



# SERBIA

IN THE JAWS OF THE

# COVID-19

# PANDEMIC



December 2020



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## Key Findings

The public opinion poll conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in October 2020 shows that the society is divided, both when it comes to measures taken in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and regarding the reaction of the competent institutions to the health crisis. Although **no less than a third of the Serbian citizens do not believe in or have serious doubts about the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> the vast majority of them are of the opinion that the health crisis will have serious economic consequences, while a third are convinced that it has affected the level of democracy in Serbia.** Most people see the pandemic as a threat to human and national security, but they are divided over how this crisis has affected their everyday lives.

Polarisation was identified in relation to the level of trust in state institutions. Citizens trust the health care system the most, which is not surprising since the health care system commonly occupies a very high position in general surveys conducted to measure trust in all institutions. The reason for the high level of trust in the health system is the fact that it is the *entire* health system – not just the specialised COVID departments – that is bearing the brunt of the pandemic. As for other institutions, the percentage of trust in the President of the Republic and the Crisis Task Force for the Protection of the Population from the Infectious Disease COVID-19 stands at almost fifty-fifty, which again reflects the broader picture of citizens' (dis)trust in these permanent and temporary institutions. One of the reasons for the division in the perception of disease as a threat to the personal safety of citizens is poor informing and reporting on the course and consequences of the pandemic (frequent contradictory messages provided by the Crisis Task Force and the authorities), which has been identified in the survey as one of the biggest problems of pandemic management.

An enormous number of citizens perceive China as the largest financial and humanitarian donor during the period of the pandemic, which also influences - in the general survey - positive opinions about foreign countries, where China ranks first. Despite the fact that it was in fact the European Union that helped Serbia the most in the fight against the Coronavirus, in both financial and humanitarian terms, in the eyes of the citizens China still convincingly holds the first place.

## CONTEXT

In Serbia, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded on 6 March 2020. The state of emergency, which was introduced on 15 March, lasted until the beginning of May. Looking at the entire period of the pandemic, we can roughly identify five approaches to political crisis management, or five stages that Serbia has gone through to date.

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<sup>1</sup> On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation pronounced the spread of COVID-19 a pandemic.

These are:

- The first wave of the pandemic, which was accompanied by the introduction of a state of emergency and the application of rigorous measures such as prohibition of movement for persons over 65 years of age and the introduction of a curfew (March-May);
- Improved pandemic situation and drastic withdrawal of all restrictive measures in the context of parliamentary elections held on 21 June 2020. The withdrawal of measures was criticised by some members of the professional public and some of the opposition parties;
- Enormous increase in the number of infected persons at the end of June; the second wave of the pandemic;<sup>2</sup> reports by independent investigative journalists on intentional concealment of data on the number of infected and deceased persons; July protests when the President of the Republic announced the introduction of a new curfew (June, July);
- Calm epidemiological situation, with a very small number of infected persons, without restrictive measures (August, September);
- The third wave of the pandemic, with record numbers of infected, hospitalised and deceased persons, with mild restrictive measures (October, November).

This health crisis hit Serbia in a year that already included a latent political crisis (for example, parliamentary elections were boycotted by a large number of opposition parties). It was the year in which Freedom House, a renowned research centre, removed Serbia from the list of “partially consolidated democracies”, characterising its system as a “hybrid regime”, and during which no new chapters were opened in the process of accession to the European Union. As regards the economic consequences of the pandemic, different messages sent by the competent institutions lead to the conclusion that there is no clear strategy on how the country will deal with the expected economic crisis. Civil society organisations have identified numerous human rights violations, especially during the state of emergency, as well as excessive use of force during the July protests in Belgrade. Finally, pressure on these organisations, as well as individuals therefrom and independent investigative journalists, manifested itself in the form of the “List” affair, when the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering of the Serbian Ministry of Finance requested access to bank documents to determine whether non-governmental organisations and individuals were in any way connected with money laundering or terrorist financing operations.

## FINDINGS

### Corona is (Not) a Security Threat

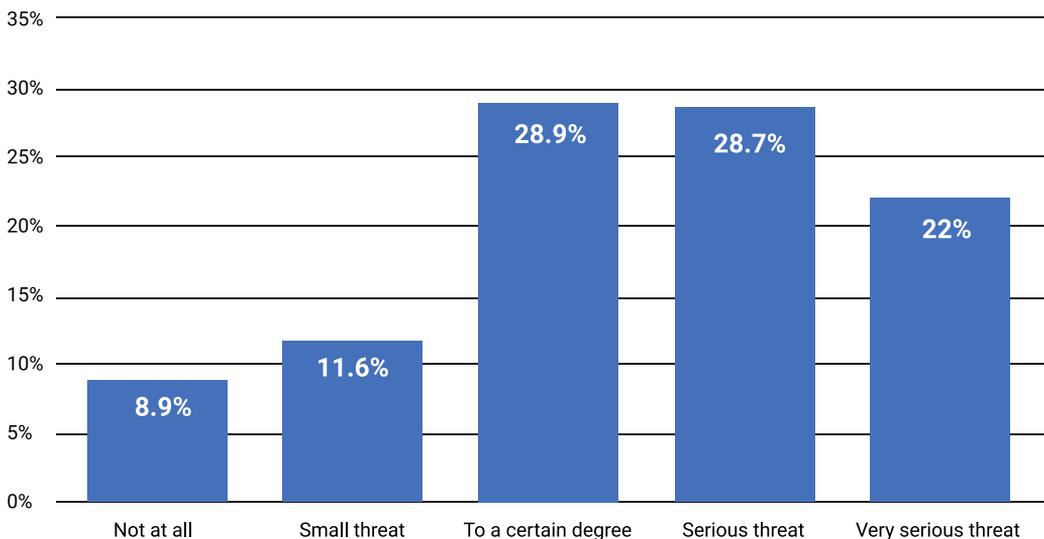
According to the public opinion poll, when asked what they consider to be the greatest internal threat or risk to national security, only 4% of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia answered that it was the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, they believe that Serbia’s national security is threatened the most by organised crime (26.5%) and corruption (14.7%).

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<sup>2</sup> The professional public is divided in relation to whether drastic worsening of the pandemic situation in June and July 2020 represented the second wave, or the second peak of the first wave.

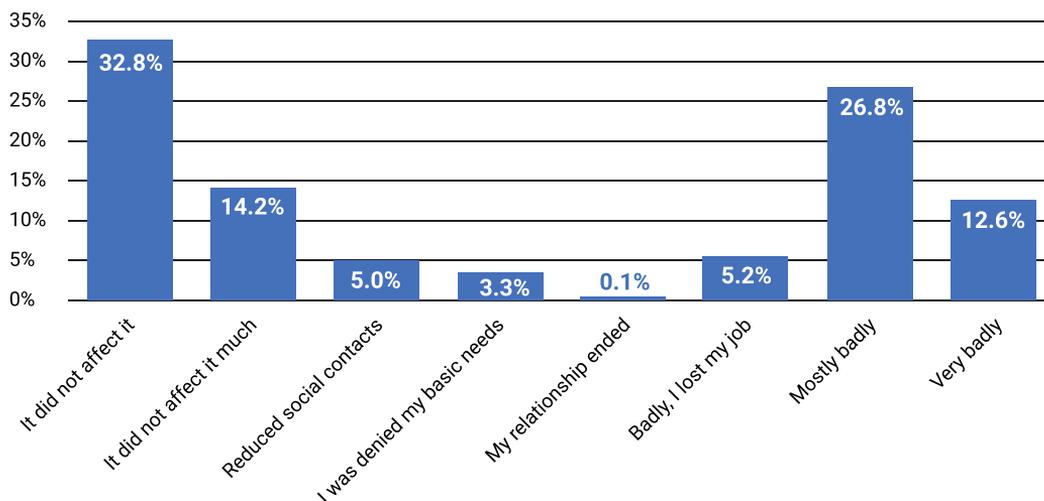
However, when asked specifically about the COVID-19 pandemic and the threat it poses to the national security of Serbia, no less than 77.6% of the respondents do consider the pandemic a threat to national security, while all of 48.7% perceive it as a serious or very serious threat. Similarly, 49.9% of the respondents believe that the threat to public health caused by the epidemic also poses a threat to the community in which they live. The question arises as to why there is such a vast difference in the perception of COVID-19 as a threat to national security between the answers given to the open-ended question and those given to the closed question which focused exclusively on the pandemic. It is a relatively new threat, a crisis that entire generations of people have never experienced to this extent and in this way. As the health crisis is still present, the meta-narrative which would identify pandemics and other forms of spread of infectious diseases as an immediate threat to national security has not yet been formed. This will certainly change as issues related to the spread of infectious diseases become part of the official security discourse in the coming months and years, much like in the case of threats caused by the climate change and threats to the environment.

### Does COVID-19 represent a threat to national security?



On a personal level, **when asked how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their lives, 39.4% of the respondents answered that it mostly affected it or that it affected it very badly**, while 5.2% answered that it affected them badly in terms of loss of employment. On the other hand, 32.8% of the respondents answered that the COVID-19 pandemic did not affect their lives at all. By their very nature, pandemics and the consequences thereof create a feeling of insecurity in people, which can range from fear of potential job loss to fear of infection and the disease itself. The emergency situation accompanied by a health crisis makes it impossible for individuals to predict their actions in the near future and plan safely, which consequently causes a feeling of discontinuity in the lives of many. This condition, which can be called ontological *insecurity*, can have great consequences for physical and mental health, and can lead to a crisis of identity and overall meaning. The real consequences of unpredictability brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic will be felt only when citizens begin to rationalise and accept the "new normal", or the post-COVID period as "normal".

## How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect your life?



### Coronavirus Does (Not) Exist

**As many as 34.3% of the respondents do not believe or doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic really exists.** The reasons for such a large number of people who do not believe in the existence of this contagious disease should be viewed as part of the global trend which places science and scientific research under the attack of populism and conspiracy theories, while in Serbia it could have been instigated by some members of the professional public, who stated – at least at the beginning of the pandemic – that the virus was completely harmless and that the mortality rate it caused was lower than that of the seasonal flu. This is a very worrying fact, because when a third of the population does not believe in the existence of the pandemic, there is a much higher level of non-compliance with measures (such as refusal to wear masks, refusal to maintain physical distance, large gatherings), which affects the spread of the pandemic itself.

### One Half of the Citizens Trusts the Institutions, While the Other Half Does Not

Regarding the attitude of citizens towards institutions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, **respondents feel that it was the medical facilities that coped best with the consequences of the pandemic. This opinion is shared by as many as 64.6% of the population** (in this context, it should be borne in mind that medical facilities ranked third on the list of institutions most trusted by citizens). After medical facilities, citizens believe that the President of the Republic has managed the pandemic the best - as many as 48.2% of the respondents believe this to be true, while, on the other hand, 33.4% believe that the President has managed the COVID-19 pandemic badly or very badly. Almost 39% of the respondents believe that the Crisis Task Force of the Government of Serbia worked well during the pandemic, while 39.9% rate its work as bad or very bad. When asked what the institutions should have done to better respond to the pandemic, the largest number of surveyed citizens said that better information/better reporting<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In another opinion poll, conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy during the same period, 62% of the citizens expressed interest in the availability of information related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

was necessary, (19.3%). 14.3% of them listed stricter punishment for non-compliance with measures, while 13.3% mentioned better organisation. However, 15.6% of the population still thinks that everything was done well.

Findings from the previous paragraph show that it is largely the communication between the competent institutions and citizens - in the context of political management of the COVID crisis - that causes citizens' different opinions. Namely, the **vaguely defined powers of the authorities** (especially those of the Crisis Task Force, which *de facto* started operating before it was formally established) **in connection with the pandemic, and the concentration of power in the hands of a small circle of people in power, are causing confusion among the citizens because they cannot seem to be able to figure out who actually makes the decisions regarding the control of the infection.** Although according to the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, the executive power is not vested with the President of the Republic, it was precisely he who communicated some of the most important information and decisions to the public - from the introduction of curfew, the procurement of ventilators and other necessary medical equipment, to information about when the pandemic itself will end (based on the reports of the Security Information Agency). In this regard, the growing authoritarianism is completely opposite of the way the Crisis Task Force communicates and provides information to the public. In the last few months at least, the Crisis Task Force did not prescribe measures to combat the pandemic – it rather recommended them, asking that each household become its own „crisis task force“, which actually undermined the authority of that body to independently, effectively and proactively influence the course of the epidemic.

## Coronavirus Has Destroyed the Economy and Democracy

**82.5% of citizens believe that the pandemic will have a bad effect on the economy.** In this case too, there are contradictory messages and decisions coming from holders of public office. Since the very beginning of the pandemic, the authorities have believed that public finances would be able to survive the “closing” of economic activities or reduced productivity in certain sectors, and that Serbia will achieve one of the best economic results in Europe in 2020 (i.e. that it will have a lesser fall of BDP). On the other hand, when the possibility of a new “closure” during the third wave was announced, the highest state officials expressed concern that said “closure” could suspend the regular payment of pensions and salaries in the public sector. These contradictory messages coming from the competent institutions and the President of the Republic himself certainly cause confusion among the citizens, who are then forced to rely on significant indicators of economic trends presented by institutions such as the Fiscal Council of the Republic of Serbia, which, in turn, warns that there is no clearer strategy to overcome the expected economic crisis.

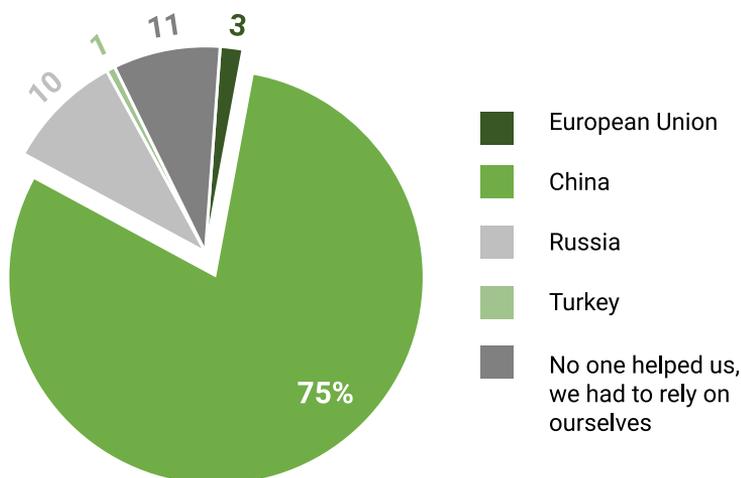
It was also necessary to determine the perception of citizens about the relationship between the pandemic and the level of democracy in society and the state. **One third of Serbian citizens believe that the pandemic has affected the quality of democracy in Serbia. Out of that number, 29.3% believe that there has been an erosion of democracy, 28.9% feel that the decisions of competent institutions have threatened democracy, while 24.1% are convinced that all the power happens to be concentrated in the hands of one man.** As in many other countries, the pandemic has caused citizens to express their dissatisfaction with issues that, in the time before the emergency situation, were not causing any reactions, especially in the case of a large number of apolitical

members of the population. This tendency was most noticeable during the epidemiological crisis in Novi Pazar. Only a few weeks after large pre-election rallies were held with no observed preventive measures, in a town where senior government officials personally handed out ventilators and medical equipment to the General Hospital, the health system collapsed. People spontaneously protested and there was an enormous number of sick and deceased people, both in the town of Novi Pazar and the entire area of Sandžak. The July protests, which erupted after the President of the Republic announced the introduction of another curfew, were primarily a reaction to the growing authoritarianism and the fact that the real number of infected and dead was being concealed. It was a reaction to the poor state of democracy in the country, which - in the context of the pandemic - reflected badly on its management and placement under control.

## Although the EU Gave the Most Funds, China is Perceived as Having Helped Serbia the Most

Finally, when asked to name one country that provided the largest financial and humanitarian aid to Serbia in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of respondents (69.4%) believe that it was China, 11.3% that it was Russia, while the European Union is ranked third, listed by 9.6% of the surveyed citizens. Ever since Serbia became one of the main recipients of Chinese non-transparent loans intended for large infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road initiative, the government has been promoting China as a friend and ally in the creation of new jobs. The positive campaign on the role of China came to the fore especially in March and April 2020, after the introduction of the state of emergency. During the most-watched public address, broadcast immediately after the introduction of the state of emergency, President Vučić declared that “European solidarity is a fairy tale on paper”, calling China “the only country that can help us” and Chinese President Xi Jinping his brother. He thus completely exposed the fact that Serbian foreign policy is not based on the values of common good, but on the principles that serve to preserve the existing internal order, thereby further deteriorating the already turbulent relations with the European Union.

Who helped Serbia the most during the COVID-19 pandemic? (in %)



It is important to note that the survey was conducted in the second half of September and the beginning of October, one month before Serbia started seeing record-high numbers of newly infected, hospitalised and deceased people.





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