

# Child Abuse in the Online Space in the Visegrád Four

Comparative analysis

2026



Funded by



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# **I. ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

## **1. Problem Statement**

According to Europol data, the majority of child victims of sexual exploitation in Europe come from V4 countries – Hungary is particularly overrepresented. Children are trafficked and exploited by local/regional criminal networks as well as by family members, while the recruitment of victims typically also involves an online element (targeting, grooming, organizing the crime, etc.). Child trafficking and online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) are overlapping phenomena, and multiple victimization (repeated traumatization) is fairly common among children.

According to the 2023 Eurobarometer survey "Protecting Children from Online Sexual Abuse," the populations of V4 countries are aware that children face increasing risks in the online space (90–94%), yet far fewer recognize the prevalence of online sexual exploitation (50–68%). The phenomenon of online CSEA is poorly understood not only by the general public, but knowledge gaps are also evident among professionals and institutions. In V4 countries, the lack of dedicated reporting mechanisms for online CSEA, as well as the inadequacy of victim support services, poses a serious problem particularly for the most vulnerable children. The phenomenon is underpinned by deep-rooted knowledge deficits and high latency.

According to the relevant ECPAT country reports, the vulnerability factors for child sexual exploitation are as follows: poverty, young age (under 14), displacement/forced relocation, gender, belonging to a sexual minority, ethnic minority (Roma/Gypsy) background, substance use, and prior victimization. In addition, political populism and politicized backlash

against sexual and gender minorities and Roma people are present on the political agendas of V4 countries, further increasing the vulnerability of affected children – particularly boys. The European Parliament's 2024 research highlights that while the obligations under Article 19 of the UNCRC – including the protection of children from all forms of violence, including online abuse – apply to all member states, national legislation and practical implementation in the V4 countries lag significantly behind western countries. In the V4, discrimination against children from sexual and racial minorities is less regulated, and the application of legal instruments (e.g. Directive 2011/93/EU, GDPR, NIS 2) is often incomplete or insufficiently coordinated, which increases the risk of online abuse.

In the shadow of a territorial war, and amid an increasingly divisive and verbally abusive political and public discourse – as the WHO's 2002 Violence Report also noted – the risk of children becoming victims is growing in both online and offline spaces.

In light of the current situation in V4 countries, there is an urgent need for targeted, evidence-based advocacy programmes to prevent online CSEA, with a holistic approach and particular attention to the perspectives of the most vulnerable children.

## **2. Research Objectives**

Within the framework of the Seeing the Unseen project, Republikon conducted primary research in the Visegrád Four countries with the aim of providing a clear picture of the extent and nature of digital harms affecting children, so that coordinated action can be taken on this issue at national, regional, and global levels. While it is widely acknowledged that children's

experiences are often shaped through and mediated by interactions with digital technologies, there is insufficient reliable, comparable, and comprehensive data to adequately understand children's experiences in digital environments, quantify and contextualise technology-facilitated risks, and reveal the extent and nature of harms. This makes it difficult to prevent, interrupt, and effectively respond to abuse and exploitation. This gap is what our project and the quantitative research carried out within its framework aim to fill.

### **3. Research Questions**

The research conducted among the V4 countries examines a number of factors related to online abuse, but certain central questions can be identified; this report is intended to answer the following:

- 1. What is the quality of life and level of digital well-being among young people in the countries studied?**
- 2. How prevalent is online child abuse?**
- 3. What are the attitudes and experiences of young people regarding help-seeking?**
- 4. What differences can be observed in this regard between countries?**

### **4. Methodology**

Within the framework of the project, four quantitative, questionnaire-based surveys were conducted, one per country: in Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland. A standardised questionnaire was used throughout the research, which contained country-specific elements in only a few

questions. The surveys were conducted through personal interviews with 1,000 respondents, using the CAPI method with random address sampling. Poland was an exception, with 800 respondents included in the sample. The population studied comprised residents aged 18–25 in the V4 countries. Data collection took place in the summer of 2025, with a maximum one-month offset between countries. The margin of error is  $\pm 3.5\%$ , and  $\pm 4\%$  for Poland. A trauma-sensitive approach was applied throughout the research, which included specialised interviewer and supervisor training, the integration of a native-language helpline option, the incorporation of feedback from child, professional, and survivor advisory boards during questionnaire design, and preliminary testing of the questionnaire through qualitative discussions with university students. The Slovak sample contains a higher proportion of more vulnerable groups, with a greater share of young people raised in institutional care and a lower share raised by their parents, which also affects exposure to abuse. The present analysis compares the results of the Visegrád countries.

## **II. RELEVANT SOCIOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS**

Digital culture and upbringing greatly influence young people's internet experience, so we begin our analysis by presenting variables related to digital culture. It is generally characteristic of the region that the majority of children interact with the internet in some regulated, restricted form. Hungarian caregivers are the strictest, with a quarter of them strongly restricting their child's internet access and a further half applying milder restrictions and rules. Czech parents are the most permissive: 16% restricted their child strictly and 43% did so more mildly, meaning households with

some form of restriction were still in the majority, but these were fewer and less strict than in Hungary. In Poland, a quarter of parents were likewise strict, however only 37% applied mild restrictions, and households with no restrictions at all were considerably more common than in Hungary. Slovak youth were the most neglected and least regulated, with 35% of their caregivers not knowing what they were doing online.

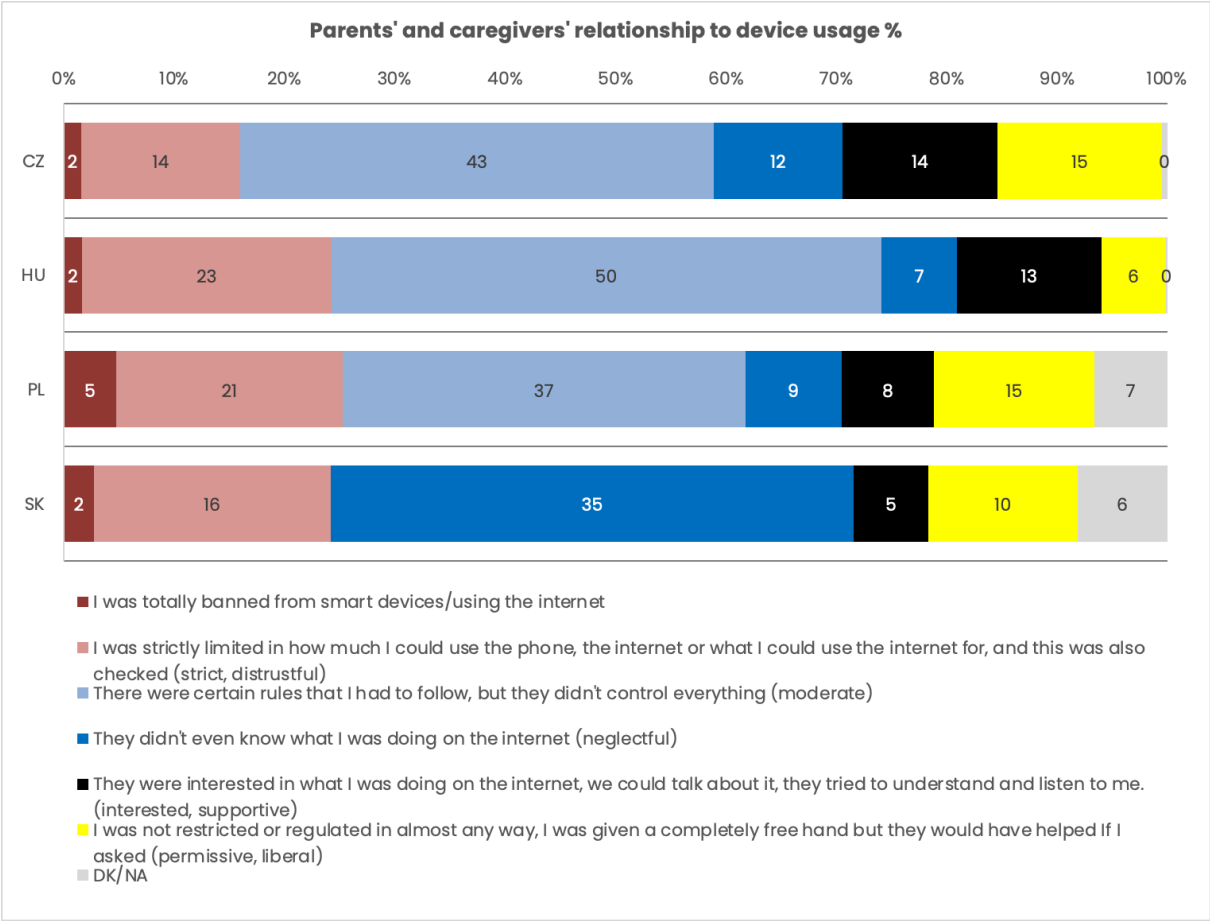


Figure 1: Parental/caregiver attitudes towards internet and device use during childhood (%).

The youth of the V4 countries have mostly received digital education. In Hungary this is true of almost every young person, whether through a school subject, a guest speaker, or another form of learning. Polish youth had the least access to digital well-being education, yet even there 71% can say they received education of this kind.

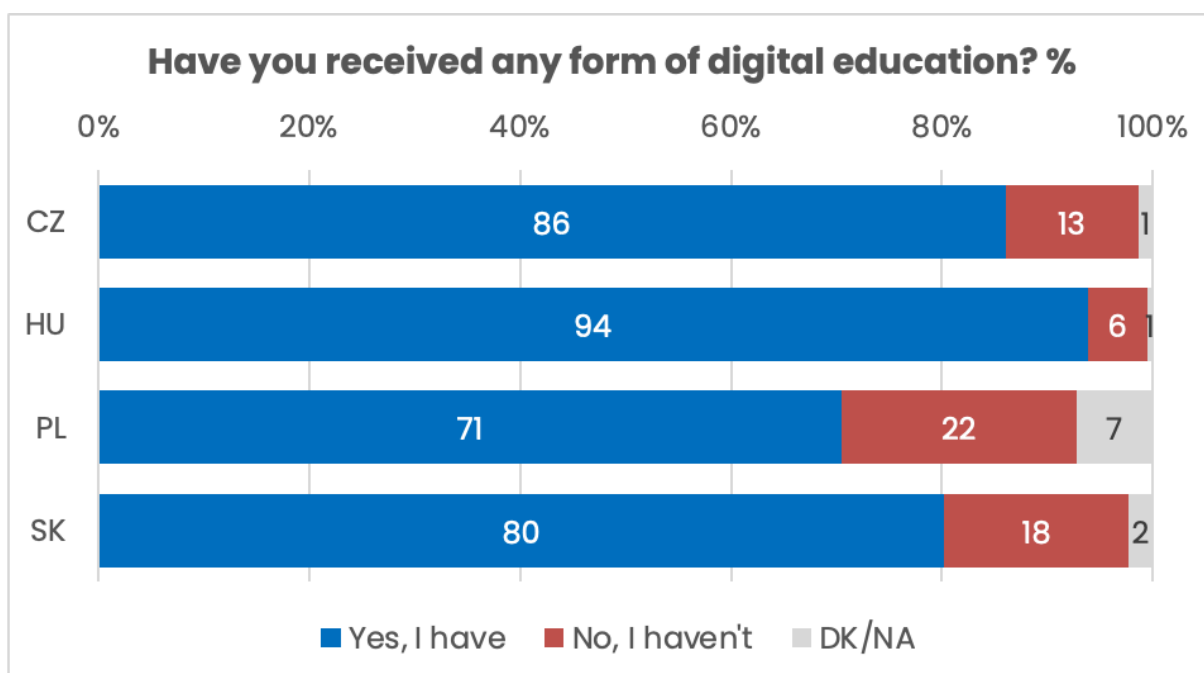
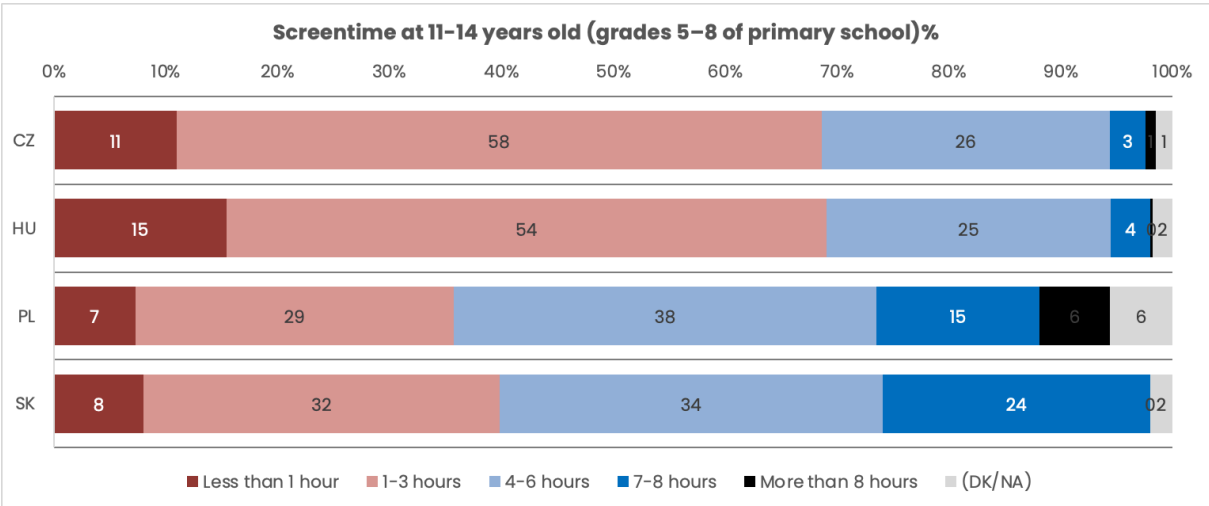
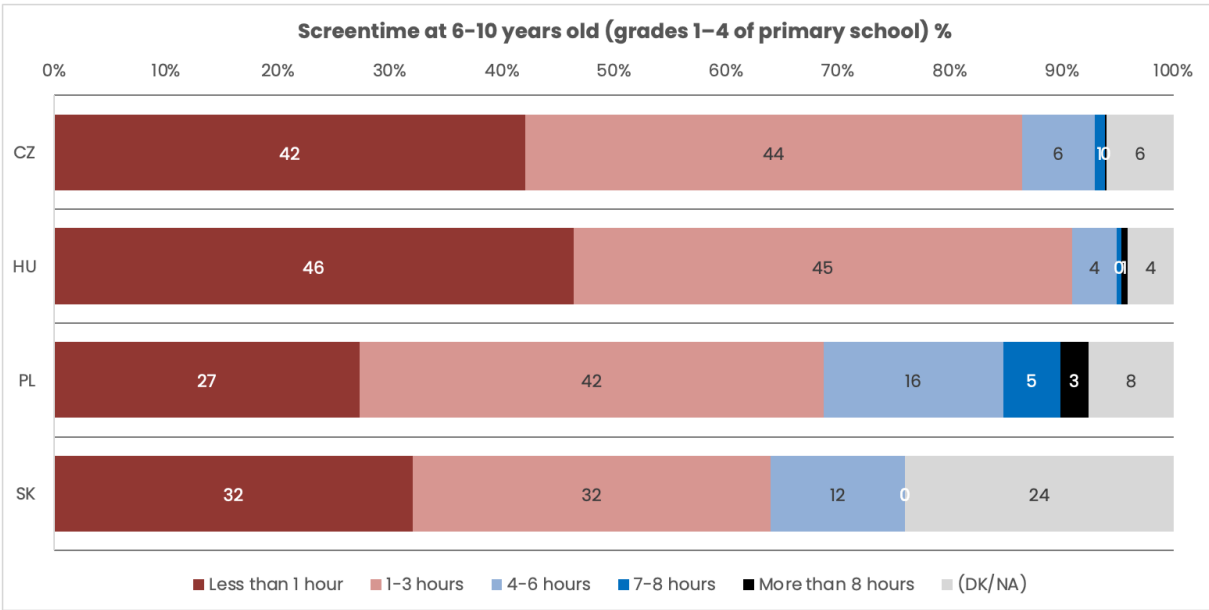
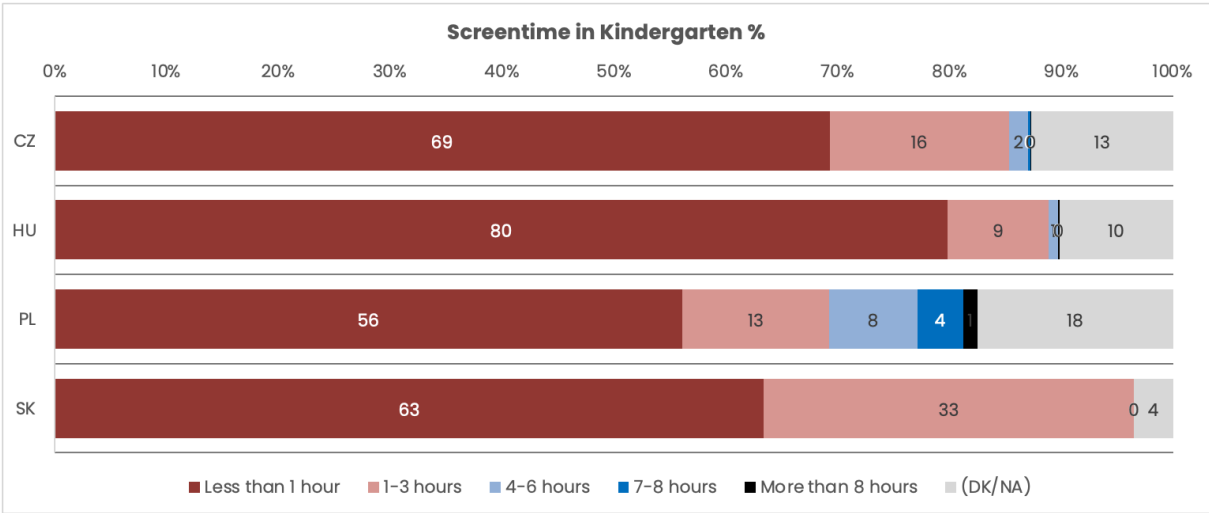
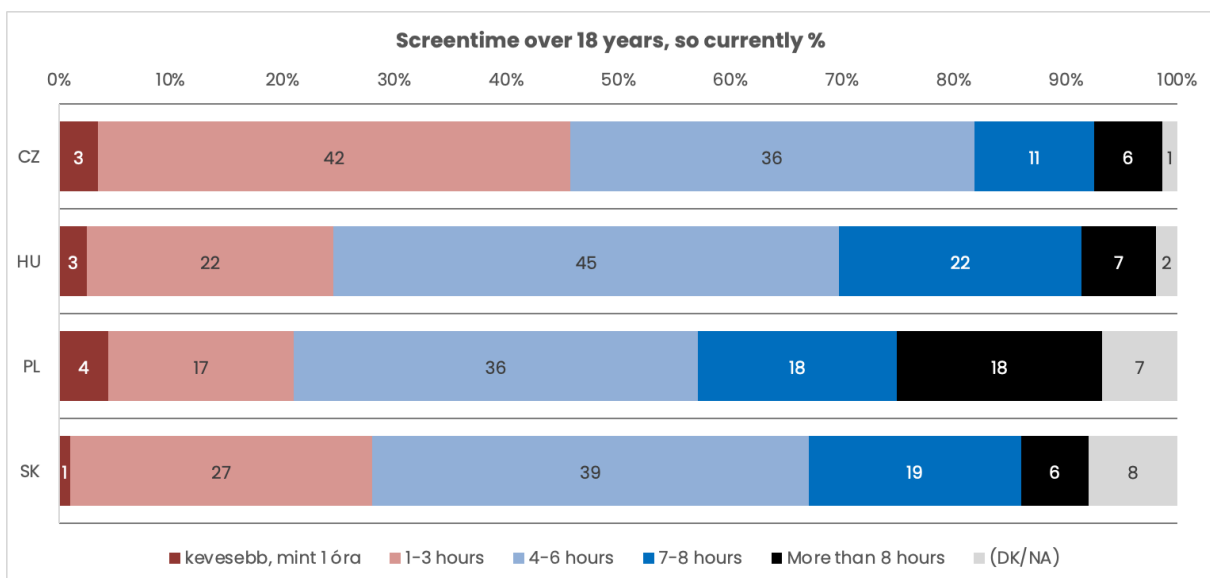
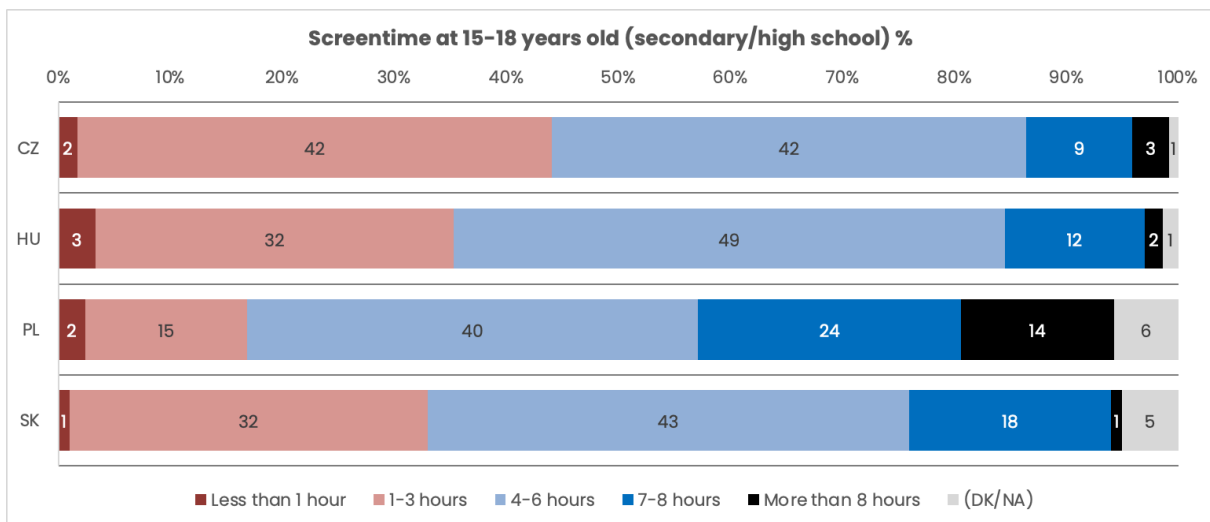


Figure 2: Proportion of those who received digital education (%).

In recent years, people's screen time has grown rapidly, and while this has a particularly significant impact on childhood development, screen time increases with age and reaches arguably alarming levels by adulthood. This is clearly visible in the countries studied: by age 18, the majority spend more than four hours in front of a screen, and a significant proportion devote seven or more hours to their devices. Screen time among Polish respondents is considerably higher than among their Czech, Hungarian and Slovak peers, across all age groups. Up to age 14, Hungarians have the lowest screen time, however above age 15 it is the Czech respondents who spend the least time in front of screens.





Figures 3–7: Screen time at various life stages (%).

Among Polish youth, the proportion spending more than 8 hours in front of a screen is an extremely high 18%, which is three times the rate measured in the other Visegrád countries.

<b>Purpose of internet use (top 3)</b>				
	<b>CZ</b>	<b>HU</b>	<b>PL</b>	<b>SK</b>
<b>1.</b>	Films, series, music	Staying in touch	Staying in touch	Films, series, music
<b>2.</b>	Staying in touch	Information search	Information search	Staying in touch
<b>3.</b>	Information search	Films, series, music	Online gaming	Information search

Figure 8: The most common purposes for internet usage among 14- to 18-year-olds (%).

The time spent online is most commonly taken up by watching films and series, listening to music, staying in touch online, and searching for information. Among Polish youth, the online gaming and esports category also made it into the top 3, which performed well among young people in other countries too, but did not make the podium there.

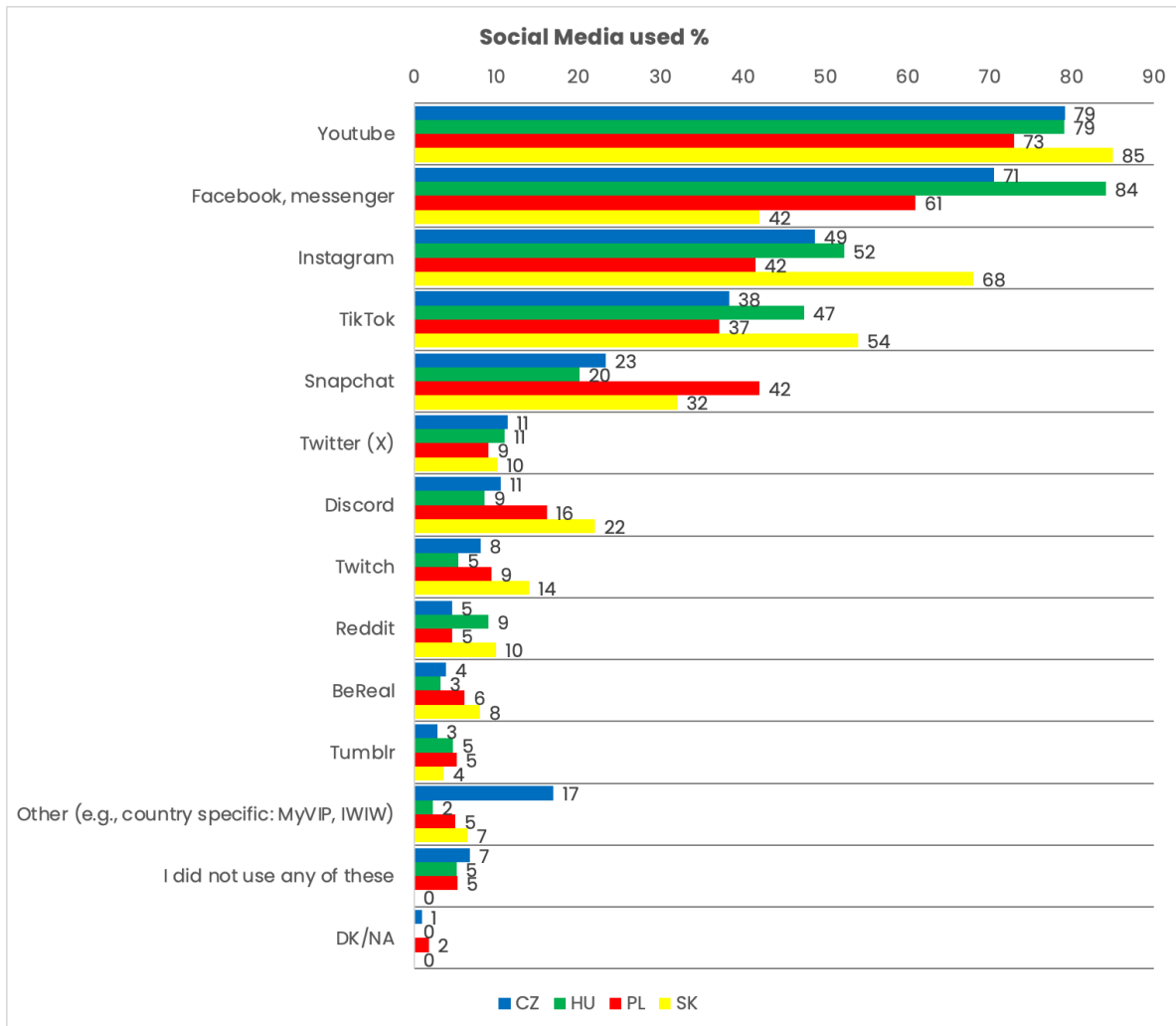


Figure 9: Use of social media platforms during childhood (%).

YouTube, Facebook (including Messenger), Instagram and TikTok are the most popular social media apps among respondents during their childhood. These are used at the highest rates by Slovak respondents, with the exception of Facebook, which is most popular in Hungary. In Poland, the photo-sharing app Snapchat is outstandingly popular, used by 42% of respondents.

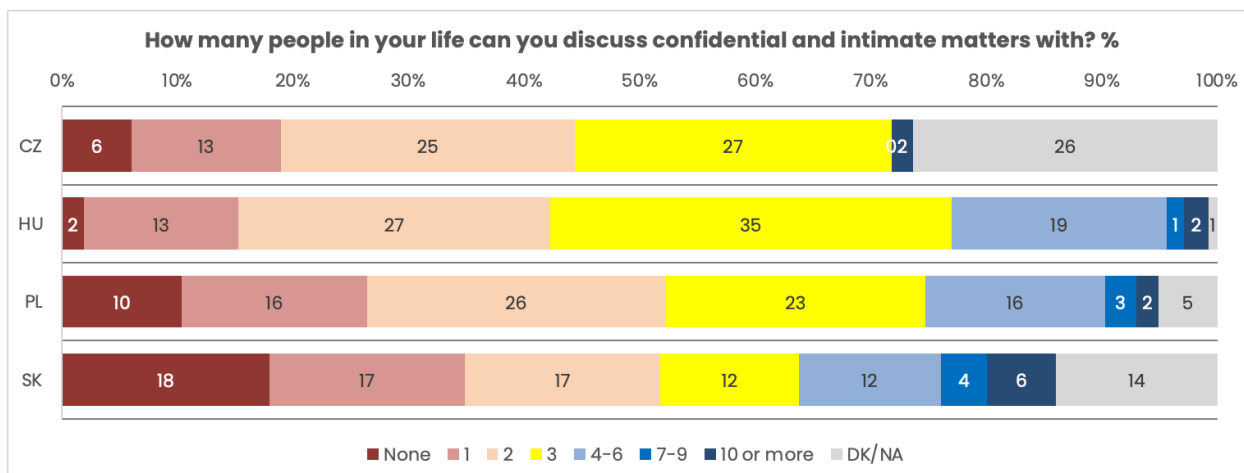


Figure 10: Number of confidants (%).

Moving from digital life to real life, Hungarian respondents had the most extensive personal social networks. Nearly a quarter of them had four or more confidants. The proportion of those with at most one confidant was highest among Slovak respondents, with 35% reporting this. In Hungary this figure is 15%, in the Czech Republic 19%, and among Poles a high 26%. Among Slovaks, the proportion of those with 7 or more close acquaintances is also relatively high at 10%. Broadly speaking, it is true of three out of four countries that the majority have 2–3 personal contacts they can talk to about anything, but the situation of Slovak respondents is more extreme: many of them could be described as lonely, yet there is also an "ultra-social" minority.

This data is consistent with how frequently respondents attend social events. Poles are at the bottom in this regard, with 43% saying they socialise less frequently than their peers. This figure is 35% in Slovakia, 24% in Hungary, and 28% in the Czech Republic. The proportion of outstandingly social respondents was similar in the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, but in Slovakia there is a segment of around 30% who report exceptionally high social activity, reflecting a similar polarisation.

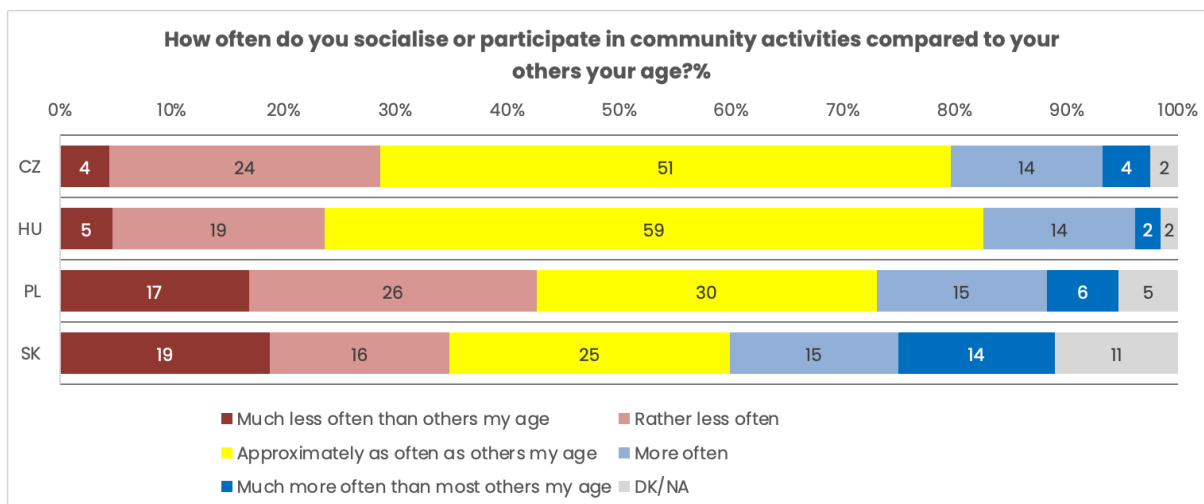


Figure 11: Richness of social life (%).

Czech youth were the most satisfied with their own lives, with 77% expressing satisfaction. 70% of Hungarians responded similarly positively, in Poland this figure was only 58%, and in Slovakia those who are satisfied are in the minority at 44%. Knowing that vulnerable groups are overrepresented in the Slovak sample, this is not a surprising result, as subjective well-being is significantly influenced by social background.

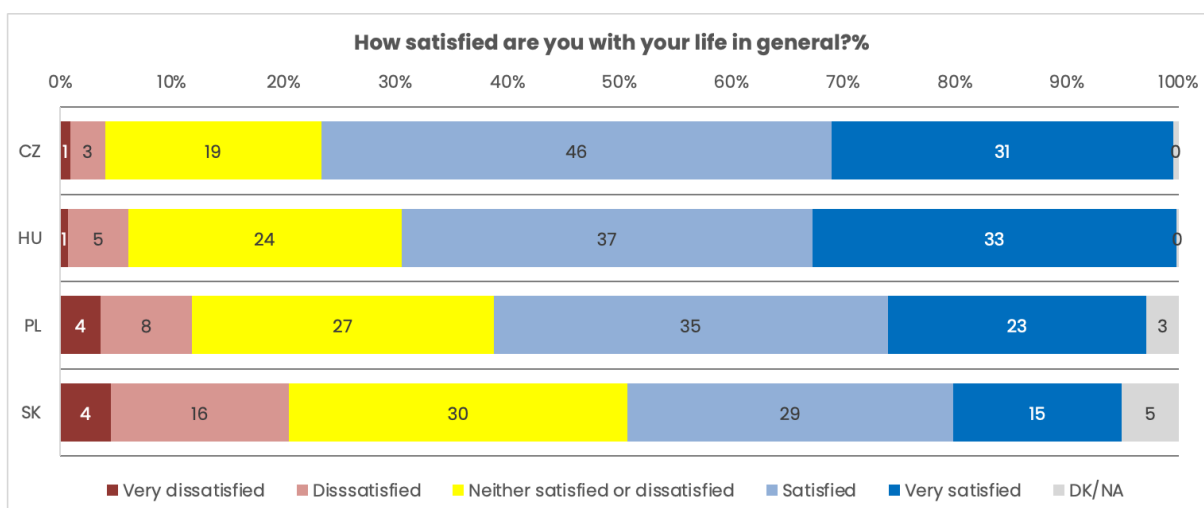


Figure 12: Life satisfaction (%).

Respondents' self-image was most positive in Hungary, with 29% very satisfied and 40% rather satisfied with themselves. The situation is similar in the Czech Republic, with 24% very satisfied and 44% rather satisfied. Here too, Slovaks and Poles fare worse: only 18–20% said they were very satisfied

with themselves and 28–31% rather satisfied, meaning that for practically every person satisfied with themselves there is one who is not.

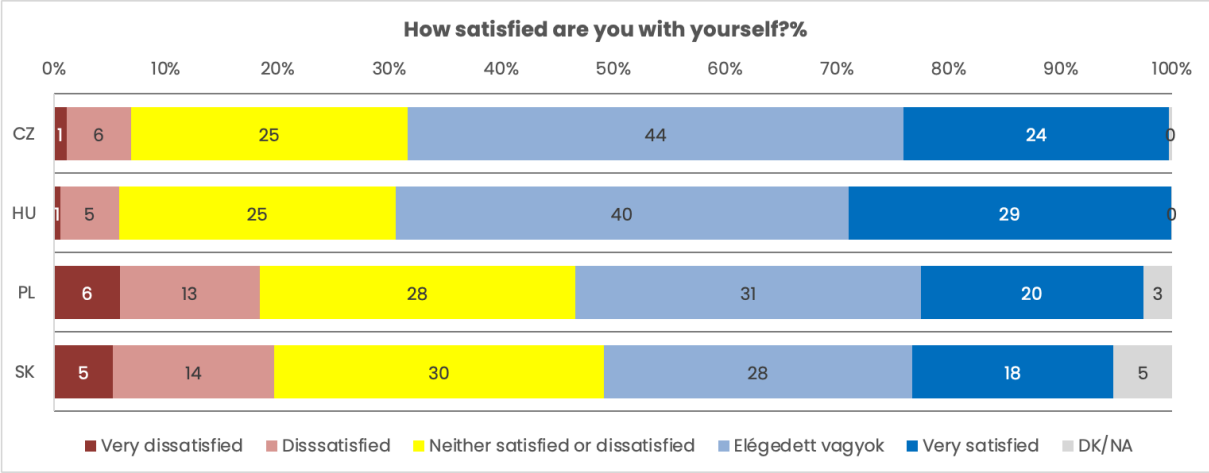


Figure 13: Respondents' satisfaction with themselves (%).

Based on the above data, it can be said that in terms of mental health and digital balance, Poland is showing signs of falling behind. Polish youth report comparatively higher screen time, a poorer social life, and lower satisfaction than their Czech and Hungarian peers. In the case of Slovakia, the results are similar to or even worse than Poland's partly due to the sampling, as this country had the lowest proportion of respondents raised by their parents. It is therefore all the more concerning that Polish respondents resemble the Slovak sample in terms of mental and digital well-being, despite having a family structure more similar to Czech and Hungarian youth.

<b>How acceptable, how tolerable is the following behaviour? (1–7 scale, average)</b>				
	CZ	HU	PL	SK
Physical contact between strangers	4,0	2,3	2,3	2,6
Commenting under a classmate's photo "you're sexy"	3,8	2,2	3,2	3,0
Sleeping together on the first date	3,7	2,2	3,3	3,3
A teacher discussing politics during class	2,9	2,1	3,1	3,3

Lying on a date to seem more attractive to the other person	2,8	1,9	2,3	2,6
Ranking members of a community based on looks	2,7	1,7	2,5	2,7
Slapping someone on the buttocks without consent	2,7	1,8	2,2	2,6
Posting a photo of a classmate without their consent	2,7	1,6	2,0	2,0
Shaming someone for their political opinion	2,7	1,4	2,5	2,2
Joking about someone's sexual orientation	2,6	1,5	2,5	2,4
Slapping someone's face	2,5	2,0	2,4	NA
Making negative comments about someone else's appearance	2,5	1,6	2,2	2,8
Making private messages public without consent	2,2	1,4	2,0	1,9
Sharing personal information about an acquaintance online (e.g. where they live)	2,2	1,5	1,8	2,5
Talking to someone using a fake profile	2,2	1,7	2,3	2,1
Showing others a consensually obtained sexual image, e.g. to friends	1,9	1,4	2,1	2,4
Editing someone's photo to make it sexual	1,7	1,3	1,8	1,9
Sending someone an unsolicited video with violent or threatening content	1,7	1,3	1,9	2,1
Getting someone to trust you so that you can then take advantage of the situation	1,7	1,3	2,1	2,0
Creating a fake profile using an acquaintance's name and photo	1,7	1,4	2,0	2,6
Sending a nude or genital image without consent	1,5	1,3	1,9	2,1
Forcing someone to share sexual content about themselves	1,4	1,2	1,7	2,5
Threatening to kill someone online	1,3	1,3	1,8	2,6

Figure 14: Abuse tolerance threshold (averages)

Socio-cultural background also determines which behaviours we consider acceptable and which we do not. As part of the research, we asked the young respondents their opinion on a number of problematic behaviours: how acceptable is each questionable act? The young people rated these on a scale of 1 to 7 based on how much they felt each behaviour "was acceptable." Respondents considered various forms of sexual harassment, death threats, and impersonation to be the least acceptable. Hungarian 18–25 year-olds were the least permissive towards the listed behaviours, meaning their abuse tolerance threshold is the lowest. Young people in the other three countries are more "lenient" towards the listed antisocial acts, with Slovak youth having a notably high abuse tolerance threshold, which fits the expected pattern. Analysis based on the Hungarian data highlighted that a high threshold contributes to the risk of abuse, and the Slovak results corroborate this, as both the threshold and exposure to abuse are high there.

## **II. OCCURRENCE OF ABUSE**

Consistent with the observations regarding mental health, the proportion of those exposed to online abuse is higher in Poland and especially in Slovakia than in the other two countries studied. We examined this in several ways: first at the beginning of the questionnaire, where respondents had to express on a scale of 1 to 7 (in the Czech Republic on a scale of 1 to 5) how much they had been exposed to online abuse during their childhood. In Slovakia, 37% of respondent youth and in Poland one third reported higher levels of abuse, while in the other two countries this proportion was only 9–10%. Czechs are the least affected, with 53% having experienced no

online abuse at all; in Hungary this figure is 45%, in Poland only 18%, and in Slovakia 10%, meaning the differences between the four countries are significant.

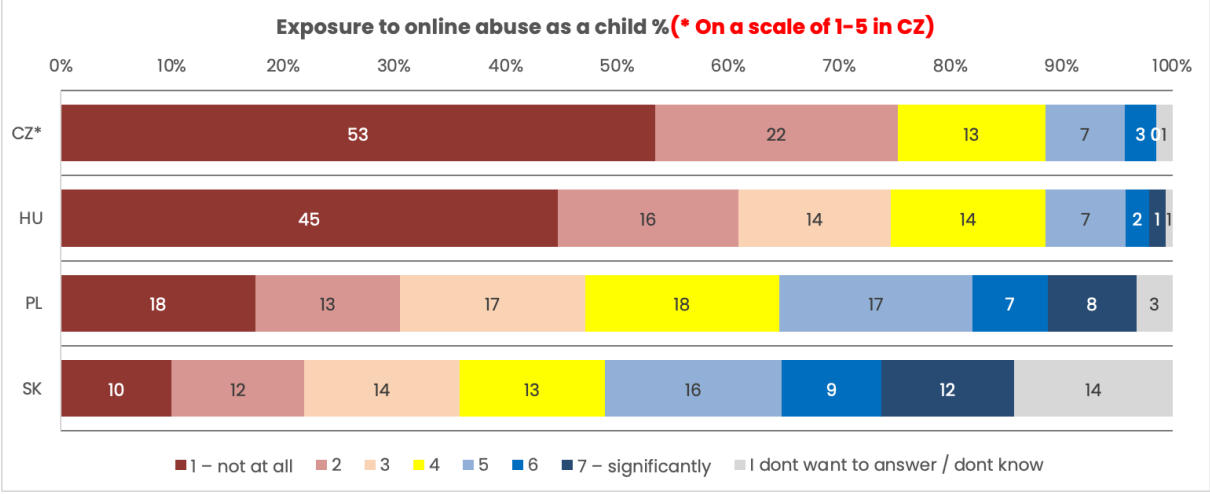


Figure 15: Exposure to online abuse during childhood – general (%).

The same pattern is reflected in the age breakdown: regardless of age group, the proportion of those affected in Poland is generally 20–25 percentage points higher than in the Czech Republic or Hungary, and in Slovakia exposure is 2–4 percentage points higher than in Poland in early childhood, and 8–17 percentage points higher in older age groups. In all countries, the 11–18 age range is the most burdened, and preschool age the least, which is understandable as screen time is still low at that stage and understanding of the online world is limited. Approximately four-fifths of Slovak teenagers, three-quarters of Polish teenagers, and roughly half of Czech and Hungarian teenagers fall victim to online abuse, with exposure decreasing but not disappearing as they reach adulthood. The "milder" forms of abuse are the most common in the countries studied: in Hungary and the Czech Republic, trolling and defamation are the most typical, while in Poland and Slovakia exclusion and shaming are the most frequent, which can be considered somewhat more serious.

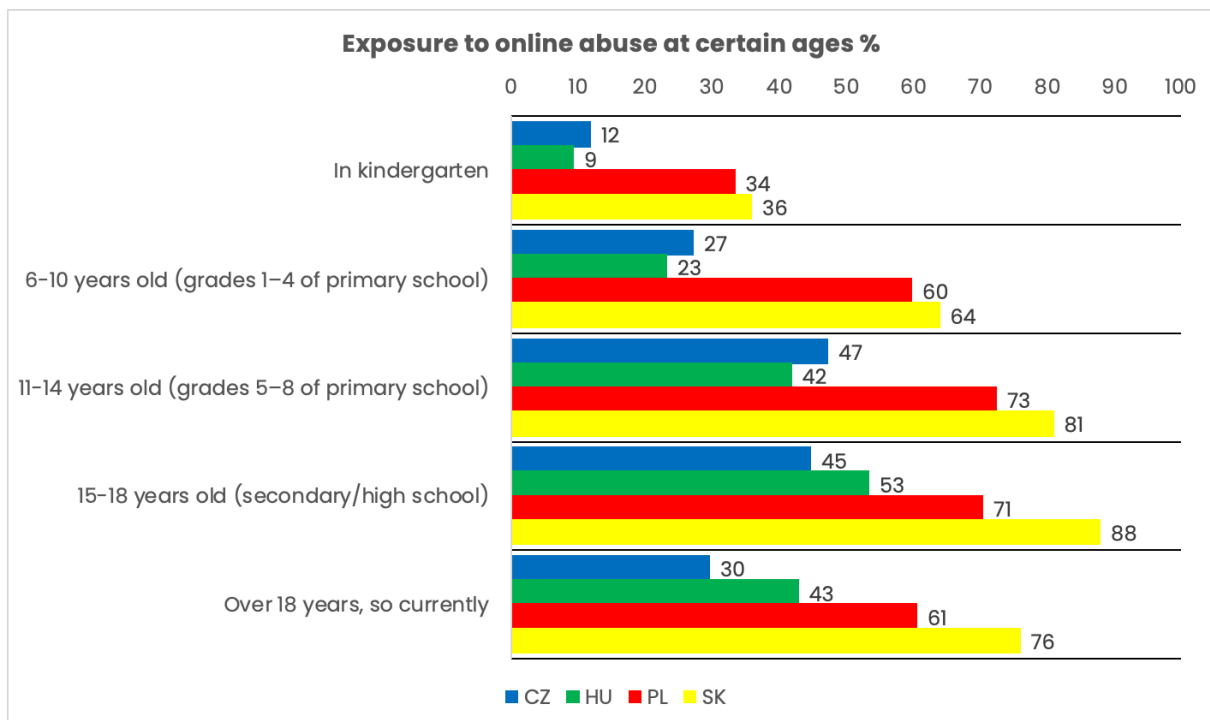


Figure 16: Exposure to online abuse by life stage (%).

We examined not only the exposure to online abuse experienced during childhood, but also the regularity of that exposure. Generally, young people are rarely subjected to online abuse, but there are differences between countries: here too it is clear that Slovaks are the most affected and the situation of Poles is the second worst. One third of Slovaks and 20% of Poles were victims of frequent abuse, compared to 8% of Hungarians and 10% of Czechs. 44% of Hungarian youth have never experienced this, which is a notably high proportion.

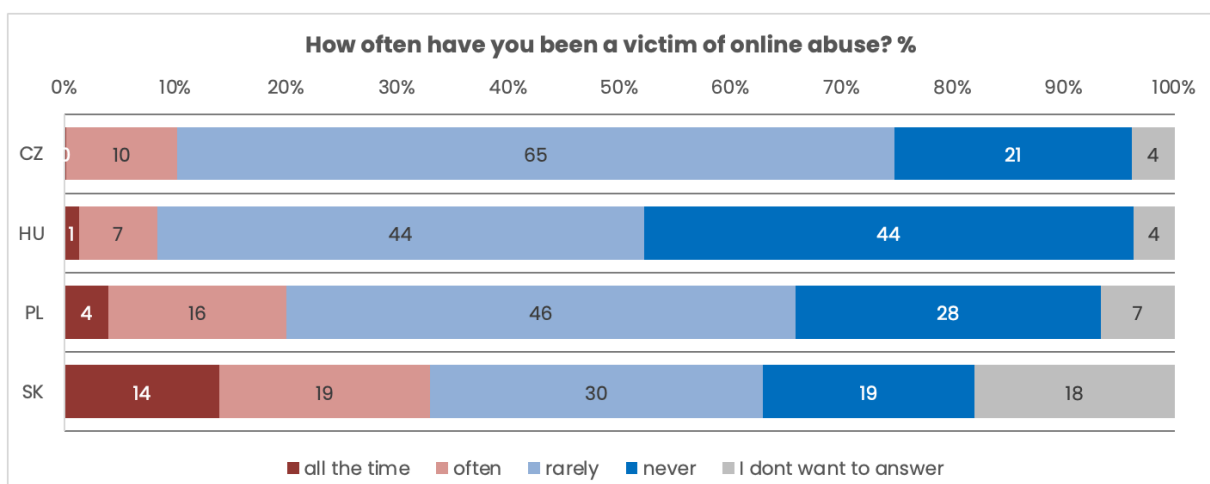


Figure 17: Frequency of exposure to online abuse (%).

Overall, it can be said that young people in the region are not subjected to abuse on a daily basis, but the majority experience online abuse during childhood, particularly during adolescence. The differences between countries are striking, and the Slovak and Polish figures are concerning.

#### **IV. ATTITUDES TOWARDS HELP-SEEKING AND HELPING ACTORS**

Another important element of our research is the question of help-seeking and help-provision. As part of the interviews, we devoted several minutes to the topic, with some questions asked of all respondents and others only of victims of online abuse. Trust is a central concept when it comes to help-seeking and help-provision. Which potential helping actors do young people trust, and to what extent? We examined a number of actors, and in each case offered four response options based on how likely the respondent would be to turn to that actor for help if they experienced or witnessed abuse. The actors were ranked by trustworthiness.

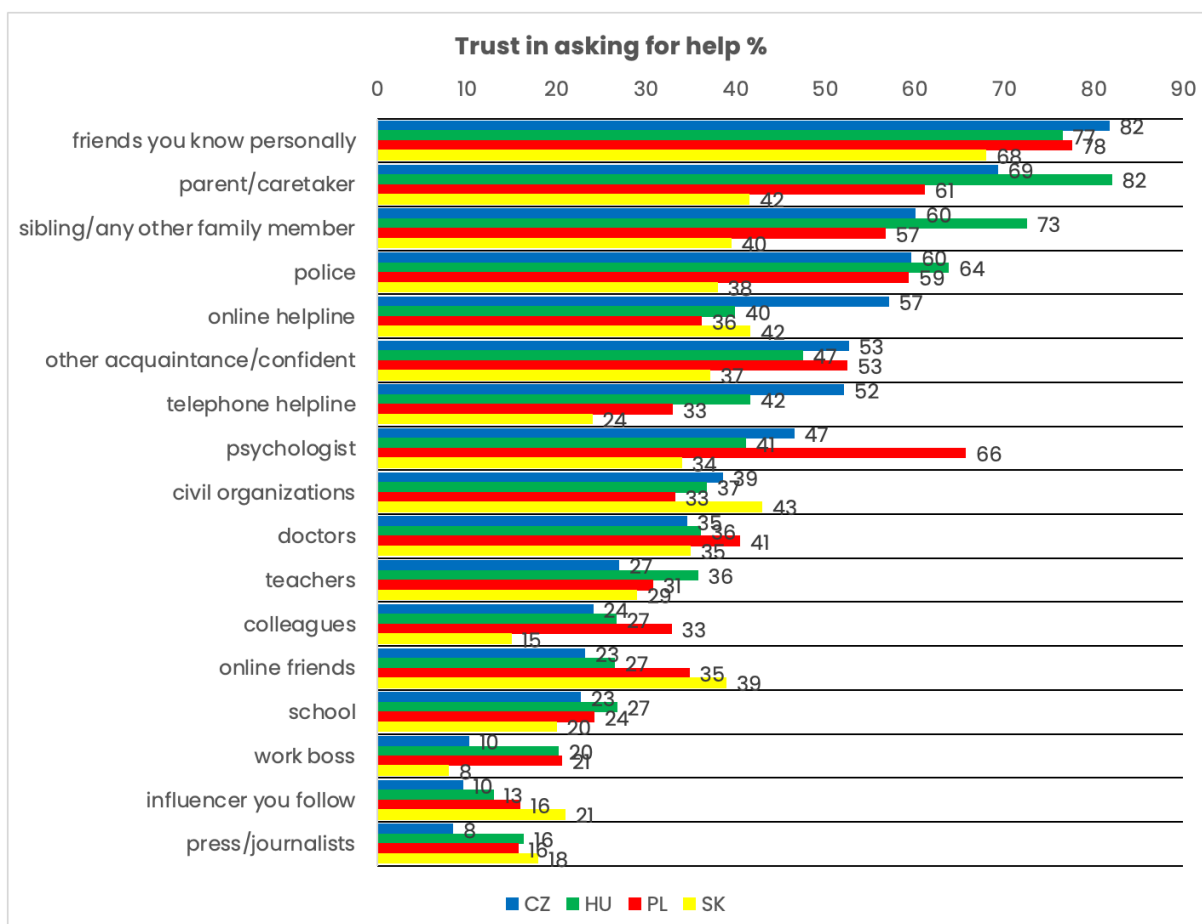


Figure 18: Trust in helping actors (%).

In the region, the personal friendship network, parents and other family members, and the police enjoy outstanding trust, at least when it comes to help with abuse. Which helping actor performs best depends on the country and the actor. Slovakia is the most distrustful of helping actors, with trust in parents and the police in particular falling below what is seen in other countries, and the role of friends (including online friends) becoming more prominent there. In Hungary, parents and other family members enjoy a particularly high level of trust. Czechs and Poles also trust their friends most. Among Poles, trust in psychologists is also notably high, and online friends enjoy slightly more trust than in other countries, second only to Slovakia in this regard (which calls to mind the high Polish screen time). In general, young people in the region place little trust in the press,

influencers, and people known from the workplace, while schools and teachers also enjoy below-average trust.

We also asked what kind of help respondents would expect if they experienced abuse. The top three expectations are a sense of safety, being taken seriously as a victim, and the problem being resolved. It is also important to respondents that the perpetrator faces consequences for their actions. In Slovakia, anonymity and avoiding a fuss are given greater emphasis than elsewhere, which logically correlates with the low level of trust. Respondents in the other Visegrád countries, by contrast, do not consider discretion important and do not mind if family and acquaintances find out about the incident or if it generates attention. The findings in the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary are rather positive, as they indicate that shame and fear are not the strongest feelings in victims. Hungarian respondents have somewhat higher expectations of helpers, rating more of the offered criteria as important compared to young people in the other two countries.

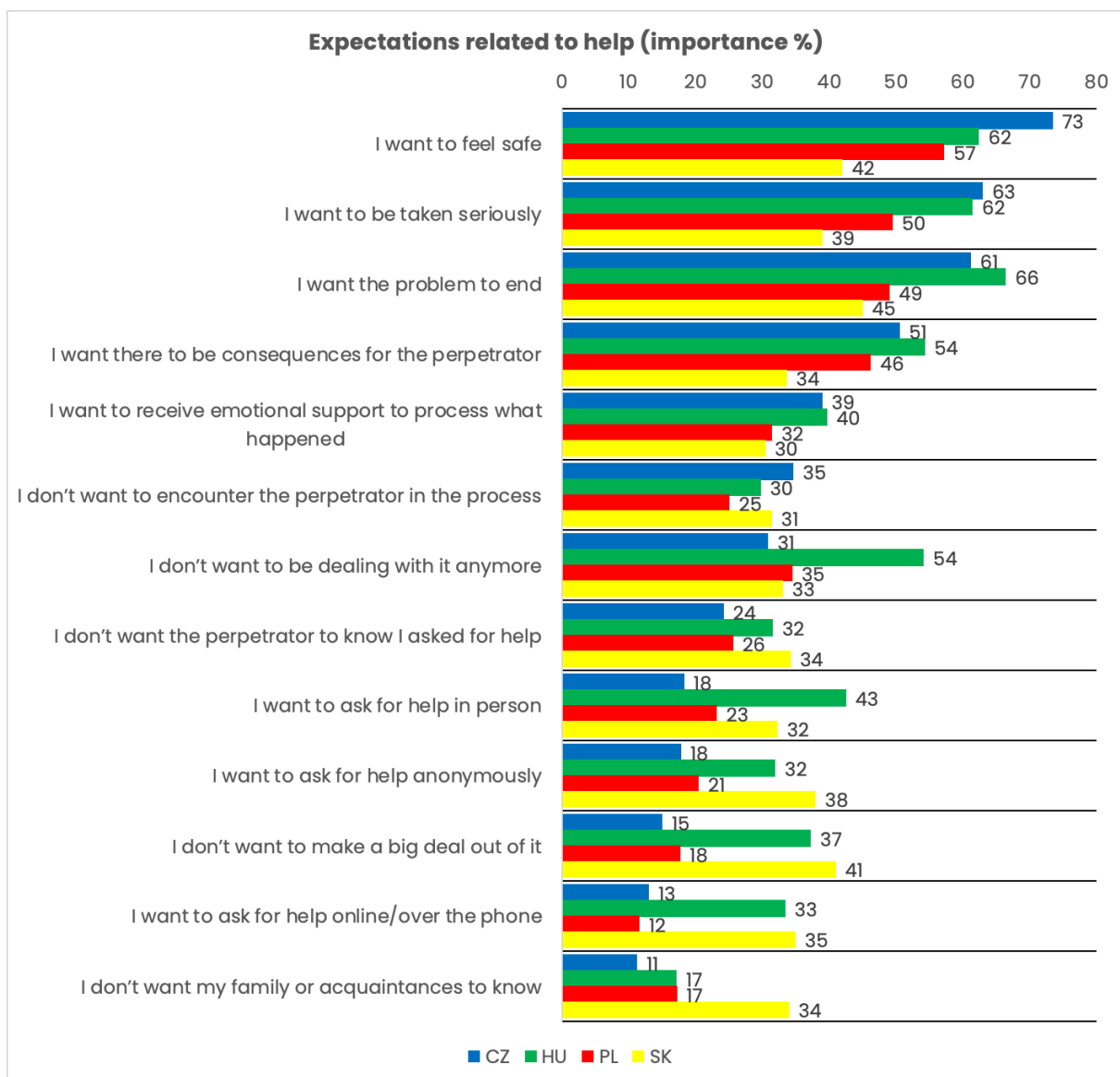


Figure 19: Expected help – most important aspects (%).

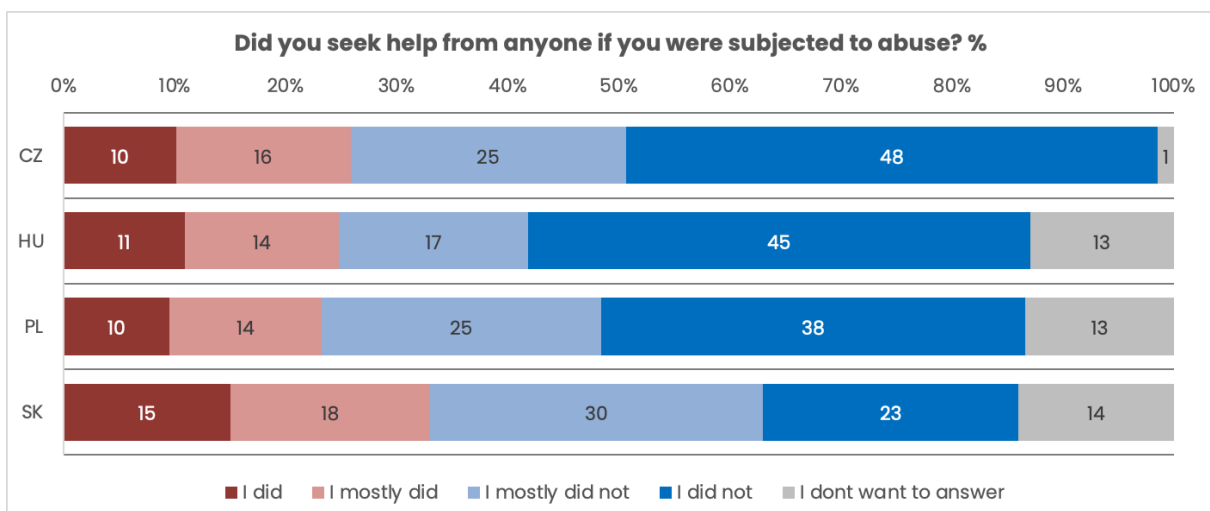


Figure 20: Proportion of those who sought help (%).

The majority of young people in the region did not seek help when they experienced online abuse. 48% of Czechs, 45% of Hungarians, and 38% of Poles did not seek help at all when previously exposed to abuse in this way. Slovak youth were more likely to seek help, with one third reporting having done so. In the V4, only 10–15% consistently sought help when they needed it.

Why did those affected not seek help? Most commonly because they did not feel the situation was serious, or because they felt they could handle it themselves. Fear and shame also emerged as frequent reasons. Czechs reported in particularly high proportions that the abuse they experienced was not serious enough to require help. This was also the most common reason among Hungarians, while among Poles it was shame. It was most common among Slovaks for the person affected to have feared the perpetrator or felt protective of them, indicating a closer relationship of exposure and dependency.

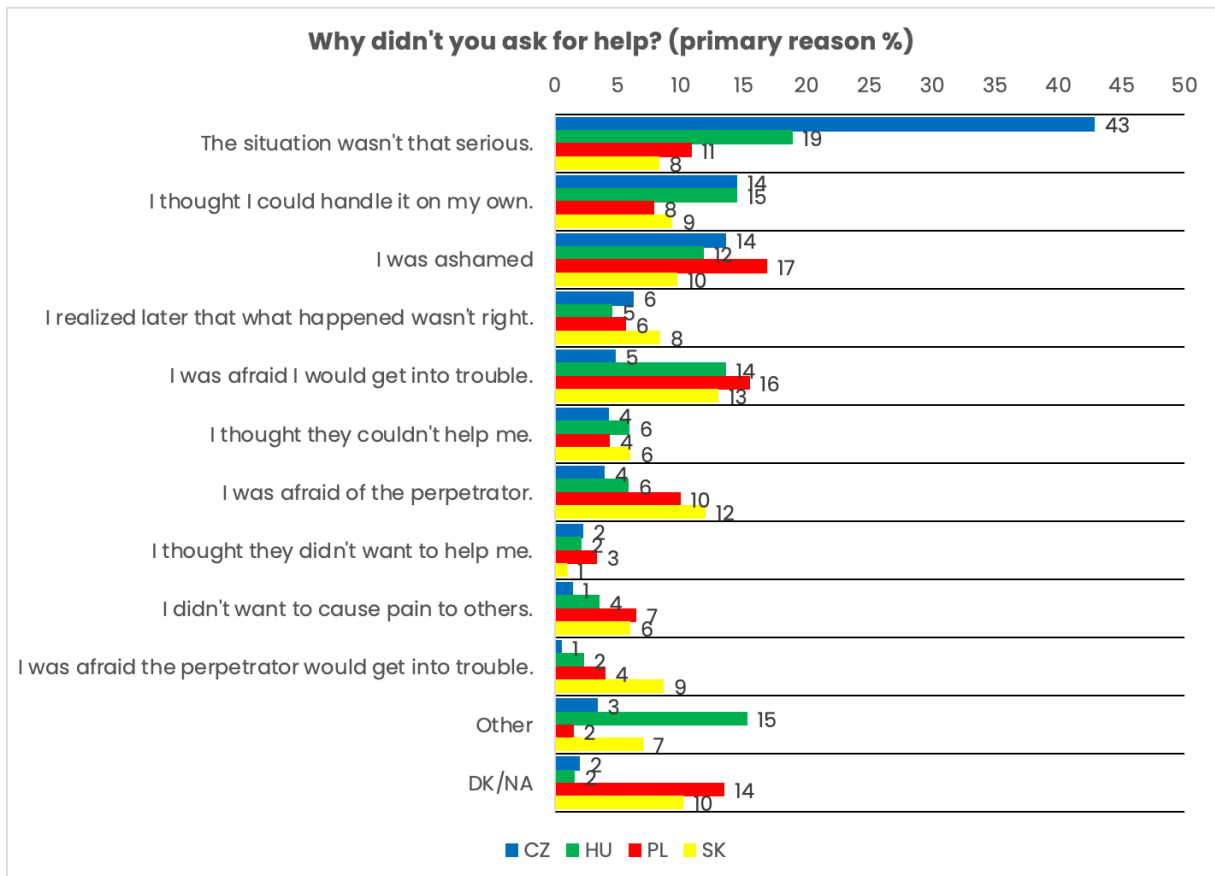


Figure 21: Why did they not seek help? – Frequency of individual reasons (%).

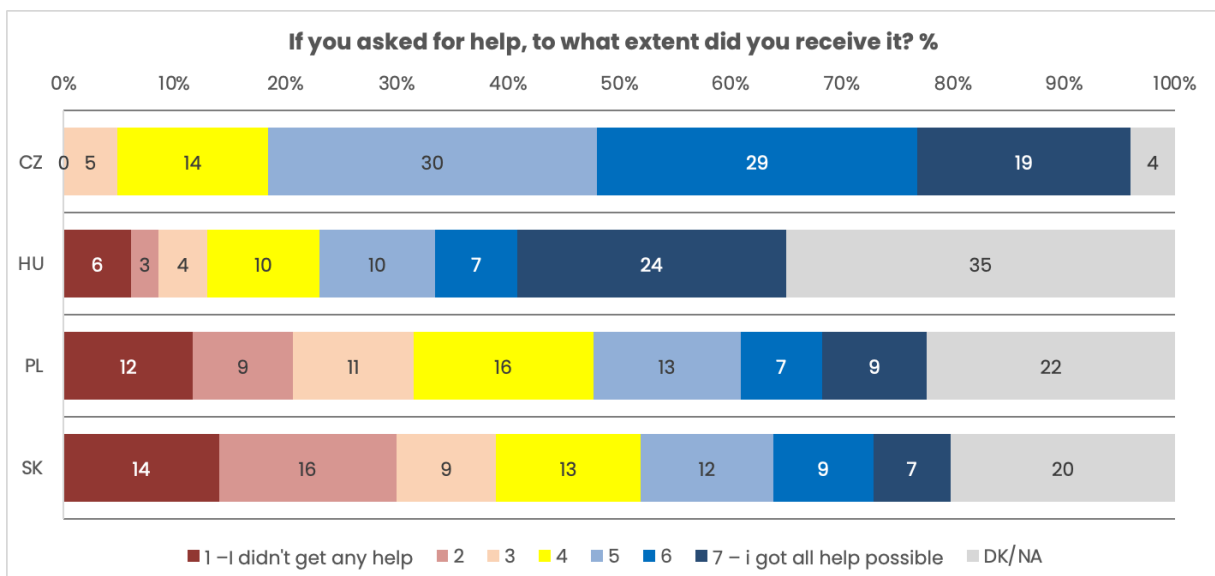


Figure 22: Quality of help received (%).

Of course, some did seek help, and there are significant differences between countries in how effective the help provided was. This is partly

because the sample of those who sought help is small, but that alone does not explain the difference. The majority of Czechs were satisfied with the help they received, and the same is true of Hungarians; however, unfortunately Polish and especially Slovak youth again reported a different experience, with more of them feeling that they did not receive adequate help.

## **V. SUMMARY**

Based on the results of our research conducted among young people aged 18–25 living in the Visegrád countries, online child abuse is a widespread phenomenon in the region. Roughly half of respondents reported experiencing some form of online abuse during childhood. Although most cases involved less frequent or milder exposure, every tenth young person was a victim of continuous or severe online abuse. The 11–18 age range proved to be the most at-risk period.

Attitudes towards help-seeking show a duality. Young people trust primarily their parents, friends, and the police, yet nearly half of those who experienced abuse did not seek help. The most common reason for this was that they did not consider the situation serious enough, or believed they could handle it on their own.

Overall, the research highlights that online child abuse is not an isolated but rather a common phenomenon in the region. Unfortunately, Slovakia produced particularly poor results: relatively poor mental health, frequent online abuse, and inadequate or unsatisfactory help provision. The findings in Poland are also concerning, especially considering that the Polish sample, which contained 18–25 year-olds with more stable family

backgrounds, showed greater similarity to the more burdened Slovak sample, which overrepresents young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Although the results of the Czech Republic and Hungary differ in several respects, for example in terms of abuse tolerance threshold and screen time, we nonetheless obtained a broadly similar picture of the online abuse problem in the two countries.

The political and identity-political dimension of online child abuse, and peer-to-peer abuse in particular, would warrant further investigation. Due to the high level of political polarisation in V4 societies, political exposure plays a key role in the socialisation of young people, and in highly politicised societies political opinion often determines social integration, the formation of subcultures, and the degree of risk of exclusion and abuse. Empirical research into the relationship between political culture and abuse would therefore be a valuable contribution to understanding the phenomenon of online child abuse, as this research did not allow us to focus on the political dimension.

Drawing on the Slovak case, we know that it would be very useful to conduct large-scale quantitative research comparing the perceptions of more vulnerable social groups with those of the average citizen, with particular attention to the topic of needs and experiences related to help provision, where the most interesting differences between the Slovak and non-Slovak samples can be observed.

Continuing the research using qualitative methods would also be warranted, within the framework of which it would be possible to examine how significant (pop-)cultural events and viral scandals influence young people's perceptions and opinions regarding abuse, and more broadly,

what role news media plays in education and awareness-raising around abuse, or indeed in radicalisation.

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