

COVID-19 AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT: HOW HUNGARIANS EXPERIENCED THE PAST YEAR



AUTHORS: ANDRÁS BÍRÓ-NAGY – ÁRON SZÁSZI

APRIL 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, by now Hungarian society has amassed a year's worth of experience concerning the complex health, economic and social crisis it has given rise to, as well as the handling of the latter. Anyone who wishes to better understand what is happening in Hungary in 2021 should also try to ascertain how the voters view this period overall and the government's crisis response specifically. Correspondingly, the goal of the joint research by Policy Solutions and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung was to find out how Hungarian society has experienced the past year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they evaluate various aspects of the Orbán government's crisis management efforts. Our research shines a light on Hungarians' perception of the scope of the danger emanating from the pandemic and the kinds of difficulties they have had to endure during the past year, and it also looks at how their relationships have shaped up during the quarantine; how the financial situation of various social groups has changed; who Hungarians can rely on for help when they are in trouble; and whether the voters perceive that the government has done enough to protect Hungarians.

We used a survey conducted between 2-11 March 2021 as the basis of our analysis. Our partner in conducting the survey was Závecz Research. The 1,000 respondents we interviewed in-person during the third wave of the COVID-19 epidemic were representative of the Hungarian adult population in terms of age, gender, educational attainment and the type of municipality (national capital, county capitals, small towns and villages) they live in.

An overwhelming majority of Hungarians take the health risks of COVID-19 seriously

The first issue that our research sought to explore was whether and how much Hungarians consider the COVID-19 as dangerous. We wanted to know whether they perceive the virus as dangerous in general, that is for society at large; or specifically for them, that is their health or the health of their relatives. We also wanted to find out how apprehensive they are about the potential long-term complications stemming from an infection.

A huge majority, 83% of respondents said that the virus was a threat to human health. Only 15% indicated that it was not a health threat. **The share of those who feared for the health of their relatives because of the virus was similarly high (79%) as the ratio of those who were afraid of the virus in general,** while roughly a fifth of all respondents (18%) indicated that the virus was not a threat to their family's health. **Three-quarters of the respondents (74%) were apprehensive about long-term complications from the virus,** while 22% indicated that there was no need to be concerned about these. Among those who expressed concerns about the health impact of the virus, those who were anxious about its potential impact on them personally were the fewest in number – although over two-thirds of respondents still fell into this category – **with 68% saying that if they were to be infected with the virus that would have serious consequences for them.** 18% of the public indicated that they would not suffer from massive consequences if they were infected with the virus.

Looking separately at various demographic groups, we found the most striking gaps between the attitudes of younger and older respondents. While nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents under 30 said that they do not regard the virus as dangerous, only 7% of those over 60 shared this view. When it comes to long-term complications, 62% of those under 30 said they were concerned, while among respondents over 60 years of age this ratio was 87%. **Juxtaposing the respondents' answers to these questions with their political orientation, we found only very slight differences between the prevailing attitudes concerning the dangers of COVID-19 and the respondents' political leaning.** Those who are afraid of long-term complications constitute an overwhelming majority among pro-government respondents (77%) as well as opposition supporters (72%) and undecided voters (74%).

Wearing masks and disinfecting hands are the most widely used individual precautions

We also asked respondents what measures they personally took to protect themselves from the virus. **The most widespread precautions are regularly disinfecting one's hands (84%) and wearing masks (83%);** half of all respondents said that they always do these, while a third indicated that they follow these measures for the most part.

Many respondents (79%) also claimed that they mostly or completely avoid meeting people who fall into the especially vulnerable category. A large majority (77%) have also scaled back physical contact with their friends and acquaintances and they maintain the recommended two-metre physical distance to others when they are outside their homes; many (76%) also avoid public transportation. Even though the remaining categories of precautionary measures were the "least" widespread, in fact they did not lag far behind: 73% tend to avoid large gatherings; 70% take vitamins; and 69% of respondents only go out when absolutely necessary.



We also found that when it comes to wearing masks, respondents in county capitals (82%) and in small towns (81%) were slightly less likely to comply with this requirement than Budapest residents (85%). However, as compared to Budapest, the residents of small towns and villages are more likely to avoid mass transportation. Almost a third (32%) of Budapest residents said that they do not (or rarely) avoid public transportation; in county capitals this ratio was 30%, while in small towns it stood only at 22% and in villages at 18%. Respondents living in villages (79%) were also slightly more likely to indicate that they avoid large gatherings than respondents who live in Budapest (71%).

When it comes to precautionary measures, we found on the whole that those with secondary education and those with higher education degrees were more likely to be careful, while women were more cautious than men. The biggest differences were between age groups, however. As compared to those under 30, those who are in their 50s and those over 60 tended to be far more careful.

We also looked at the willingness to retain certain pandemic rules in the future, beyond the currently prevailing situation. **An absolute majority of Hungarians support sticking with the current hygiene rules even once the ongoing epidemic is over.** The suggestion that stores should operate hand disinfection points on the premises even once the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided was highly popular (70% agreed). Slightly fewer respondents support the idea of renewing the mask mandate – for example during the flu season – after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the **absolute majority of respondents still indicated that in certain periods they would agree if the mask mandate were to apply to public transport (58%) and in-store shopping (54%).**

Relationships in the time of the epidemic: family ties become more intense while friendships cool

In the second block of our research we looked at the mental challenges wrought by the epidemic and by the extraordinary measures taken to contain it. **A large majority of respondents (70%) indicated that their various human relations had not changed during the time of the quarantine and social distancing. At the same time, respondents were more likely to indicate that their family ties (19%) and relationships (16%) had grown closer than to say that these had weakened during this time (8% and 5%, respectively). As far as friendships are concerned, however, the trend was the opposite, with almost a fifth of respondents (19%) saying that their friendships had cooled while far fewer respondents (7%) reported that their friendships had become stronger.** It is also worth noting that 11% of respondents perceived that their work relations have cooled, while 8% experienced the same with their family and 5% felt a greater distance between themselves and their partners.

A breakdown of the responses concerning the impact on family ties based on the respondents' place of residence is especially interesting. **In Budapest, over a quarter of respondents (27%) reported that their family ties had become closer. In the other types of municipalities, this ratio was 9-13 points lower (it ranged between 14% and 19%).** The impact on family ties of being in a relationship was also substantial. While 20% of those who live with a partner indicated that their family ties had improved, this was only true of 6% of the other respondents. Furthermore, the share of relationships growing more intense was higher in Budapest (22%) than in smaller municipalities (14-15%).

The quality of friendships was also more likely to trend in a more positive direction in Budapest, with 18% of respondents in the capital saying that their friendships had improved, while 14% said that their friendships had cooled. In county capitals and villages, 5% reported that their friendships were better now than previously, while in small towns the corresponding share of respondents was 8%. At the

same time, the proportion of those who experienced a cooling off in their friendships was 5-7% higher in municipalities outside Budapest than in the national capital; it was 19% in the county capitals, 22% in small towns and 21% in villages.

A third of those living in relationships are afraid that their partner will become more aggressive during the quarantine

We asked respondents who live in the same household with their partner whether they are afraid that the partner will become tense or aggressive during the period of the quarantine. This was a sensitive question and there was an unavoidable risk that many would not respond honestly because they might perceive the question as being too intimate, they might be afraid to respond openly or feel ashamed to answer in the affirmative. Nevertheless, even with these caveats, 36% of the respondents who live with a partner admitted that they harboured such concerns about their partner. **Based on the answers provided, a quarter of the respondents harboured slight fears about their partners becoming aggressive, while every tenth respondent had a strong fear that this might occur.** A further 2% indicated that it had in fact already occurred. Those living in small villages were far less likely (30%) to report such concerns than Budapest residents (45%). **Among those who shared this apprehension, the ratio of respondents who had lost their jobs during the pandemic was strikingly higher. Among those who have recently lost their job, 44% harboured such fears and 7% had already experienced their partner's increased tension or aggressiveness.**

Economic fears, too, are widespread in addition to health concerns

Among the personal concerns expressed in the context of COVID-19, fears for one's family and friends were clearly at the top of the list. Four-fifths of the respondents (79%) feared that a close relative or friend might get sick. Slightly fewer people are afraid that they themselves will end up getting sick (73%). Two-thirds of respondents (66%) said they are afraid that they would be restricted in the exercise of some personal freedom, while every tenth respondent assessed that the latter has already happened. Economic fears are substantial in Hungarian society. **Over half of Hungarians (55%) are concerned that they will earn less because of the pandemic while 45% of the respondents said they are afraid of losing their jobs.**

Four out of ten respondents said their financial situation had deteriorated during the crisis

Our research also looked at the impact that the past year has had on the financial and work circumstances of Hungarians. **Four out of ten respondents (39%) said that their financial situation has deteriorated, while 59% said they have not experienced any changes. There were barely any respondents who indicated that their financial situation had improved (2%).**

There were substantial differences in the way the supporters of the opposing political camps assessed their respective personal financial situations. Fewer than a third (30%) of government party supporters have perceived a deterioration in their personal financial situation. Among opposition supporters and undecided voters, however, the ratio of those who saw negative changes in their financial situation was 13 percentage points higher (43% in both groups). Two age groups stood out in terms of their response to this question. **The share of those who have**



personally experienced economic adversity during the pandemic was especially pronounced among those aged between 30 and 39, with almost half (49%) of the respondents in their thirties indicating that they were worse off financially. By contrast, only 30% of respondents over the age of 60 – a demographic that is predominantly made up of pensioners – felt that their financial situation has worsened. In the other age groups, the share of respondents who reported a deterioration of their financial situation was around 40%. **Looking at the respondents based on their respective levels of education, we found that those with lower educational attainment were somewhat more likely to be adversely affected by the recession.** Forty-one percent of those with no more than elementary education said they had suffered financial setbacks, and 43% of those with vocational training said the same. Among those with completed secondary education, the relevant ratio dropped to 37%, and it was only 35% among those with a higher education degree.

Every tenth respondent reported losing their job in the past year

As far as the pervasiveness of job losses is concerned, our results indicate that the downsizing may be worse than what the official statistics show since based on the answers they provided, a tenth of the respondents have lost their job in the past year. The difference between our survey and the official statistics owes likely to methodological reasons. For one, it seems likely that a substantial portion of those who lost their jobs have found work again – maybe not all of them full-time, but some either part-time or in the framework of public works programmes. This is the trend that is probably reflected in the official unemployment indicator. At the same time, the Central Statistical Office (abbreviated as KSH in Hungarian) will not immediately record an individual as unemployed upon the official notification that the person has been laid off. In line with international standards, only active job-seekers are considered as unemployed persons. The category of “self-reported unemployment” measured by the KSH is closer to the result of our own survey. On this particular question, the last reported data released by the KSH dates back to the period from April to June 2020, that is the time of the first COVID-19 wave. Based on the data for that time, the KSH estimated that 391,000 persons were unemployed in Hungary. Based on our data, however, even compared to the higher KSH figure nearly twice as many people might have lost their jobs because of the pandemic, as the number of those thus affected may have actually been as high as 800,000.

As we move down on the ladder of educational attainment, the share of those who have lost their jobs increases. While among those with higher education degrees the share of those who indicated having lost their jobs was 8%, the figure jumped to 12% among those in the lowest educational attainment category (completed elementary education or less). Those who raise children were significantly more likely to have lost their jobs (13%) than other respondents (9%). The disparity between those with children and those who have none remains significant even if we control for the impact of other demographic variables. At 25%, the share of those who have lost their jobs was especially high among single parents.

Going beyond the issue of job loss, we also asked respondents who are currently actively employed questions about changes in their work conditions. These respondents were most likely to report a drop in income, with over a third (34%) of respondents stating that their pay had decreased. The second most-often reported change was a decline in the number of hours worked, with 29% saying they had experienced this. Twenty-two percent of those who are currently actively employed in the Hungarian labour market said they feared they might lose their jobs. Almost a fifth (18%) of respondents said they had to work from home. With regard to telecommuting, the KSH's data up to June 2020 (currently, data are only available up to this time) found a similar ratio to our own survey: according to the Statistical Office, during the first wave the share of those who worked from home peaked at 17%.

The decline in incomes was most likely to affect those with lower educational attainment

On the lower rungs of the education ladder, we found higher proportions of respondents who said that their income had taken a hit. **While this ratio stood at 28% among employees with higher education degrees, it was one and a half times that figure (42%) among those whose highest educational attainment was having attended or completed elementary school. Another striking finding is that respondents living in villages were far less likely (26%) to report a drop in income than respondents living in major towns, where 37-40% indicated the same.** That makes sense since the services that are typically centred in urban areas (primarily the tourism and hospitality industries) were most likely to be directly affected by the pandemic restrictions and thus by the resultant economic crisis, too.

We also asked respondents whether they were more likely to save money because of the extraordinary circumstances. **Only 9% of respondents said that they had started to put more money aside. Two-thirds of Hungarians (67%) said that even though they felt they needed to save more, they simply could not afford to do so.** Only 17% of respondents said that they did not think that they needed to save more. Breaking down the answers by the respondents' educational attainment reveals that those with higher education degrees were most likely to start putting money aside during the pandemic, with 22% increasing their savings, which is 13 points higher than the average value for the population at large. Among those with no more than eight years of elementary school education, the share of those who saved was significantly below the average (5%).

As compared to respondents in county capitals (36%) as well as Budapest residents (35%), those living in villages (23%) and small towns (28%) were less likely to report that their working hours had decreased. Similarly to the reasons that fuelled the drop in wages, the disproportionate impact of the crisis on the working time of those living in urban areas also likely owes to the hit taken by the service sector. **The proportion of those who reported working from home correlated massively with educational attainment, which highlights that home office is fundamentally a privilege limited to those who have higher education degrees.** By contrast, only 5% of those who have no more than an elementary education worked from home during the pandemic. Among those who graduated from high school, this share was four times higher at 20%, while at 39% for the most educated segment it rose to almost eight times the ratio of the cohort with the lowest educational attainment. Women were far more likely to work from home during the quarantine (23%) than men (14%). Telecommuting was also far less typical among the residents of villages (11%) and small towns (16%) than among the dwellers of county capitals (23%) and Budapest residents (31%).

During the time of distance learning, university educated parents have found it especially difficult to balance the needs of their children with their work responsibilities

We also asked the respondents to tell us how difficult they have found balancing the respective requirements of child-rearing and work, especially in times of distance learning. This question was focused at those respondents who are actively employed and live in the same household with children under the age of 18. Four out of ten respondents said they had found this difficult. **Among respondents with a university diploma, the share of those who experienced the balance between the needs of their children and their work as a challenge was especially high at**



59%. The presence of telecommuting arrangements correlated significantly with the respondents' perception that it was difficult to strike an appropriate balance between the needs of their work and child-rearing. **The majority (54%) of parents working from home during the pandemic reported such difficulties, while among the parents who did not work from home this ratio was substantially lower (38%).**

On a scale from 1-5, pro-government voters gave the Orbán government a score of 4 for its crisis management efforts, while opposition voters gave it a 2

We also asked respondents to evaluate the government's public health and economic crisis management based on the grades used in the Hungarian education system, where a five is excellent and 1 means that a student has failed the subject. **Hungarian society overall assessed the government's health crisis management as average (3.0). Fidesz voters, by comparison, gave the government a significantly better score, an average of 4.1.** The positive view that Fidesz supporters took of the government's efforts was especially striking in light of the fact that by March 2021 Hungary was among the top-ranked countries globally in terms of the fatalities per million citizens. Opposition respondents, by contrast, took a very dim view of the government's performance, giving it an average score of 2.2. Undecided voters were somewhat less harsh, their average score hewed close to the mean score given by the public on the whole (2.9%).

The government's economic crisis management actions were viewed a bit more negatively by the respondents than the healthcare measures. The population overall gave the economic crisis management a below-average score (2.8). The differences between individual demographic subsegments were similar in pattern to what we observed with respect to the government's health crisis management, with the difference that each segment gave the government's economic policies 0.2-0.3 points less than they had concerning the health crisis efforts. **Specifically, Fidesz voters rated the government's economic policies at 3.8, opposition voters give them a score of 2 and the responses of undecided voters averaged 2.6.**

The government's economic crisis management was viewed most critically by those with vocational school training, who gave it a score of 2.6. This is unsurprising in that this was also the group in which respondents were most likely to say that their financial position had deteriorated during the crisis, and they were also most likely to say that they needed savings but could not actually afford to put money aside. There were no major differences between the scores awarded by various age groups except that those **over the age of 60 took a slightly more positive view of both, the government's public health measures as well as its economic crisis management.** It bears pointing out that this segment, which is predominantly made up of pensioners, is less likely to be affected by the downsizings that occurred in the wake of the crisis. Furthermore, their stable income in the form of pensions might also have had a positive impact on their view of the government's economic policies in response to the crisis.

With regard to the management of the economic crisis, it is important to highlight that a significant majority of Hungarians (59%) assessed that the government has failed to do enough to protect jobs and incomes. Only a third of Hungarians (34%) said that given the instruments at its disposal, the government had done all it could to protect jobs and incomes. Once again it was **unsurprising that those who had previously indicated that their financial situation had taken a turn for the worse – that is they had either lost their jobs or earned less than before – were less likely to be satisfied with the government's economic crisis management.**



There was a sharp divide between the political camps on this issue. **While two-thirds of Fidesz voters (66%) felt that the government had done enough to preserve jobs and incomes, a vast majority of opposition supporters (85%) felt that the government's actions in this context had been inadequate.** There were few opposition supporters who felt that given its means, the government could not have done more (9%); at the same time, however, a sizable minority of government supporters (27%) felt dissatisfied with the government's performance in mitigating the impact of the economic crisis. **The absolute majority of undecided voters (62%) was also critical of the government's efforts when it came to protect jobs and incomes, while only every fourth (26%) undecided voter was satisfied on this front.** Among those with no more than elementary school education, the share of those who were satisfied with the government's measures regarding jobs and incomes was significantly below average (28%, 6 points below the overall average value), while the share of those with a critical assessment was above average (62% or 3 points higher than the average value).

In light of the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, economists and public policy experts have once again raised the idea of introducing a universal basic income. Our survey also sought to find out where Hungarian society stands when it comes to the question of a universal basic income. **Nearly two-thirds of Hungarian society agree with the idea of introducing a universal basic income, with 65% of respondents saying that the state should provide everyone with the minimum that they need to live on.** By contrast, only 29% argued that this was not the state's responsibility. There was a vast difference between the various political groups on this issue. Three-quarters (75%) of opposition respondents support the introduction of a universal income. Among the supporters of the governing party, by contrast, support for a universal income is twenty points lower, although that still means that at 55% the majority of Fidesz supporters hold a position that is entirely antithetical to the government's stance on this question. Two-thirds (66%) of undecided voters support a universal basic income, while 28% are opposed to it. **The idea of a universal income proved far more popular among respondents who had previously indicated that their financial position had deteriorated as a result of the virus; 79% in this category supported the introduction of a universal income, while only 18% opposed it.** Among respondents whose financial circumstances had not changed since the start of the pandemic, the share of those who support a universal basic income was 57%, while 36% were against it.

When there's trouble, we only have our family to fall back on

Very few Hungarians felt that they received support from anywhere outside their family during the crisis. **Nearly half of all respondents (44%) said that they had received help from their family,** although the majority (56%) indicated that they had not received any help from their family, either. However, by comparison an **overwhelming majority of respondents said they had not received any help from their employers (89%), the central government (93%) or their municipal governments (94%).** The share of those with tertiary education degrees who indicated that they had received some support from one or more of the institutions we asked about was higher than the proportion of those with lower educational attainment who had experienced the same.

The most conspicuous difference was manifest on the question concerning help from the respondents' workplace. Every fifth respondent with a higher education degree said that they had received help from their employers. This ratio was only half as high among those with high school degrees (11%), lower still among those with vocational school diplomas (8%), and a mere 5% among those with only elementary education. **This allows us to conclude that those in white collar jobs are far more likely to be able to count on their workplace during the crisis.**

A relative majority of Hungarians said that the objective behind the funding cuts imposed by the central government on local governments was to punish opposition-led municipalities

Half of the Hungarian public (49%) believe that stripping the local governments of funding is essentially a way of punishing opposition-led municipalities. Thirty-five percent of respondents said that these cuts were justified. At the same time, however, a comparatively high proportion of respondents (16%) could not or did not want to respond to this question. **People's opinions on this issue were clearly guided by their political convictions. An absolute majority (62%) of government party supporters said that the decision to strip local governments of funds had been justified, although a fifth (22%) of Fidesz supporters took a different view, saying that in reality these were punitive measures. An overwhelming majority (77%) of opposition respondents and a relative majority (47%) of undecideds felt that the government is penalising opposition-led local governments.** Fifty-two percent of opposition supporters in villages and 59% of opposition supporters in small towns and county capitals agreed that the cuts to municipal budgets were intended as punitive measures. In Budapest, however, 79% of opposition supporters held this view, a ratio that was 20-27 points higher than in other types of municipalities. Government party supporters in the national capital (76%) and in county capitals (75%) were exceedingly likely to believe that the central government's decision to cut municipal budgets was justified; supporters of the ruling party in small towns (57%) and villages (51%) were 19-25 points less likely to agree.

When we asked respondents who they believe would be responsible if the municipal governments would run out of funds and would thus be unable to operate, the breakdown of their answers based on the demographic indicators we considered in our survey was very similar to what we found in the context of the foregoing question. **Almost half of all Hungarians (48%) said that this would be the government's fault, while a third blamed the municipal governments (32%). Respondents who said that it would be the central government's fault if municipal governments could no longer operate due to a lack of funds were in a majority in all types of municipalities.** An absolute majority (54%) of village residents shared this view, while in the larger municipalities relative majorities agreed (44% in Budapest and 49% in county capitals).

Those in favour of vaccinations made up the majority in all political camps

A vast majority of Hungarians (62%) would choose to have themselves vaccinated against COVID-19; other polls have shown similar levels of pro-vaccination sentiments. Slightly over a quarter (27%) of respondents reject the vaccine. In early March, 6% of respondents said that they had already received the vaccine, while 5% had not yet made up their minds about it.

Age proved to be one of the best predictors of a respondent's willingness to have themselves inoculated. Barely over half (53%) of respondents under the age of 30 said they wanted the vaccine, while four out of ten (39%) young people would choose to forgo it. By contrast, the overwhelming majority (83%) of the oldest cohort would opt for the vaccine – a figure which also includes those who have already received a shot. Compared to young people, there are only very few (13%) vaccine-sceptics among the elderly.



Looking at the various political camps, it is readily apparent that those in favour of the vaccination make up a majority in every group. Nevertheless, despite the prevailing pro-vaccination sentiment across the aisle, there are major differences between the various groups in terms of how pervasive this sentiment is. One year into the pandemic, seventy-one percent of government party supporters said that they want to have themselves vaccinated, while among opposition voters this ratio was 59% and among undecideds it was 55%. **The average willingness to get vaccinated was highest (66%) in Budapest,** followed by the residents of villages (63%) and small towns (60%). The willingness to get vaccinated was especially high in Budapest considering that respondents there were also most likely to say that they are certain that they want the shot (38%, a ratio that was 12-13 points higher than the rate of affirmative responses to the same question in small towns).

It is unequivocally apparent that the vaccines developed in Europe and the US are more widely accepted by the Hungarian public. **Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents would accept at least one of the Western vaccines. Acceptance of the Russian and Chinese vaccines lags somewhat behind, although nearly half (49%) of all Hungarians would take these, too, if no Western alternative were available. There was only a small divide between the Fidesz and the opposition camps with respect to European/American vaccines, but undecided voters were far more distrustful of Western vaccines, too. Seventy-one percent of government party supporters and 67% of opposition voters would have themselves vaccinated with a Western vaccine, while only 56% of undecideds shared this view.** On the whole, respondents evinced a lower level of trust in the Chinese and Russian vaccines, however. An absolute majority of opposition voters (51%) reject the Chinese vaccine; only four out of ten opposition supporters would have themselves vaccinated with it. A large majority (62%) of government party respondents said that they would take the Chinese vaccine, but as compared to the Western vaccines, even some government party supporters appeared sceptical of the Chinese shots: the acceptance of the Chinese vaccine was 9 points lower among Fidesz voters than the willingness to take Western inoculations. The levels of acceptance concerning the Russian vaccine were very similar to that of the Chinese vaccine. Sixty-two percent of government party supporters would accept the Sputnik V vaccine if nothing else was available, while 27% would reject it. By contrast, only 40% of opposition supporters would accept the Russian vaccine while 51% would reject it. Among undecided voters, the Russian vaccine proved a few points more popular than the Chinese – 46% would accept it while 39% would refuse it. Seventy percent of those over the age of 60 would take one of the Western vaccines, while 59% said they would be willing to take either the Chinese or the Russian vaccine if nothing else was available. By contrast, 60% of those under 30 would consent to be inoculated with a Western vaccine, while only 42% would say “yes” to the Chinese vaccine and 41% would make do with the Russian version.

The majority of Hungarians do not believe in the conspiracy theories concerning COVID-19

In the final section of our survey we asked respondents how much they believe in the various conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and the vaccines. We asked them to indicate on a scale from 1 to 10 in how far they agree with brief statements that summarise some widespread conspiracy theories.

The majority of Hungarians either do not tend to believe or do not at all believe in the conspiracy theories we listed. Nevertheless, some of the theories were seen as true by a remarkably high proportion of respondents. Among these theories is the one claiming that China deliberately let the virus loose on the world to seize on the opportunity and become the leading global power. This claim received an average score of 4.6, and only a slight majority (52%) of respondents rejected the theory. Seven percent agreed fully, while 27%



agreed somewhat that this statement is true. **The respondents' answers broke down along similar lines when it came to the theory that pharmaceutical corporations had developed COVID-19 to boost their businesses by selling medications and vaccines. This claim received an average score of 4.2 on the scale from 1 to 10.** Fifty-six percent disagreed with this claim either completely or somewhat, while 27% agreed somewhat and 4% said they were sure that it is true.

The simplest conspiracy theory, which posits that the virus does not exist at all, was also the most likely to be rejected by the respondents. A clear majority of 59% said that it was unequivocally false while a further 23% said it was likely to be false. The average score of this claim was 2.4 points. However, one in ten respondents was leaning towards agreeing with it, **although only 1% were outright virus deniers.** Support for conspiracy theories concerning the COVID-19 vaccines was also comparatively low. Respondents gave the claim that the vaccine can lead to infertility – and that hence the secret objective of the vaccination campaign was to control population growth – a low score of only 3.2. A majority of 58% rejected this theory. The infamous “microchip” theory – that is the claim that the COVID-19 vaccines are used to implant people with microchips – is also widely rejected by the Hungarian public. An absolute majority (53%) do not at all believe in this, while a further fifth of the respondents (21%) are leaning towards rejecting it. Only 12% said they agree somewhat and a mere 1% are committed to the microchip theory. The average score of respondents on this question was 2.5. **An interesting observation was that respondents who had lost their job during the crisis were most likely to agree with conspiracy theories; controlling for political and demographic variables, the average scores they gave such theories were 0.8 points higher** than the scores mentioned by the other respondents.

A majority of Hungarians side with the freedom of speech, even if that includes opinions that are sceptical of the existence of the virus

The majority (56%) of respondents would not penalise the open expression of opinions that are sceptical of the virus, while only 34% agreed that action ought to be taken to limit the public expression of such opinions. There were substantial differences between the various political groupings on this question. Nearly half (49%) – that is a relative majority – of government supporters would punish the public expression of opinions that reflect COVID-19-scepticism. The majority of the remaining respondents, by contrast, are committed to the freedom of expression in this context: only a third (33%) of opposition voters would endorse penalties in this context, while even fewer undecided voters – at 25% a mere quarter – agreed that such opinions should be subject to penalties.

Hungarians espoused similar views when it came to the censorship of opinions expressed on social media. Only 36% of respondents supported the practice of removing posts and comments that voiced scepticisms about the virus, while 54% were opposed to it. Once again, we observed major differences across the political fault lines. Fidesz supporters were roughly evenly divided on the issue of censoring virus-sceptic and virus-denying opinions on social media (46% for and 44% against), while a majority of opposition voters rejected the practice (with 32% supporting it and 60% opposing it); undecideds broken down similarly to the opposition supporters (27% in favour of censoring such opinions and 60% against).