

# IN SPIRIT, HUNGARIANS HAVE MOVED PAST THE PANDEMIC

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We used a survey conducted between 13-20 September 2021 as the basis for our detailed analysis below. Our partner in conducting the survey was Závecz Research. As part of the survey, 1,000 respondents were interviewed in person during the fourth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The respondents of the survey were selected to make up a representative sample of the Hungarian adult population in terms of age, gender, educational attainment and the type of municipality (Budapest, county capitals, small towns and villages) they live in.

### **The majority of Hungarians are opposed to making Covid vaccinations mandatory**

With regard to the measures taken to combat the pandemic, the first question we looked at in our survey was the public's opinion concerning making Covid-19 vaccinations mandatory. **Six out of 10 respondents (61%) were opposed to making vaccinations mandatory. Barely over a third of Hungarians (35%) would support such a measure. When it comes to supporting mandatory vaccinations, those who reject the proposal were in a majority in every political group in terms of partisan preferences.** Among government supporters, 52% opposed the idea and 44% endorsed it, while among opposition voters the difference was 59% to 37% against mandatory vaccinations. Among those outside the two major camps, the rejection of mandatory vaccinations was even more overwhelming (80% of those without partisan preferences rejected it, while only 18% said they support it).

There are pronounced differences on the issue between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated. **Among those who have received their shots already, 45% would support making vaccinations mandatory, while 51% disagree. Among those who are unvaccinated, by contrast, the idea of making shots mandatory is subject to vast opposition: 89% disagree, while a mere 11% supported the notion.**

**In line with the general trend of public opinion with regard to government-mandated Covid vaccinations, employer-mandated vaccinations are also rejected by the majority. A substantial majority of Hungarians (58%) are**



**opposed to giving employers such an authority, while relatively few respondents (38%) would endorse such a measure. In this area, too, we found a major difference in the attitudes of those who have received their shots already and those who are unvaccinated.** While among respondents who are already vaccinated, the proportion of those who support employer mandates (47%) is almost as high as the share of those who reject it (48%), among the unvaccinated a mere 15% agree with the idea while 83% reject it.

The difference between the views of those who are actively employed and those who are unemployed is higher than the poll's margin of error. Among those who are employed, 36% support the idea of employers having the option of requiring their employees to be vaccinated, and 60% are against it. Those without a job, by contrast, are more accepting of employer-mandated Covid-19 shots, with 42% for and 53% against it. In other words, those who are employed are six points more likely to reject employer-mandated vaccinations than the unemployed.

**On both these questions, women, respondents over the age of 60, as well as those with higher educational attainment were more likely to be in favour of mandatory vaccinations.**

Hungarians are sceptical not only when it comes to making vaccinations mandatory, but even concerning measures that extend positive incentives to those who are willing to receive the Covid-19 shots. This is what emerged from the responses to our questions in which we asked whether respondents would support the introduction of a vaccine lottery based on the Slovakian model. **Even though the early experience in Slovakia suggests that this policy was popular and successful, in Hungary more than twice as many respondents (62%) were against it than in favour of the vaccination lottery (30%).** The unvaccinated would not be impressed by such a possibility, either: a mere 13% said they thought this was a good idea, while among the vaccinated this ratio was 37%.

## **As compared to the time of the third wave, support for hygiene-related protective measures has fallen**

We also asked survey respondents to what extent they would support a potential decision by the government to order the re-introduction of mandatory hygiene requirements even once the Covid-19 pandemic has subsided, for example during the flu season. We had asked the same question in the survey we used to compile our 2021 March study entitled *Covid-19 and Crisis Management*, which allows us to compare how the opinion of the Hungarian public has shifted between the third and the fourth waves of the pandemic.

**The most popular hygiene measure in autumn 2021 is still the one requiring stores to install hand sanitising points for customers. At the same time, as compared to six months ago, there has been a 10-point drop in the share of those who think this is a good idea.** In March seven out of ten respondents thought this was a good idea, while in September only six out of 10 agreed.

**There was a sharper drop still in the ratio of those who endorse the renewed introduction of a mask mandate.** During the fourth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority said that masks should not be required on public transportation (45% vs. 53%) or in stores (41% vs. 57%). This is all the more striking because at the beginning of the third wave, the majority had still favoured mandatory mask-wearing (by a ratio of 58% to 40% in public transportation and a ratio of 54% to 44% in stores).

Based on the answers we can ascertain, therefore, that roughly half of the Hungarian public accept the usefulness of general hand-sanitation and mask-wearing requirements. **At the same time, there has been a marked decline in the number of those who believe that it would be useful to temporarily make these mandatory once again to prevent other diseases from spreading. In other words, we observed a “collective forgetting” of sorts when it comes to pandemic prevention measures. In part, this likely owes to popular fatigue stemming from the constant “state of alertness” and the prevention mode that social life has been in, and people appear to consciously wish to leave behind the experience of the pandemic, its lessons included.** At the same time, this may also stem from a growing sense of general health security among the public in the wake of the successful mass vaccination drive. **We also saw a consistent trend that correlates with age: among those over the age of 60, support for the subsequent reintroduction of the various hygiene measures we asked about was higher than in the rest of the population.**

### **A quarter of Hungarians experienced mental difficulty in coping with the last one and a half years of the pandemic**

In our research we also investigated the lasting mental impact of the pandemic on the Hungarian public. **Nearly three-quarters of our respondents (73%) did not experience a problem when they returned to a life without the lockdowns, while slightly over a quarter (27%) said that this transition has not been easy for them.** The public was roughly divided in half between those who wanted to quickly catch up on experiences they had missed out and those who were not as keen to resume life as before. Four out of ten respondents realised during the pandemic that they wanted to spend more time at home, while for the majority (six out of ten respondents) this was not the case. On the whole, our survey showed that the majority of Hungarians had not experienced mental difficulties in coping with the past year; **a sizeable minority, however, was traumatised by the pandemic. After the long period of isolation and seclusion, many feel uncomfortable in large company (29%) and many said they feel that they need mental assistance (28%).**

**The share of those who were no longer accustomed to large company was especially high among Budapest residents: four out of ten people in the capital said this was typical.** Thirty percent of the respondents in small towns, 25% of those in villages and only 22% of the populations of larger towns (the so-called county seats) said they felt uncomfortable when meeting a larger company after the long period of seclusion. In



the elderly segments of society, the share of those who would like to make up as quickly as possible for the things they have missed out on during the pandemic tended to be significantly lower. While the absolute majority of those under 40 said so (with a range of 58% to 60% in favour in these different cohorts), among the older cohorts typically only a minority feel this way (between 42% and 48%).

It is only in Budapest that the majority have come to the realisation that they want to spend more time at home: 60% of the residents of the capital felt this way. In smaller towns, this ratio was 39%, while 33% of village residents and 31% of the population of county seats said they longed for more time at home after the quarantine, too. The pattern of mental anguish suffered as a consequence of the lockdowns is most pronounced when we look at its distribution by the respondents' place of residence. Forty-five percent of Budapest residents feel they need some help to mentally process the recent period. In smaller municipalities, only half as many of the residents indicated the same. In small towns the share of respondents who said that they need mental assistance was 27%, in villages it was 24%, and in county seats it was 19%.

## **Hungarians' economic outlook is less pessimistic during the fourth wave than it had been during the third wave**

Similarly to our spring research, we dedicated a separate bloc of questions to surveying how Hungarians have been affected by the economic crisis wrought by the pandemic. **In the intervening six months, the share of those who reported experiencing some hardship has halved: whereas in March 39% of respondents had reported some deterioration in their financial circumstances, in September only 20% said the same. The share of those who experienced an improvement over the most recent period has remained unchanged, although they make up a mere 2% of respondents.** In September, the share of those who did not experience any changes (78%) was significantly higher than it had been six months earlier (59%). As compared to opposition voters (24%), pro-government respondents were especially less likely to report a deterioration in the financial situation of their household (15%). Those without partisan preferences were more likely (19%) to experience some level of financial distress than government voters but less likely to do so as compared to opposition supporters.

People are a tad bit more positive in assessing their financial situation when juxtaposing the current situation with the state of affairs six months ago, during the crisis, rather than the time before the pandemic began. Almost a fifth of respondents (17%) indicated that their financial situation had deteriorated, while 79% did not experience any changes. **Yet, the limits of the consolidation that set in after the re-opening in the spring was reflected in the fact that a mere 4% of respondents said they experienced an improvement** – that is not a real surge in light of the fact that the base of comparison was the low-point of the crisis.

## **Budapest residents and families raising children were hardest hit by the crisis**

**Budapest residents were most likely to report a drop in their income (27%), while the share of respondents who were least likely to experience this was highest in small towns (16%). The proportion of those who had lost their jobs was also highest in Budapest (11%), while in county seats and villages fewer people lost their jobs (8% in each type of municipality), and the share of those who were laid off during the pandemic was lowest in small towns (6%). The difference between the capital and the smaller municipalities is another piece of evidence to show that the economic downturn wrought by the pandemic has led to a recession which is concentrated in the country's economic centre, especially since it hit the service sector disproportionately hard. Our data reaffirm the values we measured during the third wave earlier this year.**

**When it came to the respondents' assessment of how their households are doing financially, we found a difference in excess of the survey's margin of error between the responses of those who have children and those who have none.** Respondents in the latter group were five percentage points (18%) less likely to say that their financial situation had deteriorated since the start of the crisis than those who live with a child under 18 (23%). We found a similar trend when it came to joblessness: those who raise children were twice as likely to have lost their job (11%) than those without children under the age of 18 (6%).

The differences between men and women, between those with different educational attainments and between age groups were mostly negligible and within the margin of error on many issues. That is all the more striking because in our survey in the spring of 2021 those under 60 and those between the ages of 30 and 39 had been far more likely to experience a decline in the financial situation of their household, and the same was true for those with lower educational attainment. **In other words, not only had the respondents' assessment of their personal financial improved between March and September, but the inequalities between the various demographic groups has declined substantially.**

## **Very few respondents expect further economic difficulties in the next one year**

In addition to looking at the retrospective assessment of Hungarians, we also looked at Hungarians' expectations with regard to the future of their financial situation. **Nearly a quarter of Hungarians (24%) said they were optimistic, and far fewer were gloomy, with only very few respondents (6%) expecting a further decline. Six out of ten respondents do not expect their financial situation to change in the future (62%).** Unlike with regard to the assessment of the recent past, the differences between pro-government and opposition respondents were far less pronounced when it came to



future expectations. In both groups roughly a quarter of the respondents were optimists (27% and 25%, respectively). By contrast, optimists were significantly less common among those without a party preference (18%). Respondents were most likely to be optimistic in Budapest (33%), followed by respondents in small towns (26%), in villages and in county seats (19% each). Those with a neutral outlook were in an absolute majority in all of these demographic segments (54%-65%). There were very few pessimistic respondents in the capital (2%), slightly more in the cities/large towns (6-7%), while every tenth respondent in the villages was pessimistic with regard to the outlook for the following year (10%).

## **The crisis management score of the Orbán government is still mediocre**

In September 2021 Hungarians gave the government's healthcare measures a middling score (3.2 points on a scale from 1-5), which is a 0.2 improvement over the average score in March (3.0 at the time). **This means that even the extraordinarily high Covid-19 fatality rate in international comparison has failed to put a dent in the public's assessment of the Orbán government's healthcare response.** As is well-known, the pandemic proliferated especially wildly in Hungary during the third wave: by March 2021 Hungary had registered 15,000 coronavirus fatalities and that number doubled during the spring.

The underlying political stance of the respondents continues to dominate their assessments of the situation. **Fidesz supporters awarded the government a high score of 4.1, opposition voters gave it a barely passing score (2.4) and those without a partisan preference had a middling assessment (3.1 points).** Among the various age groups, those over the age of 60 gave the government's healthcare crisis management the best score, an average of 3.4.

Hungarians also gave the economic crisis management a middling score (3 points). This, too, marks a slight improvement over the government's assessment since the spring (0.2 points). **We found the same pattern we had observed in the March survey in September, that is Hungarians' assessment of the government's management of the healthcare crisis was a tad better than their view of the economic crisis management.** The gap between political groups was once again pronounced: pro-government voters awarded it a high average score (4 points), opposition voters a barely satisfactory score (2.2 points), while those without a party preference gave a mid-range score (2.8 points).

We also asked Hungarians whether the government had done enough to protect jobs and incomes. **An absolute majority of the respondents (55%) said they think the government's job protection and social measures were inadequate.** Four out of ten respondents (38%) said that the government had done enough in this realm of life. As compared to March, there was a mere 4 percentage point increase in the share of those who professed to be pleased with the government's efforts in this area, while there was a commensurate decline in the share of those who were dissatisfied.

On this question, too, the political affiliation of the respondents had a significant impact on their assessment of the government. Seven out of ten government party supporters thought that the government job protection and welfare measures had been adequate. Nevertheless, a quarter of Fidesz supporters (24%) assessed that the government had not done enough to protect jobs and incomes. **Over half of those without a party preference (56%) were dissatisfied, while a third (32%) were happy with the government on this issue. However, while a mere 12% of opposition supporters were happy with the government's crisis management, 83% found it wanting.**

### **Mapping the Hungarian public's perception of the most pressing issues in autumn 2021: making ends meet tops the list, migration, LMBTQ issues and climate change rank low on the list of priorities**

We also surveyed the issues that most intensely preoccupy Hungarians in autumn 2021. As a new component of our survey, in September we introduced the claim that “there is too much homosexual propaganda” among the social issues that we asked respondents to reflect on. The option to choose this answer did not appear in our previous survey. However, it allows us to investigate what impact the government's negative campaign against the LMBTQ+ has had on public perceptions and Hungarians' sense of the problems that their society faces.

**The top three items on the list of problems mentioned by Hungarians has been essentially unchanged since the third wave of the coronavirus pandemic. In the fall of 2021, the problem of the high costs of living continues to top the list (mentioned by 47% of respondents). This was followed by low pay in second place (46%), and the low quality of healthcare services in third place (38%).** In line with the trend we observed in previous years, Hungarians continue to see the state of their healthcare system as a major problem. At the same time, it is striking that a year and a half after the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the view of the majority of the respondents was primarily shaped by the financial/subsistence aspect of the crisis.

**An important change is that corruption has moved from sixth place on the list of top concerns in March into fourth.** The explanation may be that on account of the heavy focus on the issue during the opposition primary campaign, the criticisms of the Hungarian government have become more intense in Hungarian public discourse, and these often centre on corruption affairs. Opposition parties and prime ministerial candidates have begun competing on the question of who will go furthest in “holding Fidesz accountable”. **The high cost of housing has also moved up on the list: from its tenth place in March in jumped into seventh place in September (17%).** The increased mentions of housing difficulties presumably owe to real market trends: based on the statistics of the Central Statistical Office, after a period of stagnation housing prices have begun to rise again.

**In an indication that Fidesz's long and intense anti-migration campaign is beginning to run on empty, only 10% of Hungarians ranked immigration as one**



of the top concerns in Hungary. It was only in 13<sup>th</sup> place on the list of major concerns. The limits of the Fidesz communication campaign that seeks to portray sexual minorities as a threat was evident in the fact that even fewer respondents mentioned “homosexual propaganda” than migration (8%). The ratio of the mentions of the environmental and climate crisis was similar (7%), as this issue has dropped six places in as many months. On the whole, we can assert that people do not tend to be preoccupied with those issues, dangers and enemies that political communication has harped on in recent months – Hungarians tend to be focused on making ends meet rather than the end of the world.

**The high costs of living, low pay and the low quality of healthcare were the top three most often-mentioned concerns among all, pro-government and opposition voters as well as respondents without a partisan preference.** The only difference we found between these groups was in the respective positions of these issues among the top three issues. While for pro-government voters and those without a party preference the costs of living ranked first, among opposition voters low pay was the top concern.

There are also some more pronounced differences between the political groups, however. **While almost half of all opposition supporters mentioned corruption (48%), only a fifth (21%) of respondents without a partisan preference saw it as a top concern, and only every tenth pro-government voter saw it as a major problem.** The situation of democracy is another issue that is far more likely to worry opposition voters (14%) and those without a party preference (12%) than pro-government voters, who were least likely (5%) to mention it as an issue.

**Fidesz voters were most likely (17%) to mention migration as one of the top concerns for Hungarians, while for opposition voters and those without partisan preferences immigration was near the bottom of the most often mentioned pressing concerns (4% and 3%, respectively). “Homosexual propaganda” was a far more important issue for government party supporters than for the rest of the Hungarian public, but even so it ranked only tenth among their most often voiced concerns (12%).** Those without a party preference were only half as likely (6%) to mention it, while among opposition supporters “homosexual propaganda” was the least frequently mentioned topic (3%). As compared to the other groups, those without a partisan preference were more likely to refer to the low quality of education: 14% of them mentioned this problem, while among opposition supporters it was only raised by 9% and only 7% of Fidesz voters saw it as a major issue.

## **The vaccine sceptics are most likely to be afraid of the long-term side effects of the vaccinations**

We devoted a distinct bloc of questions to survey the views of the Hungarian public towards the Covid vaccines. **A quarter of the respondents (24%) said that they had not yet received a shot. Seventy-two percent of respondents said they had received one of the vaccines.** According to the official statistics, 69% of the adult population had

received at least one shot of the Covid vaccines at the time of our survey, which indicates that the vaccination rate measured by our survey was only 3 points off as compared to the official government statistics.

We asked those respondents who had not been vaccinated at the time of the survey why they had decided not to get a shot. Respondents were offered a menu of options, and they were also free to mention reasons outside those offered in the survey. **Unvaccinated respondents were most likely to say that they were afraid of the long-term side effects of the Covid vaccines (55%). Roughly a third of the respondents said they harboured doubts about the effectiveness of the vaccines (30%). Every fifth respondent said they were afraid of its short-term side effects (19%).** Those who justified their decision not to get vaccinated by saying that they were not afraid of being infected with the coronavirus were slightly fewer in number (16%). Other reasons for not taking up vaccinations were mentioned by 8% of respondents.

### **Only a third of those who are vaccinated plans to get a third booster shot**

We asked respondents who had already received their first vaccinations whether they were planning to get their third booster shot (or the second one for those who had received the one-dose Janssen vaccine). **Only a third of respondents plan to avail themselves of the third vaccine or have already received it. Over half (54%) of all vaccinated Hungarians do not plan to get the booster shot.** Fourteen percent of all respondents did not provide any substantial response to this question, presumably because they have not made up their minds yet.

The respondents' views towards the third vaccine were in obvious correlation with their age. **In the older age groups, the share of those who plan to refuse the booster shot was distinctly lower.** While 68% of respondents under the age of 30 do not plan to receive another shot, among those over the age of 60 this was only true of 42%. Only 13% of the youngest cohort plans to get a third vaccine and only two percent among them have already done so. By comparison, among the oldest respondents, 31% said they were planning to do so and 14% had actually already received it.

We asked those respondents who were planning to get a booster shot or had already done so what vaccine they would choose or had chosen. **An absolute majority (52%) of respondents opted for the Pfizer vaccine.** The other vaccines all received a roughly equal share of the remaining mentions (between 5% and 8% each), except for Janssen, which was rarely mentioned (1%). **Pfizer was an exceedingly popular choice – in fact the most popular one – also among respondents who mentioned having received the Sputnik or the Sinopharm shots in the first round.** At the same time, another frequent pattern was that many prefer the third vaccine to be the same as the first two they had received.

## The number of virus-deniers and conspiracy theorists has increased

We also looked at the prevalence of Covid-related conspiracy theories in Hungary. We had asked respondents about these theories at the start of the third wave of the pandemic, too.

**Although there has not been a change in the ranking of the various theories in terms of their popularity, we found that in our later survey in autumn more people believed in all of the theories we looked at than had been the case in our spring poll.** In September, too, the claim that “*China deliberately set the coronavirus loose on the world to become the leading global power*” was the most commonly shared conspiracy theory. Every tenth respondent fully embraced this theory, while 28% lean towards it. A slight majority of respondents (52%) reject it outright or lean towards a sceptical view. As compared to six months ago, there has been a six-point increase in the share of those who agree with this theory.

The theory arguing that “*the pharmaceutical companies had developed and set the coronavirus loose to be better able to sell their medications and vaccines*” ranked second on the list. A third of Hungarians (33%) agreed with this theory, although a clear majority (57%) reject it. The share of those who accept this theory has grown by two points since the spring.

The third most popular conspiracy theory posits that “*the coronavirus vaccine may cause infertility, and its hidden goal is to control population growth*”. The majority disbelieves this theory somewhat or completely (58% of all respondents), while only a quarter of the Hungarian public accepts it (25%). **At the same time, it is important to add that there has been a significant increase (nine points) in the share of those who agreed with this particular theory.** This rising trend and the high share in the proportion of those who did not respond to this theory also reflects that many harbour massive fears about the potential impact of the vaccines on fertility.

The second least widely shared of the conspiracy theories we investigated was the notion that “*the coronavirus does not exist, it’s fictitious*”. Only two percent of respondents said they were sure that this was the case, while a further 19% said they were somewhat sure that the virus does not really exist. The overwhelming majority (72%) reject this theory somewhat or completely. **Nevertheless, over time the trendline is disconcerting. Since the beginning of the third wave the share of those who are virus-deniers has increased by nine percentage points (a near doubling):** in March, only 1 percent had been sure that the virus was not real while 11% were somewhat certain that it does not exist.

The least common theory is still that “*the anti-Covid vaccines are used to implant microchips into humans*”. In September, 17% were leaning towards the chip theory, while 2% said they were sure that it was true. The share of those who reject it was once again exceedingly high (72%). Over six months, the share of those who partially or fully embrace this theory has grown by four percentage points.

## **Low educational attainment and anxiety increase the respondents' susceptibility to conspiracy theories**

**We saw a clear trend in terms of the correlation between the acceptance of conspiracy theories and educational attainment: as we moved towards lower educational attainment, we saw higher levels of acceptance of given theories.** This pattern was the most spectacular when it came to the China theory. **In the age groups where having children is most likely to be a timely issue (those under 40), the share of those who believe in the infertility theory was above average.** The average score was highest among those under 30, 4.4 points on a 10-point scale (53% rejecting it completely or somewhat and 30% accepting it outright or to some extent). Among those between the ages of 30-39 the score was 4.1 (56% vs. 27%).

Our multivariate analysis also reveals that the general level of anxiety also has a significant impact: A 1-point increase in the level of anxiety (on a 4-point scale of anxiety) resulted in a 0.8-point higher susceptibility towards conspiracy theories. **In other words, on a 10-point scale a massively anxious person who felt that they had suffered intensely from the quarantine was 3.2 points more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than a person who had weathered the period of social distancing with relative ease.** It is hardly surprising that those who reject the vaccine were also more likely to be susceptible to conspiracy theories (1.3 points on 10-point scale).