
BOOSTING ARMAMENT TO FIGHT DEMOGRAPHIC
DECLINE, CRIME AND CORRUPTION

PUBLIC OPINION ON SECURITY



BCSP

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Boosting Armament to Fight Demographic Decline, Crime and Corruption

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The findings of public opinion poll were analysed by Belgrade Centre for Security Policy researchers: **Marija Ignjatijević**, **Bojan Elek** and **Marija Pavlović**

Main Conclusions

The main finding of this study is that the Serbian public have conflicting views on national and personal security and their relationship with the country's institutions. On the one hand, people instinctively recognise that the **main security threats are internal** and are related to poor governance – such as organised crime and corruption and low levels of trust in institutions that serve the interests of politicians – which is why they rely on themselves and their own good conduct, from which they derive a sense of personal security. On the other hand, under the influence of media messaging and dominant narratives about threats to national security, presenting a maelstrom of great power rivalry and adversarial actors in the region, they continue to believe that **hard power is the best response to security issues**. Therefore, they see solutions mainly in the continued strengthening of the country and investment in the security sector. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that public opinion is diametrically opposed to the threats and risks defined by the official National Security Strategy and Defence Strategy adopted last year. Both documents place (the relatively unlikely events of) armed aggression and separatist tendencies within the country in first place on the list of threats to Serbia's security – threats that only appear in the lower half on the list of priorities in the eyes of the public, who see human security issues as the priority problems. This discord between public perception and the strategic documents is a consequence of the almost complete lack of public debate during the adoption process of these documents. At the same time, it is testimony to the wrongheaded priorities of Serbia's security policy, which is clearly at odds with the needs of the public, even though the National Security Strategy cites their subjective feelings in defining national security.

Research Context

The public opinion research was conducted September and October 2020 on a randomly selected, representative sample, as a face-to-face survey, ensuring that the findings are statistically valid for the Serbian population as a whole. Eminent public opinion research agencies conducted surveys in the field. Due to the large number of different topics the survey covered, this was conducted in stages, on the basis of three separate questionnaires that were compiled by researchers of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy.

To properly understand the findings, it is important to bear a number of things in mind. Firstly, the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had two primary effects on people's attitudes. On the one hand, it encouraged them to recognise threats to public health as a security issue, as can be seen from the fact that for the first time they understand investment into the national health system as a priority in terms of reducing security threats to the country. On the other hand, it certainly affected levels of public trust in the key institutions responsible for managing the pandemic, from the healthcare system, to the security sector and political decision-makers.

Additionally, changes to the geopolitical environment and the refugee/migrant crisis (which has been ongoing for more than five years, albeit with changing dynamics), have significantly affected public understanding of where threats to their security emanate from. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that people's sense of vulnerability and perception of threats are significantly influenced by media content and messaging by government officials. If we take into account the fact that two thirds of people for whom television is the main source of information, and the fact that the most watched television stations uncritically broadcast official statements without calling into question the information they are relaying, we can conclude that the political authorities have at their fingertips enormous potential to craft public opinion.

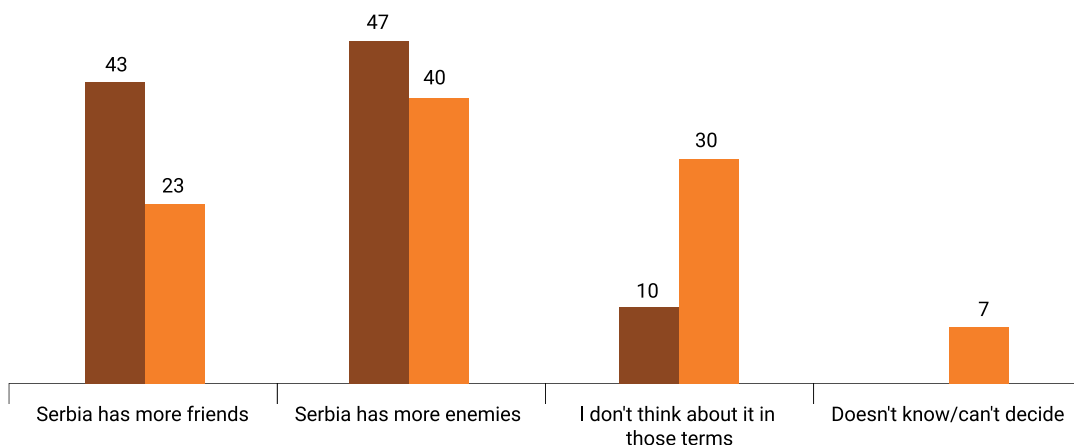
| National Security: Internal threats and external vulnerability

The Serbian public's attitudes on national security stem from their understanding that the main threats are internal. Consequently, the list of the main internal security threats Serbia faces is topped by organised crime, selected by a quarter of the population, and corruption, with an additional 15 percent. On the other hand, the public believe that the country is most under threat from great powers and Serbia's enemies, which is probably a product of sensationalised media coverage and messaging by politicians.

As external threats, the public identified migrants and great powers (each selected by one fifth of respondents), also including the USA (17%), Kosovo (15%) and Albanians (one in ten). These findings are a consequence of global security events, first and foremost the long-lasting refugee crisis, but also the increasingly frequent reports of radical groups and the fear of losing Kosovo, which is seen as a joint undertaking by Albanians with American assistance.

Compared to 2017, a **marginally larger number of people believe that Serbia's security is under threat** and they see the best response being investment in the economy and raising the standard of living (58%), as well as shrewd diplomacy (one third). On the basis of these findings, it can be concluded that the public view Serbia to be threatened primarily by internal problems, which is supported by the finding that, compared to the previous survey, almost twice as many people believe Serbia has more friends than enemies in the region (Chart 1). However, a significant polarisation of attitudes compared to the previous survey is also evident, due to the reduction in the number of those who do not see relations in the region in terms of friends and enemies.

Chart 1: Does Serbia have more friends or enemies in its immediate neighbourhood?



When asked about investment in areas aiming to reduce vulnerability, a third stated that the priority is healthcare, which is an obvious consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. A positive takeaway is that 16 percent of the population recognise pollution as a security threat that requires investment, something that was not the case earlier, and that local issues are at the list of topics of interest to the public. This speaks to an increased awareness of the risks brought about by pollution and testifies to the lack of policies that tackle these topics.

However, the second most common response is the procurement of armaments, a priority for one fifth of respondents, with the same number of people choosing investment in personnel within the security sector through increased salaries and the acquisition of equipment. Therefore, in spite of a widespread understanding that the main threats come from within and the majority of people not seeing neighbouring countries as adversaries, most people in Serbia do not see the strengthening of institutions as a priority, instead favouring so-called 'hard power' directed against external enemies. This is also a likely consequence of messaging by the political authorities and frequent media reports of threats that need to be met by rearmament, resulting in a situation in which the public are obstinately trying to treat the affliction they so well recognise with the wrong remedy.

In the same vein, when asked to rank the threats to Serbia's security, people were least concerned about external aggression or separatist movements and most at troubled by human security concerns: demographic crisis (73%), drug addiction (70%), organised crime (66%), people leaving the country (60%) and corruption (58%). It is interesting that the fear of depopulation is a constant carried over from earlier surveys since 2011,¹ while other topics dominant at the time, such as the secession of Kosovo or national over-indebtedness, have been pushed off the list of priorities.

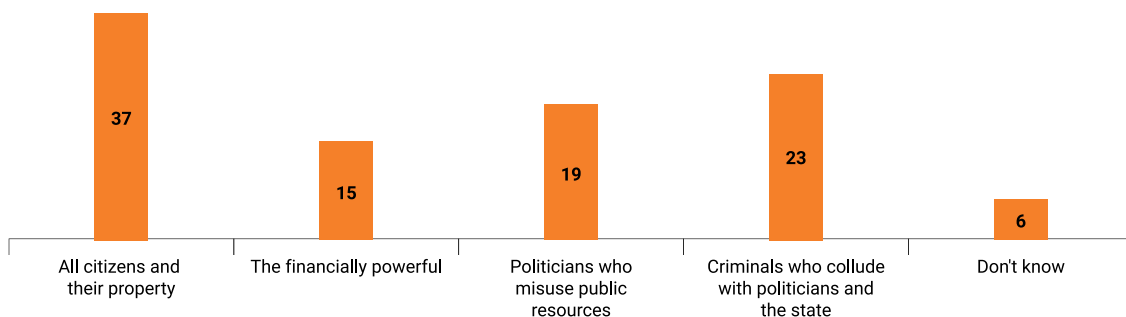
¹ Šta građani misle o svojoj i bezbednosti Srbije, multiple authors, 2011, BCSP. https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/bcbp_2011_sta_gradjani_srbije_misle_o_svojoj_i_o.pdf

Attitudes on Institutions: Greatest trust in the military, the police do not serve the public

When it comes to public attitudes on security sector institutions, the Serbian Armed Forces traditionally enjoy the greatest levels of trust – around 65 percent of people have faith in the military and it is the institution least considered to be corrupt. On the other hand, around 45 percent of people trust the police, while more than 70 percent deem the police to be mostly or completely corrupt. At the same time, the stable levels of trust and high perceptions of corruption is a phenomenon that is repeated year in, year out, which shows that people do not associate corruption with operational police work and that corruption is so widespread and normalised that it largely does not affect trust in institutions. Along with perceptions of high levels of corruption, more than half of people believe that **the police do not protect citizens** (Chart 2), instead serving the interests of criminals who collude with politicians and the state (23%), politicians who misuse public resources (19%) and the financially powerful (15%). These attitudes were likely affected by controversies such as the Savamala scandal and even more so by recent events such as the conduct of the police during the July protests and the state of emergency. When it comes to the security services, as with the police, people's opinions are divided – around 41 percent have confidence in the Security Information Agency (*Bezbednosno informativna agencija* – BIA), while 44 percent have little trust in this agency.

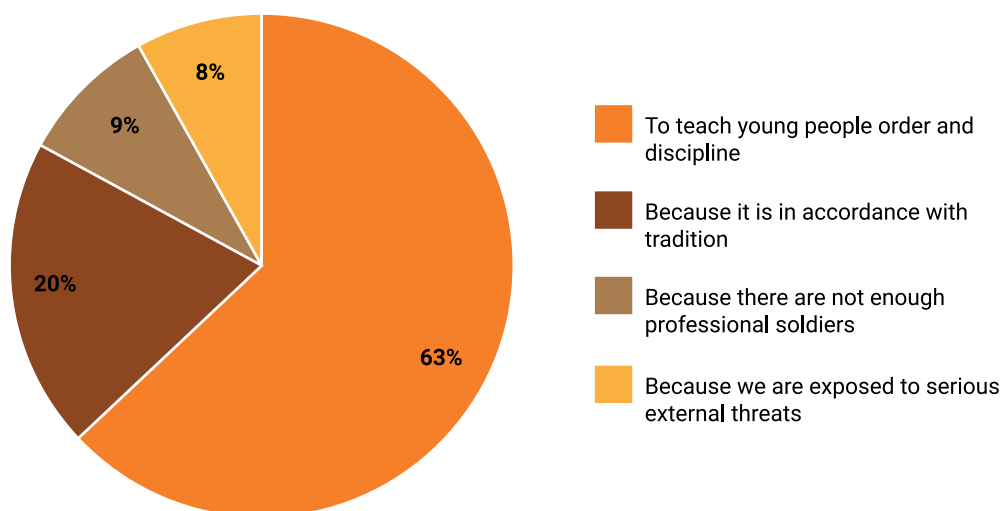
In general, the public believe that after political parties, the most corrupt institutions are the judiciary, the traffic police, the customs administration, the police and the healthcare system. These are, after all, the institutions with which people come into contact the most in their daily lives.

Chart 2: Who do the police protect in Serbia?



Almost half of people believe the military is capable of defending the country (48%), which is an increase compared to 2011 when 41 percent had a positive opinion of the military's capabilities. People attribute the military's capability mostly to its equipment – the number of people who believe the military is well-equipped has nearly doubled since 2011 and now stands at 40 percent. This increase can be interpreted as the result of media and official discourse, which seeks to bolster the image of the military through sensationalist reporting on the acquisition of arms and equipment, military exercises and by portraying Serbia as having “the most powerful military in the region”. Even so, most people are of the opinion that defence sector spending should either increase (46%) or remain the same (38%), which is also a consequence of the dominant narrative on Serbia being under threat and requiring increased arms procurement and defence spending. It is important to note that, after the Serbian Armed Forces and the Serbian Orthodox Church, people report having the greatest levels of trust in the media they follow, which speaks to how powerful the media are as a tool for shaping public attitudes and opinion in Serbia.

Chart 3: What would, in your opinion, be the main reason for reintroducing compulsory military service in Serbia?



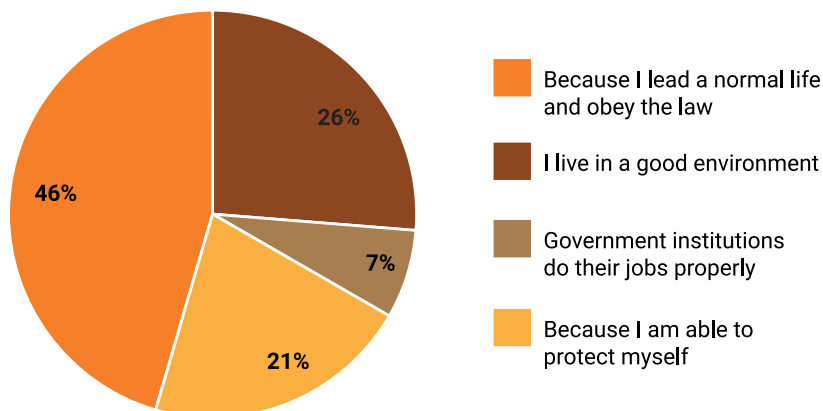
On the other hand, **more than half citizens believe the military does not have enough personnel (52%)**. Meanwhile, almost three quarters of people think that **compulsory military service** should be reintroduced. However, the most common reasons people give for the reintroduction of conscription (Chart 3) are order and discipline among the youth (63%) and tradition (20%). It appears that people do not see military service as a matter of defence policy, but instead as a kind of socialisation institution. In a similar manner to investment, people do not associate threat assessment with a potential solution – i.e. they do not see conscription as a solution to challenges the existing professional military cannot resolve. This surge of support for the reinstitution of military service can be linked to the age group of respondents – the largest numbers of respondents who support the reintroduction of conscription come from the 45-60 and 60+ age cohorts. Accordingly, positive attitudes to the reintroduction of military service can be interpreted as a legacy of the past and as an understanding of the military as the ‘school of life’ that puts young people ‘on the right path’.

Personal Security: People feel safe but not because government institutions are doing their jobs properly

Most people in Serbia generally feel safe. People feel most secure in their homes (94.3%), then in their neighbourhood (90.7%), their city (84.9%) and only then in the country as a whole (78%). According to the results of a survey conducted by the BCSP in 2011, people also felt at their safest in their own homes (84.5%) and an upward trend in how secure people feel is evident. However, most people do not feel that government institutions have contributed to their feeling of security. As the main reason for feeling safe, almost half of people (45.5%) cited the fact that they **lead normal lives and obey the rules and the law**. The next largest category (one in four people) say they feel safe because they **live in a good milieu**, while 20.7 percent of people believe that they can protect themselves (Chart 4). Only 7.4 percent of people reported feeling safe because government institutions are doing their jobs. In comparison to 2011, the number of

people who see themselves as responsible for their own security has more than doubled. What is more, people feel that the communal police (68.8%) and local authorities (65.8%) **do nothing** to affect their sense of security. It appears from this that people have turned to themselves in order to provide their own security, while only a few people rely on the state, which is understandable given how little trust institutions garner and how little faith there is that they serve the public interest.

Chart 4: What is the main reason why you feel safe?



As many as 84 percent of people are **ready to resort to violence** in order to protect their own and their family's security. When asked why they think there is violence in society, most people cite the poor economic circumstances, poverty and a lack of opportunities (39.1%), while one in four people believes that the violence is caused by the breakdown of values in society.

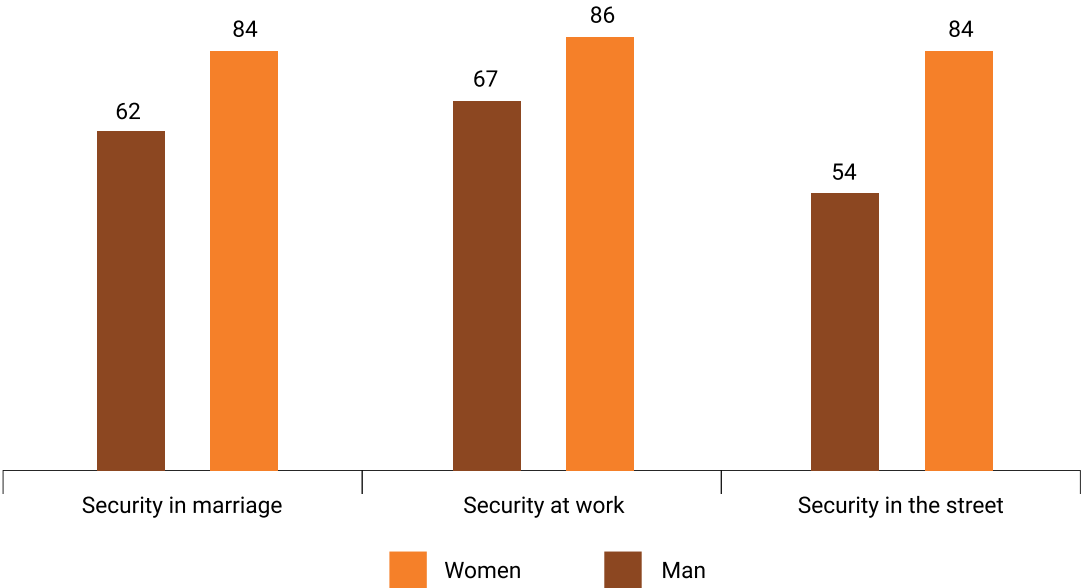
When it comes to the police, more than half of people (56.5%) believe the police protect the financially powerful, politicians who misuse public resources or criminals who collude with politicians and the state. It is also alarming that 41.7 percent of people say they would not report someone to the police if they knew they were committing a crime because it is none of their business, because they are afraid that the perpetrator could harm them or because they do not believe the police would solve the problem. In spite of this, however, 38.1 percent of people would like the police to have a greater presence in their neighbourhood.

Half of the Serbian public believe that **the police conducted themselves properly even though there were some excesses in terms of use of force during the recent protests**. This is hardly surprising given that 40 percent of people believe that if someone goes to a violent protest and the gets beaten by the police, that even if they did nothing wrong they are still responsible for what happened to them.

In their local communities, people are most concerned by unsafe roads and speeding (83%), peer-to-peer violence in schools (81.5%), drug-related violence (79.4%), domestic violence (76.3%), the free movement of migrants in towns and villages (74.2%), natural disasters (68.1%), the coronavirus epidemic (62.8%) and altercations between criminal groups (62.1%). Significantly fewer people expressed concern about violent attacks against members of the Roma community (46.7%), the activities of far-right groups in Serbia (45.5%), attacks on migrants (39%) and the activities of extreme left-wing groups in Serbia (38.8%). The impression is, therefore, that most people perceive the violence that could affect them as the main problem, while the violence that happens to others (migrants or the Roma) is less of a problem.

When it comes to gender security, more people think that **men are safe** in the home (84.3%), at work (85.8%) and on the streets (83.9%) than think **women are safe** in their marriage (61.7%), at work (67%) and on the streets (54.3%). There is a gap between men and women, with almost 20 percent fewer people feeling that women are safe in their homes or at work and almost 30 percent fewer people feeling that women are safe on the streets (Chart 5).

Chart 5: How would you assess the security of women and men in Serbia?



** Percentage of respondents who assessed security to be high or very high*

On the issue of COVID-19, 37.3 percent of people said that they feel unsafe, while the majority (62.7%) report feeling safe. It should be mentioned here that the survey was conducted in September and October, when the number of cases in Serbia had yet to rise to the heights it reached in November. Due to a change in circumstances in November, namely the drastic increase in positive cases, it is to be expected that the percentage of people who feel unsafe as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic would be greater.



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