



SHORT REPORT

Serbian Citizens' Opinion on the COVID-19 Epidemic

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Summary

Aim: The Centre for International Public Policy has undertaken a public opinion research in which we tested the opinions of the citizens of Serbia on the coronavirus epidemic. The respondents had the opportunity to express their opinion on measures undertaken by the Serbian Government to combat the virus, to state their trust in the media, as well as the health system in general. In addition, we tested the prevalence of different conspiracy theories among citizens, whether the pandemic gave China a new image in the minds of the people and, most importantly, the level of solidarity among Serbian citizens as well as within the European / international community as a whole.

Methods: In seven days, from 8-15th April 2020, we gathered a convenient sample of N=5989 respondents, which makes this the largest public opinion research project in Serbia on the topic of COVID-19 since the start of the epidemic. The electronic questionnaire consisted of 24 questions of mixed and closed type.

Results: The findings of this research suggest that citizens of Serbia are not afraid of COVID-19, but are nevertheless cautious (86%). The percentage of those willing to consult a doctor when they notice any symptoms lies at 70%. Half of the respondents do not believe in alternative theories regarding the origin of the COVID-19 virus. The majority of the respondents (55%) hold government officials accountable for spreading panic through public speeches and daily public addresses. Moreover, 60% of the respondents do not trust the Serbian media outlets that are currently reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, over half of the respondents are prepared to report their neighbour when he or she is coming from abroad and violates the obligation to self-isolate. However, mostly due to the significant fines, 65% of the respondents would not report the elderly when they are breaking the limited-movement restriction measures.

Conclusion: As before the epidemic, opinions of the Serbian population on current topics are somewhat polarized. Although the majority of the respondents are cautious, a significant number also believes in conspiracy theories and does not fully trust the information provided by the media or the government.

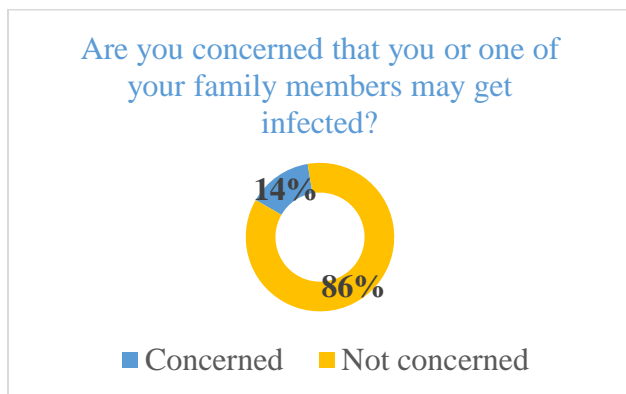
Keywords: COVID-19, opinion survey, epidemic.

References:

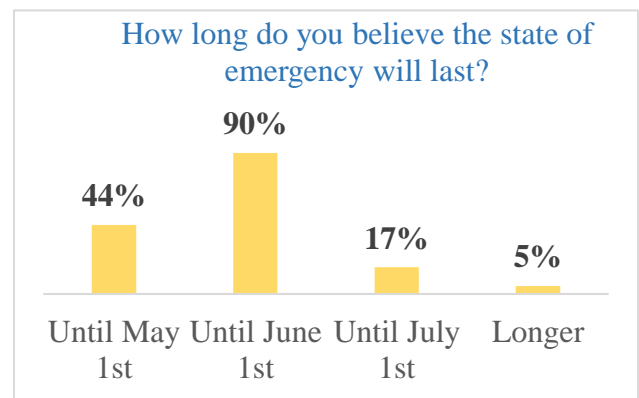
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1) Is there a presence of fear and which prevention measures have the citizens of Serbia undertaken?

We were astounded by the fact that **86% of the respondents said that they are not afraid** that they or their family members are susceptible to being infected by the virus. Still, in times when we are witnessing the heavy toll of the consequences due to the pandemic on mental health globally, this in an encouraging sign. The question of the level of responsibility among the citizens can be answered with the following data: of the above-mentioned 86%, 79% stated that, although they are not afraid, they are taking preventive measures. Further data states that: **85% of respondents wash their hands** more frequently, **85% implement social distancing** measures and **75% use masks and gloves**. Also noticeably, **2,5% of respondents said they are not taking any preventive measures**.



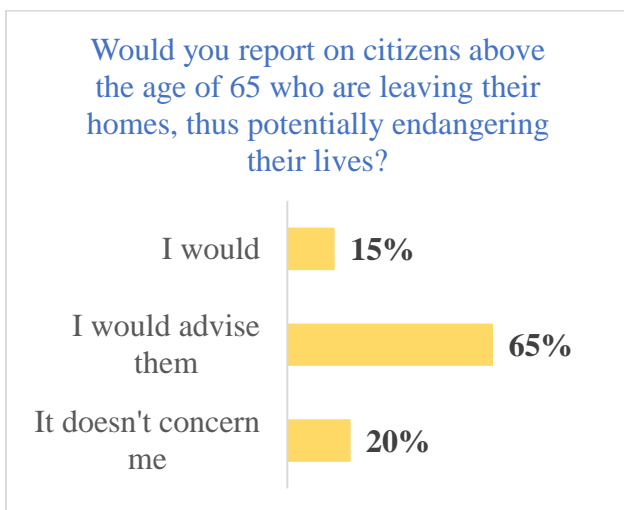
There is noticeable optimism among respondents in the following topics: **60% of the respondents do not believe that we are likely to reach the “Italian scenario”** of exponential growth of new cases and overloading the health system, while as many as **90% believe that the virus will be contained by the 1st of June** and that life will return to normal.



2) Would the citizens of Serbia report on their co-citizens who do not abide by the self-isolation measures?

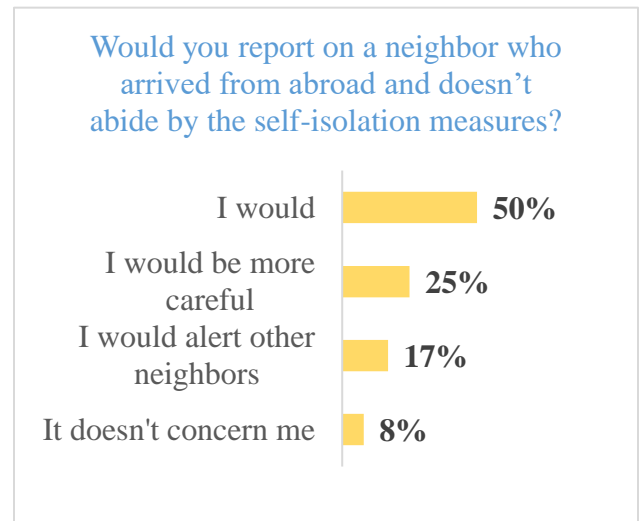
Having in mind the special movement restrictions for citizens of the age 65 or above, we were interested in how many respondents would report on their senior co-citizens who leave their home, thus potentially endangering their lives. The largest number of respondents (**65%**) stated that they would not report on their co-citizens but would advise them not to go out, likely because of the expensive penalties that would be incurred by the senior citizens; **20% would not**

report them, as it does not concern them, while **15% would**. The results showcase a lack of motivation for including government institutions in solving this problem, as many respondents would rely on self-initiative. This could point to the demotivating factor of high penalties for reporting third parties' wrongdoings.



The situation greatly differs regarding the question of the neighbour returning from abroad. **Half of the respondents would report** a returning neighbour who does not abide by the self-isolation measures. About a **quarter of the respondents would not report** on their neighbour, but **would be more careful, while 17% would alert other neighbours**. There was a considerably lower number of indifferent respondents, since only **8% stated that this matter is none of their concern**. This leads to the question of why this is so and what role did

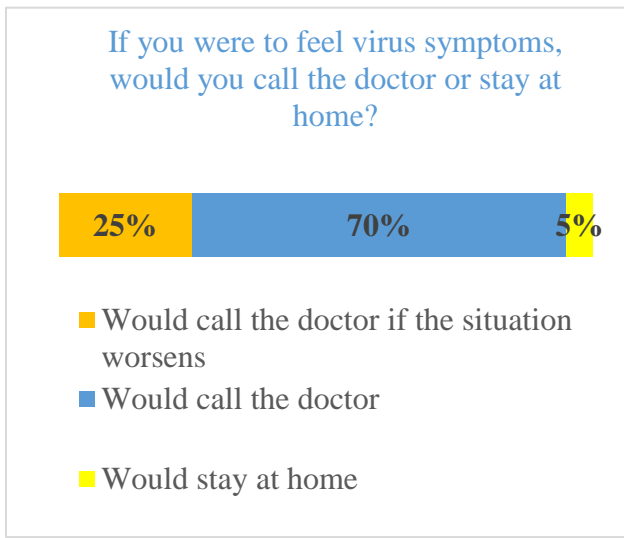
government authorities play in the formation of these opinions, given their open criticism of citizens returning from working abroad (the so called “Gastarbeiter”).



3) How much trust do the citizens of Serbia have in the health system and the Crisis Staff?

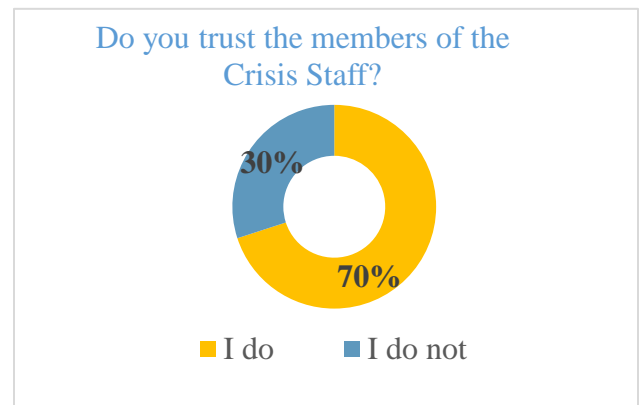
Even with the citizens' outpouring of solidarity towards health workers “on the front lines” of the epidemic with the symbolic applause each evening at 20h on their balconies, we still wanted to test the level of trust citizens have in the health system. On the question “If you were to feel virus symptoms, would you call the doctor or stay at home”, **70% of the respondents would call the doctor**, while a significant portion (**25%**) would only call if the situation **drastically worsens**. With the constantly changing recommendations of the Crisis Staff on the right measures to

undertake, we chose to classify these 25% among those who do not have complete faith in the health system. Additionally, 5% of the respondents stated that they would **stay at home**.



The greatest experts among the doctors have been invited to form the Crisis Staff and their recommendations affect the measures further adopted by the Government in handling the pandemic. For 6 weeks, every day at 3 pm we sit docked in front of the TV screen, waiting to hear the latest information on the number of infected and about future measures. Therefore, we were interested in which member of the Crisis Staff citizens of Serbia trust the most. In the first place, leading with **27%**, there is **prof. Dr. Predrag Kon**, then **Dr. Darija Kisić Tepavčević with 20%**, **Dr. Goran Stevanovic with 15%**, while the least trusted member is **prof. Dr. Branimir**

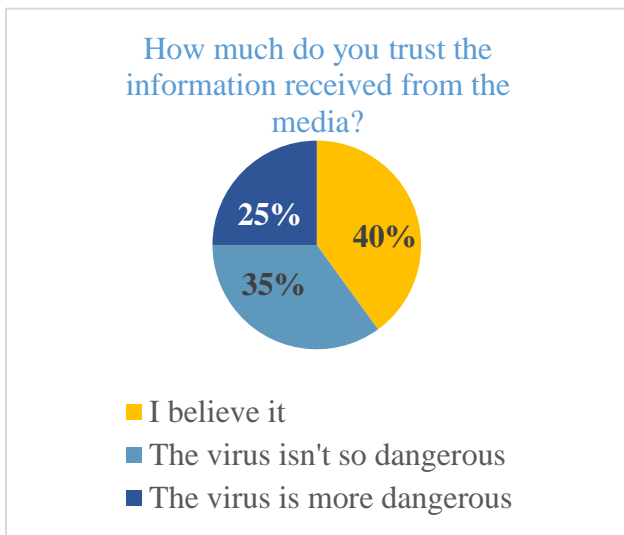
Nestorovic with 8%. However, the most common answer given, (by as many as 30% of respondents!), is that the citizens **did not trust any member** of the Crisis staff! These results are an indicator of citizens putting members' expertise in the background, while their appearances in the media are mostly perceived in the context of the current political climate in the country, i.e. citizens often understand them as politicized.



4) How much do the citizens of Serbia trust the media and high state officials?

It has been repeatedly said that “the media is adherent to the doctors,” as one side fights the infectious virus and the other unverified information and fake news. In this regard, we were interested in the degree of trust that the citizens have in the information they receive from the media. The results of the research tell us that as many as **60% of respondents do not**

trust the information they receive from the media about the corona virus! Among them, **25% of the respondents think the virus is more dangerous**, and that the number of infected and deceased is higher than the official information states. Also, there are **35% of those who believe that the virus is not so dangerous** and that the whole crisis is exaggerated to divert the publics' attention from other problems.

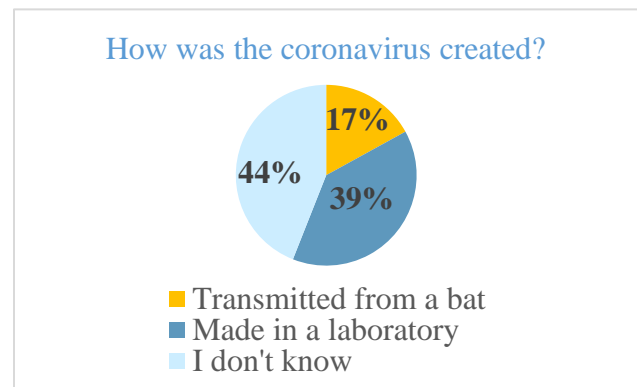


At the top of the crisis management chain is the state management. Although politicians' ratings are often measured in opinion polls, we were interested in the kind of impression that high state officials give the citizens when addressing them about the virus. Exactly **55%** of respondents stated that government officials and their public appearances cause them **distress and panic**. On the other hand, **30%** of the respondents rated

their behaviour as **responsible and serious** and **15% of them rated it as positive** - "they calm us down and they bring hope that everything will be all right." When comparing these results to the previous questions', one could ask: If 55% of respondents think politicians are bringing discomfort and panic, while at the same time, 86% say they are not concerned about the virus, are the politicians losing the trust of the people?

5) How much traction have conspiracy theories gained among Serbian citizens?

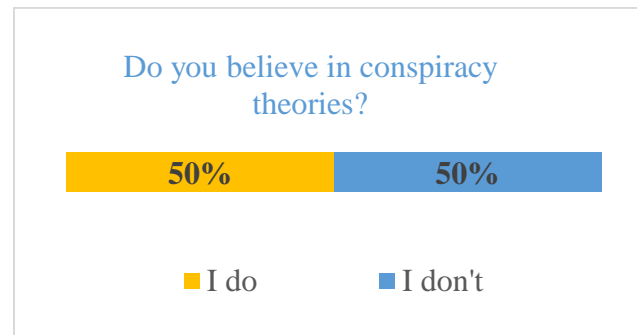
Along with the first coronavirus cases came the emergence of the first conspiracy theories. By focusing all their resources on suppressing the exponential growth of the virus, countries failed to prevent the exponential growth of conspiracy theories. There are countless conspiracy theories today, but we have singled out a few.



The answers to the popular question of whether the virus was transmitted from bats to humans or

if it was made in someone's lab showed that the highest percentage of people believe that the **virus was made by scientists, as much as 44%** of respondents! When combined with the undecided (39%), we conclude that a large percentage (83%!) of people either completely reject or distrust the theory that the transmission of the virus occurred from an animal to a human. Only 17% of respondents believe that the pandemic came from one of the wet markets containing exotic animals in Wuhan.

While on the topic of Wuhan, in addition to being considered the world's epicentre of the COVID-19 virus, it was also among the first cities in China where 5G technology was deployed. It didn't take long for new conspiracy theories to emerge, as we are already hearing about how the British are destroying their lampposts. What is the situation in Serbia? As much as **15% of respondents think 5G technology is harmful** and that there is a **correlation between it and the pandemic**, while twice as many people (30%) believe that this is a mere coincidence and do not believe this theory. **Most of the respondents were undetermined - 55%**. These respondents also differ from one another, as we have **40% who are suspiciously** waiting for scientific evidence to be presented, and **15% of those who have no opinion** on this matter.



Also, among the most popular in Serbia are the following alternative interpretations: everything is a plot of the **pharmaceutical mafia** that only wants to profit, "they created a virus in order to sell us the vaccine" (believed by 28%), a pandemic is a front for **settling migrants** in Europe (27%) and the **US made the virus to destroy China** economically (24%). The reverse theory, also present in the world, but with a lower acceptance in the Serbian public - 10% of the respondents considered it to be a virus made by **China in order to overtake the United States** in a battle for the world's largest force. Overall, it is encouraging that half of the respondents said that they hold no beliefs in conspiracy theories.

6) Which country do citizens of Serbia believe will be the first in developing a vaccine?

The fact that the "Made in China" label is no longer undesirable demonstrates to what extent crises can change the world, as well as peoples' awareness about it. This is shown by the fact that **more than half** of the respondents (**60%**)

believe that **Chinese scientists** will be the first to develop a **vaccine** for COVID-19. Former technological giants, countries who led the world in innovations and high standards of living are now ranked below China regarding the development of a vaccine. This is demonstrated by the fact that the **United States** enjoys only **24%** of respondents' trust, whereas a mere **11%** of respondents believe **Germany** will develop a vaccine first.

7) How do the citizens of Serbia evaluate their government's measures and its' management of the crisis?

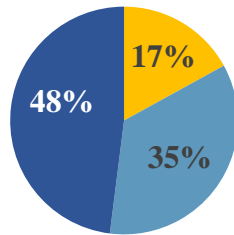
When it comes to the capability of the domestic industry to develop respirators, surprisingly, almost half of the respondents (**49%**) believe that **Serbia has the capacity** to develop them; 29% of the respondents disagree with this statement, whereas 22% of the respondents claim that Yugoslavia would have been the country capable of doing so.

When asked about the **24 hour (total) lockdown** as ordered by the Government, Serbian public opinion as measured between the 8th and 15th of March has been significantly divided: **43% of the respondents** stated that they **support the lockdown**, considering it "the only measure that can put us in line and create order." An identical

percentage (**43%**) believes that the **24 hour lockdown is too harsh** of a measure and therefore do not condone it. The rest (14%) of the respondents do not have an opinion on the matter.

A financial aid package of 5,1 billion euros has ignited tremendous public attention, especially regarding an initiative to give 100 Euros to every adult Serbian citizen. During the presentation of the economic measures, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić made a remarkable statement: "People simply cannot believe that Serbia has money". With this remark in mind, we decided to pose the question to the public in this way: "Do you believe that Serbia has the money to overcome the crisis?" Opinions were divided: **48% of the respondents agree that the money will be provided**, but also believe that pursuing this policy will have **negative long-term consequences**; **35%** of the respondents believe that **Serbia does not have enough money** for such an endeavour, whereas **17%** of them claim that, because of its responsible fiscal and monetary policy, **Serbia does have enough resources** to overcome this crisis.

Do you believe Serbia has enough money to implement the economic stimulus package?



- Yes
- No
- Yes, but there will be negative consequences

“Only Unity Saves the Serbs”, which is a famous and widely-used proverb in Serbia, has had to share its’ symbolic and moral importance with another phrase that has gained almost the same weight over the course of the past 20 years – namely the saying that “there has never been a greater solidarity than during the (NATO) bombing”. This made us wonder whether this pandemic and its’ ever-growing economic impact have had enough of an effect on the population as to re-awaken that reputable Serbian unity. It appears that enthusiasm has been somewhat lost: **60%** of the respondents are of the opinion that **solidarity is somewhat higher than usual**. However, the ends of the spectrum provide a more compelling analysis with only **10%** of the respondents claiming that **solidarity is at an all-time-high** (like during the 1999

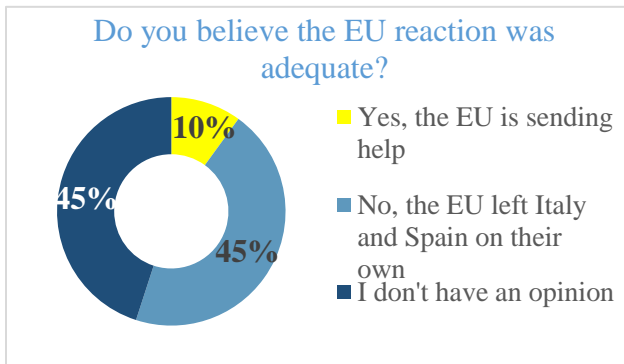
bombing), whereas **30%** of them claim that **people are more selfish than ever**, as demonstrated by increased panic buying and the stockpiling of groceries.

8) How do the citizens of Serbia evaluate other crisis management models (USA, EU, Sweden)?

Although the evaluation of domestic solidarity was not very positive, it's surprising to see that **85%** of the respondents believe that **global issues** such as a pandemic are most efficiently resolved through **international cooperation**. Meanwhile, only **15%** of the respondents believe that **it is in every country's best interest to rely on its’ own capacities**. The results show a growing awareness among the public of the necessity of a global approach when dealing with global issues.

Solidarity and cooperation between countries up until recently served as synonyms for the European Union. How does this stand today? The results show that only **10%** of the respondents believe that the **EU is aiding the countries** struck by the virus in every way it can. However, a large percentage of respondents (**45%**) believe that **the response of the EU to this crisis was inadequate**, stating that it left Italy and Spain stranded to their own devices. There is a

surprisingly high percentage of respondents (45%) who **do not have an opinion** on the matter. Such results imply a possible tendency of declining trust in EU institutions in Serbia after the crisis.



The research results have shown that there is little interest in the different models of crisis management, since 35% of the respondents have no opinion on president Trump's plan regarding the pandemic and 60% do not have a clear opinion regarding the so-called Swedish model, even though Sweden is unique among European countries in its' approach to the crisis. Only **10% of the respondents support the Swedish model**, stating that it is adequate. When it comes to the US, **almost half of the respondents consider saving human lives more important than President Trump's quest of salvaging the economy**; **15% of the respondents condone the latter**, considering his worry about the economy justified.

In the end, the respondents were asked to pick the two, in their opinion, most important consequences of isolation and social distancing. More than half of (**60%**) believe a **temporary economic halt and the arrival of a new economic crisis** to be the main negative consequence. The positive consequences of the crisis, according to the respondents, would be the **recovery of nature**, as well as a **decrease in climate change and air pollution**.



Discussion

The goal of the Centre for International Public Policy when conducting this online research was to enable citizens to indirectly state their opinion on current issues, which have proven themselves to be existentially important to them in these uncommon circumstances. We also wanted to provide a better insight for the public and for the media into the citizens' personal positions regarding the current state of affairs, as well as their expectations for the time that lies ahead of them.

The positive findings of this research suggest that citizens of Serbia are not afraid of COVID-19, but are nevertheless cautious (86%). The percentage of those willing to consult a doctor when they notice any symptoms lies at 70%. Half of the respondents do not believe in alternative

theories regarding the origin of the COVID-19 virus, as they seem to approach the matter objectively. Of particularly high concern is the fact that 55% of the respondents hold government officials accountable for spreading panic through public speeches and daily public addresses. Moreover, 60% of the respondents do not trust the Serbian media outlets that are currently reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, over half of the respondents are prepared to report their neighbour when he or she is coming from abroad and violates the obligation to self-isolate. However, mostly due to the outrageously high fines, 65% of the respondents would not report the elderly when they are breaking the limited-movement restriction measures.