

Happy Young People - Mission (Im)possible?

Young People in a Post-COVID World: Recommendations for Policy & Practice in Lithuania

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid-19 pandemic strengthened issues which already existed and/or pushed them into the spotlight. Through working with the CONTINUE project, it was found in Lithuania that the most important topics and issues for our youth are their mental health and career development which are separate but at the same time, deeply connected.

This briefing was produced using data from the CONTINUE project's activities, and through desk-based research.

KEY INSIGHTS

- CONTINUE unveiled 3 key areas affecting youth: decreased socialisation, fear of the future, lack of critical thinking and digital skills;
- Currently in Lithuania there are many changes in different spheres influencing the future of youth;
- It is important to involve NGOs and other stakeholders in these changes to increase impact and intersectional cooperation for the sake of the future of Lithuania's younger generations.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic strengthened the issues which already existed and/or pushed them into the spotlight. Through working with the CONTINUE project, it was found in Lithuania that the most important topics and issues of our youth are their **mental health** and **career development**. This was identified not only by us but also by many stakeholders (from youth workers to scientists) who are working in these fields. We believe that these topics consist of many subtopics and impact many parts of our lives and therefore they are crucial for the happiness of young people. For this reason, this policy briefing is based around these areas.

After many previous and ongoing crises, Lithuania has been shaken up in many different spheres, and this has encouraged the process of change. Right now many areas of life are in the process of learning and updating their systems, catching up with developments, global trends and improvements. Therefore this is the right time to step into those changes, be part of it, and put forward our own knowledge and experience.

This policy briefing is based on the experiences of young people and the results of the project activities so far, as well as knowledge garnered from speakers during the local knowledge exchange event. It also draws on findings from desk-based research, and other local events with organisations working in relevant areas.

The briefing presents practice- and theory-based youth issues, two interrelated topics which aren't usually put together, existing plans on their development, and proposals connecting both governmental and nongovernmental sectors' work.

The impact of COVID-19 on young people in Lithuania

The young people we have been talking to noted some short-term experiences like fear or feeling hopeless, and missing in-person socialization, but they also noticed that COVID-19 had longer-term impacts on them after living with it for so long. These include **anxiety, anger, depression, boredom, and lack of motivation to do anything**.

Stakeholders working with young people noted further impacts on youth such as:

- Feeling miserable, less brave and confident, experience self-esteem deviation;
- Struggling to communicate face-to-face, and feel physical discomfort or even pain to be between people;
- Finding it difficult to be self-motivated;
- Feeling uncertainty and anxiety about the future in general;
- Changing their career paths.

Creating change and COVID-19 recovery in Lithuania

The youth, participating in the project chose 3 topics to focus their social actions on:

- Decreased socialisation - increased physical and emotional distance between young people, and deteriorating mental and physical health;
- Uncertainty, insecurity, fear of the future, plus societal pressures on young people relating to their career path, the imposition of a framework of what should and shouldn't be done;
- Lack of critical thinking and digital skills - disinformation, fake news and hate speech coming together with increased screen time and an inability to discern information and to protect themselves; not understanding opportunities and how to use them.

Wider context

Our discussions with stakeholders and our desk-based research activities have revealed:

- The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport created the Life Skills Framework Programme (including mental health topics), which will be launched from 2021. It covers the 5 domains: self-awareness, belonging to a group, needs, rights and responsibilities, everyday situations, and situations at risk, which encompasses a wide range of life skills, from problem-solving to communication, and from creative thinking to refusal skills.
- Increased focus on mental health - in many places, there is an effort to support mental and physical health;
- Increased number of local events, giving opportunity for people from smaller towns to take part, and also giving opportunity for people struggling with larger groups to take smaller steps back into the community;
- Continued opportunity for free learning support, such as "Padėsiu mokytis" ("I'll help you study");
- Information channels specifically for youth, such as "Žinau viską" ("I know everything"), to help find opportunities, without getting lost in a huge amount of online information;
- Increased availability of psychological support, especially in high schools, with remote options, and increased numbers of psychologists;
- It is known that, in the European context, it is more common to include mental health breaks in events, to create a safe, less overwhelming transition space to get back to yourself, to your thoughts and feelings.

Key learnings

3 main topics arose in the project activities:

- Decreased socialisation;
- Uncertainty, insecurity, and fear of the future;
- Lack of critical thinking and digital skills.

Despite a lack of policy, there are already some moves to support youth in these areas, including the Life Skills Programme.

Policy & practice recommendations

- The Life Skills Programme should be compulsory in all public schools in Lithuania:
 - In partnership with career specialists;
 - In partnership with NGOs working with young people to encourage best practice which they can share with school staff;
 - Including learning to learn and integrating cross-curricular skills;
 - Extended to 11th and 12th grades to help students in the stressful last years of school.
- The development of the career guidance system to include collaboration between career specialists, NGOs and other stakeholders.
- Improve existing platforms disseminating opportunities to young people to make them more attractive and accessible to youth.
- Develop a National Curriculum campaign empowering young people to see there is no one 'right' path to a career, encouraging them to choose what they are interested in, what they like, what they are good at - and encouraging them to freely choose their path.

METHOD

This policy and practice briefing has been produced as part of the CONTINUE project. It uses:

- Data from young people's stories gathered using Community Reporter methodology, which facilitates people sharing lived experience in order to create social change;
- Information gathered during interviews with local and pan-European stakeholders.
- Information gathered from young people and youth workers during the social action co-creation process;
- Information shared during Conversation of Change events and Knowledge Exchanges, both local and pan-European. These were held with young people, youth workers, and policy- and decision-makers.

At each stage, this data has been synthesised into reports which have informed the next stages. These have, ultimately, been synthesised to inform these policy and practice recommendations.

ABOUT CONTINUE

CONTINUE supports young people experiencing social exclusion to tackle the specific challenges of post-COVID times in terms of staying connected and integrated into European communities. The project is being delivered by a consortium of 8 NGOs from different European countries who are experienced in youth education and community-based activities. The work involves storytelling, social action projects, policy development, knowledge exchanges, an outreach campaign and the creation of an online platform. It is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

Find out more by scanning the QR code.



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