

# “COVID came in and completely changed everything.”

## The impact of the pandemic on young people with migrant backgrounds in Hungary: Recommendations for Policy & Practice

Olga Irimiás, Artemisszió Foundation, December 2022

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the framework of the CONTINUE project, we have worked with young people from migrant backgrounds living in Hungary to find out how the pandemic impacted their lives and what will help them overcome present challenges. We have gathered lived experience stories, conducted interviews, co-created social actions, and organised discussion events. This briefing is based on the insights gathered during this process, and aims to summarise the main topics discussed by young people and stakeholders, as well as ideas for policy and practice change.

### CORE RECOMMENDATIONS

The core recommendations in this briefing are:

- More focus on mental health;
- Reducing the language barrier in Hungary's healthcare system;
- More focus on communication within the family unit to create a stable environment.

### Introduction

In the framework of CONTINUE project, Artemisszió Foundation has gathered insights from young people with migrant and refugee backgrounds, as well as professionals working with them, about the challenges and learnings that were experienced during the COVID pandemic.

While the pandemic is not still affecting our communities the way it did 1-2 years ago, the present and future seem to bring other severe challenges, such as the war in Ukraine and an unfolding energy crisis. It is a good time to look back at the experiences of COVID and learn from them now, in order to be better prepared for these.

Our research shows that two main areas where young people experienced difficulties were healthcare and mental health. Thus, when working on the policy recommendations, we focused on these areas and organised a discussion event to gather the ideas of different stakeholders. The policy recommendations outlined in this text are taken from ideas that were raised during that event.

### The impact of COVID-19 on young people in Hungary

In the autumn of 2021 and the winter of 2022, we collected stories from young people with migrant backgrounds living in Hungary, about their experiences during the COVID pandemic. The stories showed that there are significant differences in the perception of them, depending on their life situation, financial income, family status, administrative status, etc. At the same time, there were some common issues:

- Mental health was a topic addressed in some way by all of the stories: the storytellers reported anxiety, fear, lack of motivation, depression;
- Access to healthcare and related information was another focal topic: a lot of information was only available in Hungarian, and there was a time period when foreign nationals did not have access to some vital services that Hungarian national were provided with (testing, vaccination);
- Family relations: many stories are about family bonds – some youngsters felt safe and supported in the family, others were very worried about their relatives' health or financial stability during the pandemic.

### Creating change and COVID-19 recovery in Hungary

- Isolation and mental health: To help people connect with each other, articulate and stand out for their thoughts, they organised a public event titled “Dare to print it!”. Here, participants produced some creative writing in order to form their own slogans that they could identify with. After that they printed the slogan on a T-shirt or a tote bag. Most of the slogans created by the youngsters were about mental wellbeing, resilience, activism and gender equality.
- Lack of accessible information to foreigners living in Hungary. Youngsters first made a needs analysis through a survey and, based on the results, they planned and started a podcast about information that is useful for people with migrant background living in Hungary.
- The young people reported that implementing co-created social actions empowered them, and they discovered the potential in making such kind of actions, which they would like to continue in the future.

## Wider context

In the summer of 2022 we conducted interviews with youth workers, teachers, trainers and other stakeholders working with marginalised youth. The findings were as follows:

- Activities being adapted to the circumstances and moving online;
- Activities adapted to the needs of the youngsters more than ever, engaging them more in the planning or even “passing the steering wheel” to the youngsters;
- Financial insecurity was an issue for many marginalised young people, as most of them work in service sectors that were the first to shut down;
- Some organisations working in youth education and community development started activities to provide food to those in need;
- Lack of mental health services available for marginalised youth.

## Key learnings

Young people experienced the pandemic in different ways, but some major topics affected them all, such as access to healthcare, mental health, financial stability, family relations. To overcome the difficulties and bring a positive change, youngsters found it important to create opportunities for people to meet and interact, to formulate their thoughts and express them. Another important step for them is sharing information, especially to those who arrived to Hungary recently.

## Policy & practice recommendations

- **Paying more attention to mental health and making mental health services available** (therapy, hot lines for consultation through phone or online), and education about mental health starting from school. Ideally, the state or local government should provide these, but also companies or schools can be providing such services. It is important to have possibilities of free access to those, because the most vulnerable members of the society cannot afford to pay for these.
- **Reducing the language barrier in the healthcare system.** The state healthcare system should be more accessible to people with migrant backgrounds by providing designated English-speaking doctors. Another possible solution could be to organise volunteer translators to work at the reception desks of doctors and hospitals. For this purpose, foreign health workers and students could be recruited as well.
- **Family relationships.** The pandemic has shown how important it is for youngsters to have a stable family environment, and also the fact that often there are many problems in the family. It would be important to raise awareness about paying more attention to each other in the family, and to communicate well and honestly within the family. Decision-makers should talk about this issue and it should be addressed at schools as well.

## 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.



The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.