Table 1).

44 However, it is important to stress again that the data from the two studies are not strictly speaking statistically comparable but can only be compared in a limited way at the level of interpretation of the results.

45 For more, see Everitt–Skrondal (2010) – cited in Glen (n.d.).

Table 1: Sociodemographic-sociological profile of youth subgroups of categories based on changes and difficulties (groups over-represented by adjusted standardised residuals, with the value of the indicator in parentheses; $n=3,260-3,262$ – their proportion in the filtered sample in parentheses after the group names; and the average of the Index of Resilience Experience)

| | Significantly over-represented | Moderately over-represented | Highly over-represented |
|---|---|--|-------------------------|
| Small change, small difficulty (14.1%; 6.49) | Persons with upper secondary education, no school-leaving certificate (2.6) Men (2.3) Living in a village or farm (2.2) | Primary education or less (3.6) Central Transdanubians (3.1) | - |
| Large change, small difficulty (8.8%; 6.46) | People living in a village or on a farm (2.2) | 18–21 years old (4.6) Men (3.8) | - |
| Small change, medium difficulty (16.8%; 6.21) | Central Transdanubians (2.5) | - | - |
| Small change, high difficulty (2.6%; 5.19) | Men (2.2) Persons with secondary education, no school-leaving certificate (2.1) | - | - |
| Large change, medium difficulty (44.5%; 6.21) | Central Hungary (2.6) Western Transdanubians (2.3) | At least tertiary education (4.6) Living in the capital (3.2) | Students (6.9) |
| Large change, high difficulty (13.3%; 6.06) | Central Hungary (2.2) | Reduction in social contacts (4.0) Infection with coronavirus (3.2) | Women (5.8) |

Source: Századvég 2021 – own ed.

Within the young adult age group, relatively low-educated people without a school-leaving qualification, men, and those living in smaller settlements and the Central Transdanubian region also showed more resilient or “crisis-resilient” characteristics in the summer of 2021. A rather narrower group of young people can be identified at the intersection of those who experienced strong change and those who experienced moderate difficulties – they are considered the most vulnerable group of youth in terms of resilience experience and are over-represented in terms of their socio-demographic profile, as are men and those with no secondary education. The two groups of young people who appear to be the most inelastic and vulnerable (those experiencing strong change and moderate difficulties and those experiencing strong change and a high level of difficulties) can be identified according to relatively different characteristics. While in the former category, the relative majority of young people are students, those with a tertiary education and those living in the capital, the over-representation of those who reported increased vulnerability to major changes (13.3% of the filtered sample) is mainly found among women, those who had experienced a reduction in social relations in the two years preceding the survey and those who had been infected with the coronavirus.

4. Young people during a coronavirus epidemic – an international perspective

International research plays an important role in the analysis of the situation and resilience of youth, as it permits contextualisation of the results of the Hungarian Youth Survey 2020 and allows for comparisons between countries, if not in terms of data, then in terms of interpretation. In this chapter, we briefly present some international resilience studies that may complement our knowledge of Hungarian conditions as background material.

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), with 38 member countries (including Hungary), uses a huge statistical database to conduct comprehensive comparative analyses. Since 2007, it has increasingly placed well-being at the heart of social progress, so it is not surprising that since 2019, it has made it one of its main missions to analyse the impact of the epidemic, draw policy conclusions and make recommendations. In its 2021 publication *COVID-19 and Well-being: Life in the Pandemic*, the OECD paints a holistic picture of how the coronavirus epidemic has affected people's lives (OECD 2021a). According to this, the epidemic has affected all aspects of human well-being. Although the elderly suffered more from the consequences of infection, young people were most affected by mental illness, reduced social contact, fear of job loss and general insecurity (OECD 2021b). The quality of life and resilience of young people are therefore closely linked to the economic and social environment. The strain of the epidemic has left a long-term mark on natural, economic, human and social capital, which suggests that government decisions should strongly emphasise recovery from the epidemic and improving people's well-being.

In 2021, a survey of 6,000 people between the ages of 15 and 29 was carried out based on a representative sample of the main sociodemographic aspects of the populations studied, supported by qualitative methods (Harring et al. 2022). The *Youth Study Growing up in Central Eastern Europe 2022* research focused on young people in Central Eastern European countries, including the Visegrad Group, with Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The main objective of the research and the study that was carried out was to assess the life situation and attitudes of young adults in five areas (education, work and migration, family, general values, attitudes and aspirations, and political attitudes and participation), all in the context of regional comparative analysis. The authors of the research report seek to interpret the growing-up process in Central and Eastern Europe in the theoretical framework of postmodern society, where pluralisation and individualisation processes characterise life paths that are increasingly less linear. They point to the low level of intergenerational transmission of cultural capital in the region, the high incidence of poverty among young people, which is also a feature of the social history of the region, and the prevalence of individualisation, which they hope will give young people a real sense of agency. The researchers point out that the expansion of opportunities within the generation has become a reality only for a narrower stratum and that inequalities between young people appear to be growing, with many of them

finding themselves in a situation of constraint in terms of their ability to prosper and fulfil their aspirations for social mobility. Although the European Union is seen as an important point of reference for young people, the contradictions they feel about socially legitimate goals and means are reflected in their distance from public issues. As Haring and co-authors point out, the coronavirus epidemic and subsequent crises are expected to increase further the sense of uncertainty that pervades life situations and life prospects, including for young people, although the longer-term consequences are not yet clearly visible in the research findings.

The *Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures*, a collaboration between UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and the OECD, examined the educational situation during the epidemic and collected good practices and strategies for long-term resilient education (UNESCO no year; UNESCO et al. 2022). The research was designed to help education officials prepare for school reopening in different countries. The report highlighted that transforming the education system and developing learning strategies may be key to increasing resilience among young people. The research report also stresses the need for education institutions and professionals to be able to develop flexible responses and support students. Maintaining and improving the quality of education contributes to young people's mental and emotional well-being and resilience.

It is important to mention the WHO (World Health Organization) report *Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak* (2020), which highlighted the importance of mental health promotion during the outbreak for young people. The stress, uncertainty and isolation caused by the outbreak may negatively impact young people's mental wellbeing, so providing them with appropriate mental health care is key. The report stresses that managing stress, maintaining emotional stability and addressing mental health challenges are necessary in the long term to enable young people to adapt to changing circumstances.

Both Hungarian and international research confirms that young people in general are more susceptible to the effects of the coronavirus epidemic than members of other age groups. For young people, maintaining their standard of living and well-being has been more challenging during the crisis. Research has clearly recognised that educational and working conditions changed significantly during the epidemic, with a major breakthrough being the 'migration' to the online space.

In the present study, it is important to emphasise that although international research also examines the situation of young people, it reveals much more general trends than when we focus on the situation of Hungarian youth. One of the main merits of Hungarian youth research is that it is possible to identify region-specific differences. Finally, the time factor is a very important factor in resilience research: the international research briefly presented here describes the early phase of the epidemic period, while the Hungarian research includes later data – and a next wave of youth research data collection, due in 2024, may allow the detection of significant trends if the data collection is implemented.

5. Summary and conclusions

We started our study by discussing how the epidemic situation can potentially become a significant experience and bonding material for the generational consciousness and sense of community of young generations. Although the results of the youth survey in autumn 2020 suggested that the impact of the coronavirus epidemic on young people was not significant, the data from the Századvég survey conducted in the summer of 2021, less than a year later, revealed a more complex picture.

It shows that young adults aged 18–29 had a particularly bad experience with the coronavirus epidemic compared to other age groups. In terms of the extent of lifestyle changes, the severity of the adverse experience, the ability to find a new equilibrium and the experience of resilience, the crisis was most severe for those in the younger age group. More than half of young people experienced significant changes and typically found them difficult to cope with. Particularly vulnerable and “inflexible” in this respect were the sub-groups of young people in higher education, those living in the capital, those suffering from a reduction in social contacts or even from direct illness with the coronavirus, and young women.

A more distant task, pointing to the need for further research, is to identify what actual changes are occurring and which are being recorded in the areas identified by the European Youth Forum (EYF 2021 – cited in Székely 2021a: 24) as potential long-term effects of the coronavirus epidemic on young people (labour market, education, financial situation, mental health). And, related to this, whether this will have a meaningful spill-over effect on their status differentiation, well-being, and the social stratification processes of the generation.

Based on national and international research in the early period of the coronavirus epidemic, the picture emerges that youth were one of the social groups that, although not directly affected by the health consequences, were challenged to adapt to the changed circumstances. This was associated with strikingly negative perceptions at the experiential level (i.e., young people’s experience of resilience has been found to be weak), but further, more research seems necessary for identifying how successful they have been in striking a new balance (i.e., in terms of resilience). Moreover, now that the acute epidemic situation has passed, it is possible to suggest that the generational consciousness of today’s young people is being shaped not just by a ‘virus generation’⁴⁶ but by a crisis generation – if the successive crises (epidemics, inflation, war, the energy crisis), which are increasingly indivisible in terms of their effects, have long-lasting, specific consequences for young people.

46 In the spring of 2020, during the coronavirus epidemic, Andrea Szabó (2020) put forward the idea of the birth of the ‘V (for Virus) generation’.

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