

(ABSENCE OF) TRUST AND SECURITY IN THE SECOND YEAR OF THE PANDEMIC

Serbian Citizens' Opinions about the COVID-19 Pandemic



Author:

Maja Bjeloš and Srđan Hercigonja

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The data presented in the report derive from the Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) survey. WBSB is a new regional initiative launched by KCSS in 2020, implemented in cooperation with the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in Serbia and Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG) in Albania, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). WBSB serves as an instrument to measure public perceptions in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia on different security-related issues. The findings demonstrate how citizens percept or are informed about the issues presented in this report. As such, the views presented in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the KCSS, BCSP, CSDG or NED.

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SERBIAN CITIZENS' OPINIONS ABOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

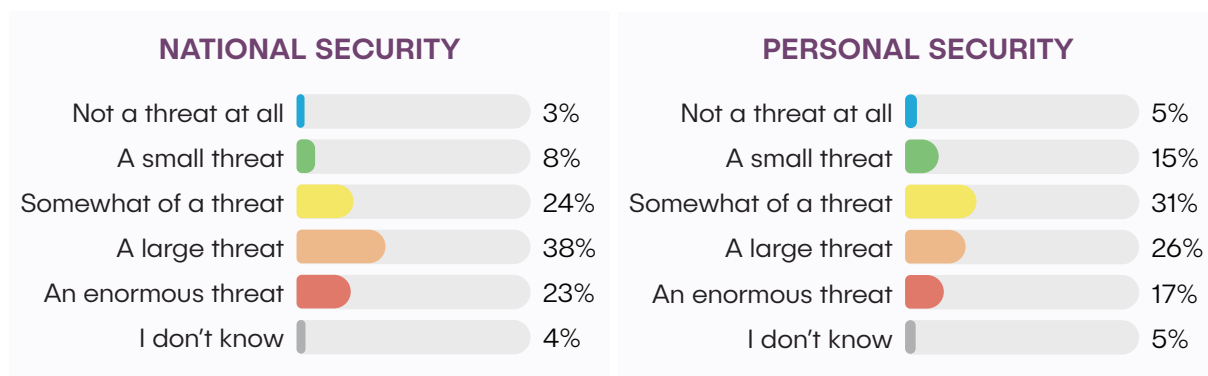
The public opinion poll on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of immunisation of the population and the impact of the pandemic on the work of institutions and the status of democracy was conducted during the relatively calm epidemiological period, just before the big wave in late 2021 and early 2022, when Serbia had a record number of registered citizens newly infected with the Coronavirus.¹ At the same time, the survey was conducted in the period when all adult citizens were offered the so-called booster or the third dose of the vaccine against COVID-19. The observed period was marked by the political and security crisis in Kosovo, so the pandemic was not in the focus of public and political discussion.² In the meantime, the gradual calming of the situation regarding the pandemic itself, and primarily the reduction of the number of newly infected and dead, created space for the analysis and assessment of the way the pandemic had been managed.



IS CORONAVIRUS (NOT) A SECURITY THREAT?

According to public opinion polls, the trade in narcotics (65%), the economic crisis caused by the pandemic (61%) and the COVID-19 pandemic itself (61%) are three key threats to Serbia's national security. This perception of threats to national security is situational; it is conditioned by general insecurity in the second year of the pandemic, but also by media reporting, since the state actively waged a media war against organised criminal groups in the previous period.³ Although the spread of the Coronavirus directly affects public health, citizens are recognising the complexity of this problem, as well as the fact that the pandemic affects various spheres, including security. Therefore, citizens are of the opinion that the pandemic is a greater threat to national security than to personal security.

TABLE 1 To what degree is the pandemic a threat to:





THE CORONAVIRUS EXISTS AFTER ALL

Three quarters of Serbian citizens (75%) answered 'yes' to the question "Do you believe that the COVID-19 pandemic really exists?", while almost one fifth of them (18%) still do not believe that the pandemic is real. However, this percentage is significantly lower compared to the previous survey, when a third of the citizens (34%) expressed suspicion that a pandemic existed.⁴ What caused the change in citizens' perception was most likely the fact that in the period between the two surveys a large number of citizens got infected with the Coronavirus, and that now almost everyone knows about one or more people who have had COVID-19 or have died from it.

Authorities in the Republic of Serbia have contributed to this situation by inconsistently informing the public ever since the pandemic began – on the seriousness of the virus to public health, the number of infected and dying from the Coronavirus, and the measures to combat the spread of the virus – thus causing citizens to often feel confusion, fear and panic. According to experts, the way citizens were informed proved to be one of the weakest points in the process of controlling the epidemic.⁵ The suspicion of the existence of the Coronavirus is also the result of the spread of misinformation, conspiracy theories and false news about the virus itself,⁶ transmitted via national television, media portals and social networks by certain doctors, deputies, statesmen and politicians, among others.⁷ The pandemic further threatened the position of (investigative) journalists and independent media who sought to oppose the infodemic⁸ and inform the public in an objective manner.

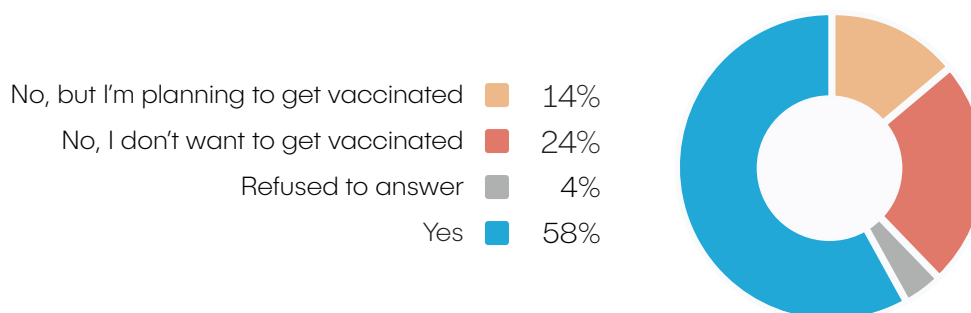


OPINIONS ABOUT VACCINATION

Apart from the suspicion of the existence of the virus, the consequence of inconsistent communication between the government and the public, and the large number of conspiracy theories and false news, is a lower percentage of immunised population compared to other European countries. It is estimated that about 50 percent of the population in Serbia has been vaccinated, but there is a discrepancy between the official data of public institutions on the number of vaccinated and the statements of state officials.⁹

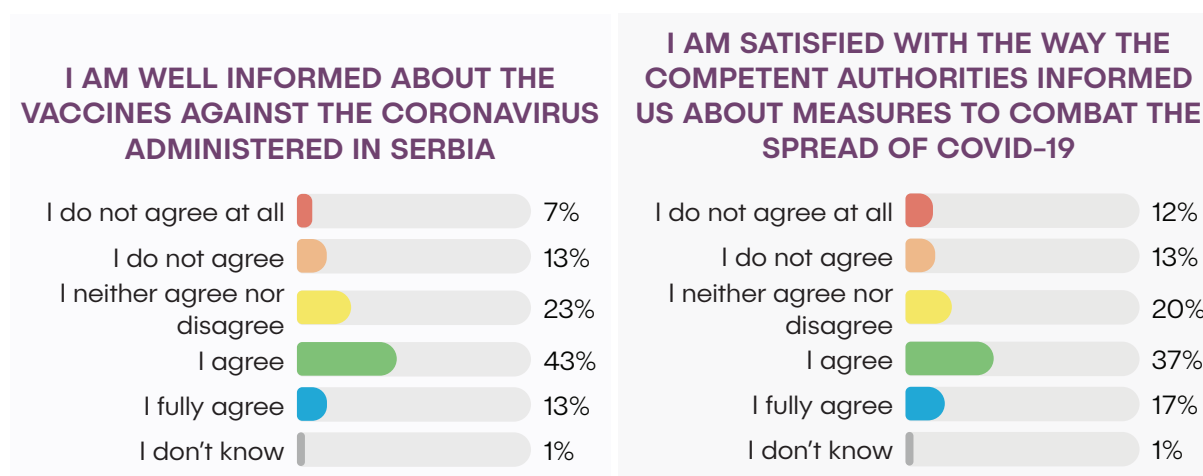
In the opinion of the World Health Organisation (WHO), there is a need to vaccinate at least 70% of the entire population of a country to slow down the pandemic.¹⁰ Although three quarters of the surveyed citizens do believe that Covid-19 exists, 58% of them claim to have been vaccinated, while 24% state that they have not been vaccinated and do not plan to be vaccinated at all. It is possible that the percentage of the vaccinated population will increase in the coming period, as 14% of the surveyed citizens said that they are not vaccinated, but are planning to get vaccinated. Information on the percentage of vaccinated citizens should however be taken with a grain of salt, because it is higher than the official statistics and there is a high probability that some citizens did not speak honestly during the survey due to pressure and public outrage over citizens' refusal to be vaccinated.

TABLE 2 Are you vaccinated against COVID-19?



As key reasons why they do not want to be vaccinated, citizens state that they do not trust the existing vaccines (40%), i.e. vaccines that are available in Serbia (12%), and that they do not trust the World Health Organisation (17%). It is obvious that citizens are not objectively informed about the available vaccines and the benefits of vaccination. The low level of trust in vaccines may also be a consequence of conspiracy theories, the most popular of which is that vaccines are used to implant chips in people. The citizens' lack of information about the protection against COVID-19 is also reflected in the fact that 9% of them think that they should not be vaccinated because they were exposed to the virus and have thus gained natural immunity.

TABLE 3 To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



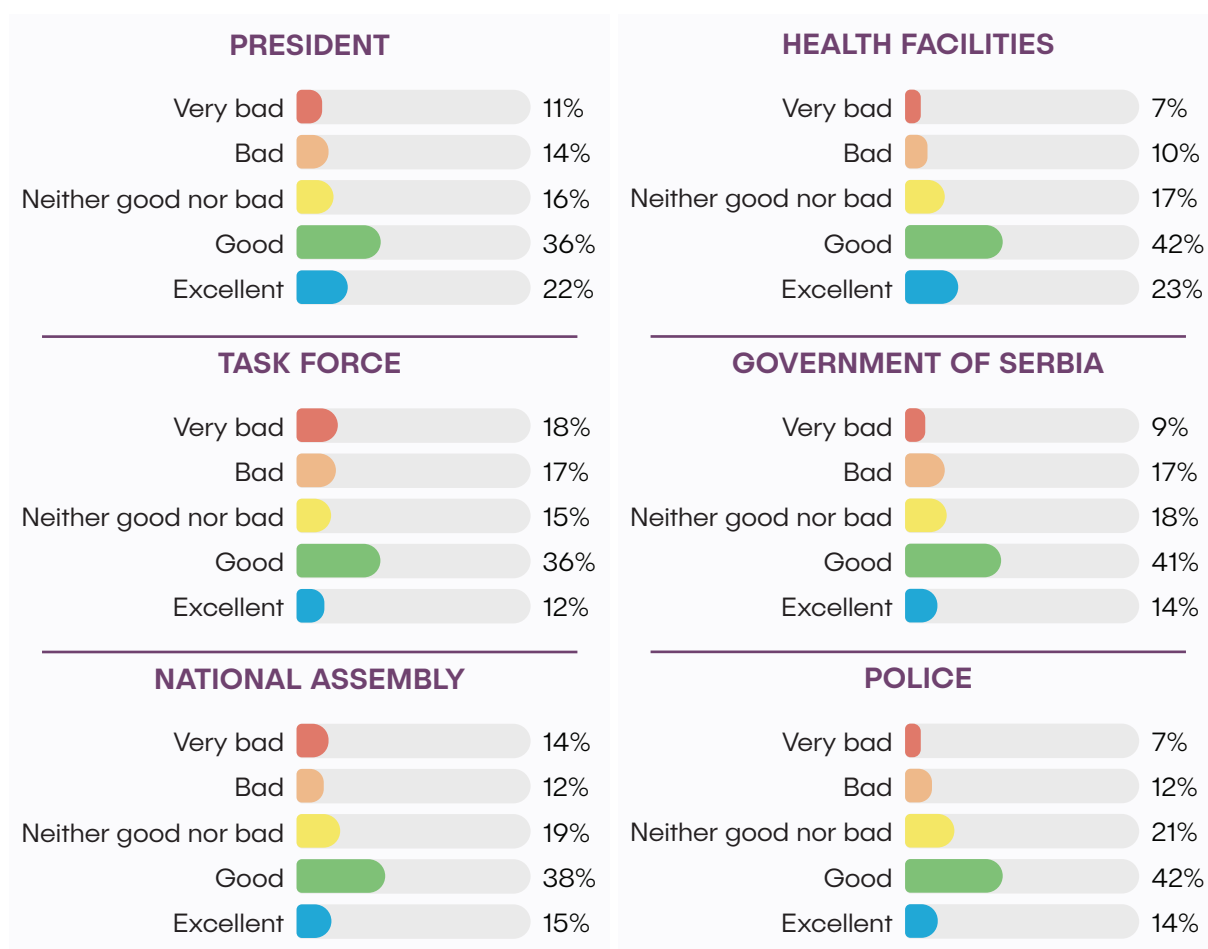
Although citizens largely agree with the statement that they are well informed about the Coronavirus vaccines used in Serbia, the result of their informedness is that more than half of the population does not wish to be vaccinated. Bearing in mind that the competent authorities are the key source of information about the pandemic, it can be concluded that the government and the competent bodies and authorities bear the greatest responsibility for the outcome of vaccination and the citizens' lack of information.



TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

Based on the results of the survey, citizens are satisfied with the way the competent state authorities, including health institutions, have managed the pandemic. Two thirds of them are of the opinion that the health care system has managed the health crisis well (40%), i.e. extremely well (23%). Based on the answers, it can be concluded that citizens still have great confidence in the public health system, despite the insufficient financial investment in it, the lack of medical staff and the overload of the system due to the large number of patients. The President of the Republic has no constitutional or legal authority to manage the pandemic; however, at the height of the crisis he presented himself to the public as a central figure and decision maker, consciously building his own positive image of the guardian of lives, security and physical health of the Serbian people and thus increasing public support to both himself and the ruling party ahead of the general elections that were held in Serbia in 2020.¹¹ In 2021, the President presented himself as the key foreign policy actor, thanks to whom Serbia received the necessary medical assistance and vaccines from various countries and organisations, i.e. companies. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that 58% of citizens think that the President of the Republic managed the crisis well or extremely well. However, one quarter of the population believes that the President managed this crisis badly.

TABLE 4 Pandemic management assessment

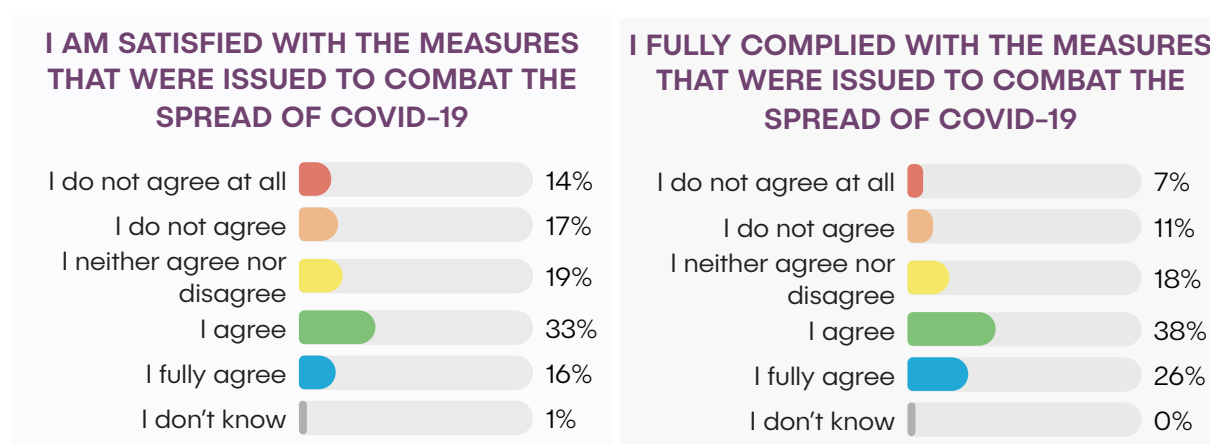


The work of the National Assembly was temporarily suspended during the state of emergency, and the Serbian Government managed the pandemic based on decrees and without any effective parliamentary supervision. Upon returning to the parliamentary benches, the deputies discussed other topics more than they did public health.¹² It is therefore not surprising that the citizens relatively highly praised the way the National Assembly managed the pandemic.

A large percentage of citizens think that the Government of Serbia managed the pandemic well, and almost half of them are satisfied with the measures that were prescribed to suppress the spread of COVID-19. From the beginning of the pandemic to date, the Serbian government adopted more than 100 measures.¹³ The speed of the adoption of decrees and other by-laws, and their frequent changes, have become a source of legal uncertainty and have led to three days of protests in July 2020, which were quelled by use of police brutality.¹⁴ The Government changed its rhetoric in 2021, which possibly influenced the people's opinions; namely, it communicated to the citizens that the most significant results of the Government in the field of health were the procurement of vaccines and modern medicines, the establishment of the COVID-19 Information System which was used by citizens to apply for receiving vaccines, the construction of three Covid hospitals, the start of construction of two vaccine factories, the reconstruction of clinical centres, and the construction of health centres and hospitals such as "Dedinje 2" or "Tiršova".¹⁵

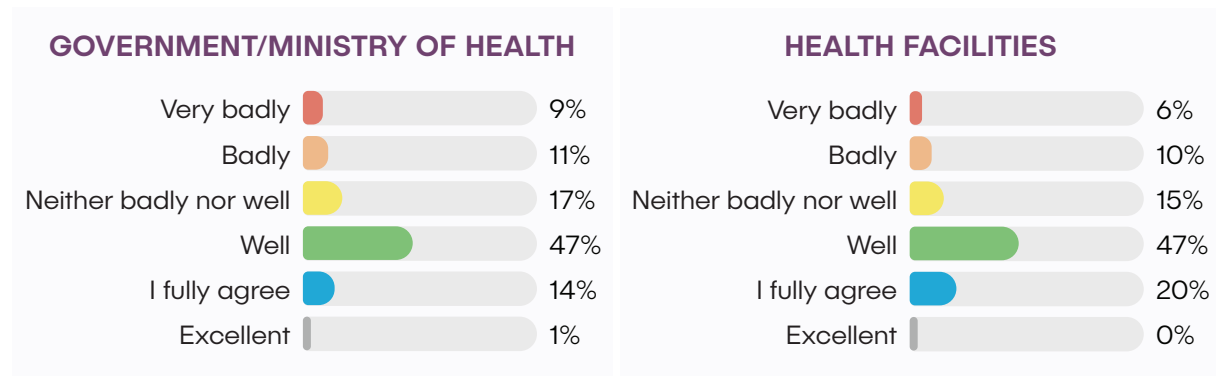
Judging by the data, the dissatisfaction of the citizens is directed towards the Task Force for the Suppression of Infectious Disease COVID-19, i.e. the expert and advisory body of the Government of Serbia that reported to the public on the course of the pandemic.¹⁶ The Task Force lost credibility in the public because it passed - outside the law, and instead of the Government - anti-epidemic measures that did not affect only public health, but the economy and the media as well.¹⁷ Also, it became obvious that the members of the Task Force were under the influence of the political elites in power, that they consciously kept silent about the number of people who died from Covid, and that they spread misinformation.

TABLE 5 To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



When it comes to the process of collective immunisation of the population, two thirds of the citizens of Serbia are satisfied with how the health institutions and the government organised and carried out the vaccination process.

TABLE 6 How did the following institutions organise the process of vaccination?





THE PANDEMIC HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE ECONOMIC DECLINE AND BACKTRACKING OF DEMOCRACY

Despite the high degree of satisfaction with the way the competent institutions handled the pandemic and the vaccination process, citizens think that the pandemic has negatively affected the state of democracy in Serbia. More precisely, they believe that the pandemic led to restrictions on human rights and freedoms (38%), unconstitutional concentration of power in the institution of the President of the Republic, marginalisation of the National Assembly and the judiciary (22%), and social unrest and demonstrations in the streets (12%). About one-fifth of the population (19%) thinks that the pandemic did not affect the state of democracy. The pandemic, therefore, contributed to the further deterioration of democracy and the capture of the state, as confirmed in other surveys as well.¹⁸

TABLE 7 How did the pandemic affect democracy in Serbia?



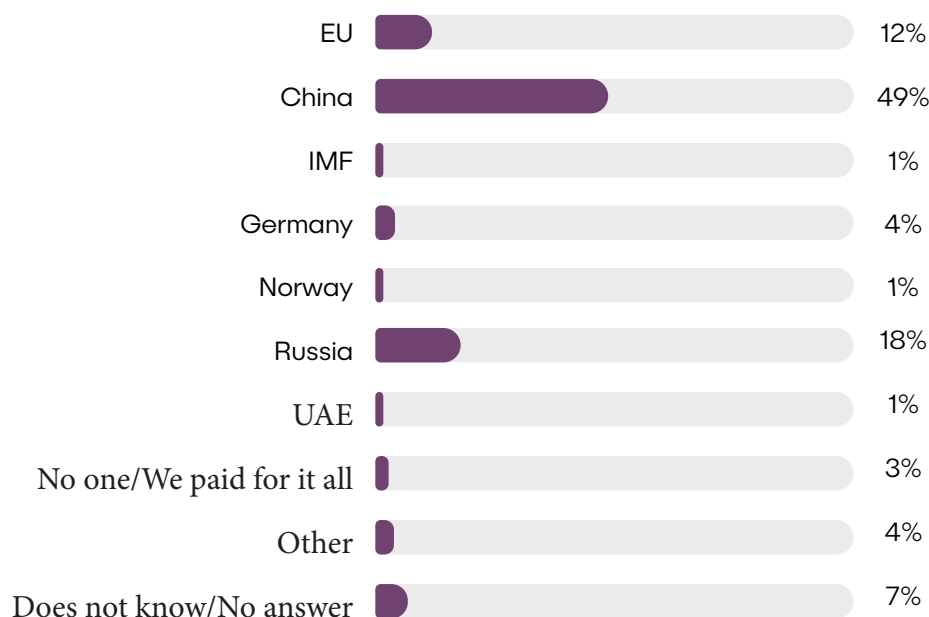
The pandemic abruptly slowed down, limited or completely stopped the production, trade and the work of employees in many economic entities in Serbia,¹⁹ and negatively affected the revenue of most economic entities. The Serbian government took out additional loans to finance the growing costs of the health system and provide the necessary assistance to the economy to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic.²⁰ Nevertheless, the message that the political elites wanted to send to the citizens was that, regardless of the fact that the economy was affected by the pandemic and despite numerous restrictions introduced as anti-epidemiological measures, thanks to its political leadership and foreign policy Serbia managed to cope with the economic crisis better and easier than other European countries. This is contrary to the perception of most citizens, who believe that the pandemic has led to layoffs and increased unemployment (30%), declining economic growth and rising inflation, increased Serbian borrowing and a public debt created for the purpose of economic recovery (20%), extinguishing small and medium-sized enterprises (17%), as well as reduced foreign investment in Serbia (14%). Only 6 percent of the citizens believe that the pandemic did not affect the economy.



CHINA HELPED SERBIA THE MOST, ALTHOUGH THE EU PROVIDED THE MOST FUNDS

China was presented as the biggest ally of Serbia in its fight against the pandemic, and a pillar of collective immunisation of the population because of the large number of vaccines the Chinese manufacturer Sinopharm supplied in 2021. Chinese aid has been glorified in all media with a national frequency, while Russian and European Union aid have been minimised. A survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) showed that, in the period from March 2020 to March 2021, there were twice as many articles on Chinese medical aid than on aid that came from Russia and the EU combined. Moreover, two thirds of the articles on EU medical aid had a negative tone, while four fifths of the articles on China had a positive one, with frequent use of words and phrases such as “brotherhood” and “friendship of steel”.²¹ As a result of the above, almost half of the citizens state that it was China that provided the largest humanitarian aid to Serbia, while only 12% believe that it was the European Union.

TABLE 8 Name one country or international organisation that provided the most financial and/or humanitarian aid to Serbia in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic?





WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE THINK ABOUT THE PANDEMIC

According to the survey, a quarter (24%) of young people aged 18 to 24 claim to have been vaccinated, while almost half (47%) do not want to be vaccinated and are not satisfied with the measures that were prescribed to combat the spread of COVID-19. For this reason, a focus group with young people aged 18 to 24 was organised as part of the research, to better understand their views on the pandemic and vaccination.

Although they are aware that the danger of infection is real, the participants of the focus group are of the opinion that the entire situation is assigned too much importance; that the consequences of the pandemic are exaggerated; and that panic which is being created is not justified. They think that people cannot live in an atmosphere of fear of the virus, such as the one that has been created. Their motto is that people should protect themselves and learn to live with the knowledge that the virus exists. Overall, they find lack of social life and isolation to be the most difficult aspects of the pandemic. They are also concerned about the polarisation in society, and the division into those that are vaccinated and those that are not. In this context, they feel vulnerable because they have been accused by the authorities of spreading the virus, and labelled – both as a group and as individuals – if they do not want to be vaccinated.

Young people are of the opinion that the measures taken by the state to fight the pandemic were contradictory and not in line with the general interest of the citizens; instead, they see them as being politically motivated. As an example, they cite radical lockdown measures, followed by complete opening, followed by another wave of infection for which the authorities blamed the citizens. The measure that involved the provision of financial aid [to the citizens] is perceived as collecting political points, since the allocated amounts of money were not enough to constitute real aid. Young people also notice that the adopted measures did not apply to everyone equally, i.e. that some cafes kept working during lockdown, while others were closed.

“As for the pandemic, I do not think it is as dangerous as it is presented to be, and I think it is very bad for society because it has caused an enormous division, not only in our country but also in the West, and in America, where there are two groups of people – those that are in favour, and those that are not. Things are too black and white in that sense, there is no middle ground. People are separated from each other and an enormous division has been created in society. That is not good either, because people are also divided politically, and of course someone benefits from it by simply using the current situation. I don’t think that the situation is that serious, but again, too much importance is given to it to collect political points”.

“I think that the virus certainly exists and that it could be serious. I had it, a lot of people had it, it leaves consequences and that is a fact. But there are also a lot of consequences of all the circumstances that accompany the virus. I would like to say that one cannot live in an atmosphere of fear, and that is what we have been doing for two or three years. This is not the only deadly disease; there are others also. The thing is that these are not talked about so much”.

"I agree with them, I too believe that the virus exists and that there should be some measures in the sense of paying more attention; for example, if you go to cafes and restaurants – and I'm not talking about those vaccine passes here – the tables should not be crammed next to each other. But I believe that a normal life must go on and I don't think that we should all be locked up and that nothing should be open".

There are fears that the consequences of the health crisis and the measures that had been adopted are yet to be felt in the coming period, especially in health and education. Given that other types of treatments and surgeries are being delayed due to the pandemic, as well as regular and preventive medical examinations, it is expected that this will have multiple negative effects on the health of citizens and lead to overloading the health system long after the pandemic subsides. When it comes to education, some young people think that the transition to online teaching was a positive measure, but they also believe that this will have long-term consequences not only for the acquired knowledge of students, but also for the development of social skills, especially in very young children, those in the lower grades of primary school.

"I think that transition to online teaching was a good idea... but it's about consequences, the loss of socialisation to a certain extent, but I think that it is a good preventive measure, that a large number of students will be protected. On the other hand, the quality of teaching has not changed, in a way I would even say that it may have improved, because now we have the opportunity to pause something, and hear it again, if the lecture was recorded, we can see it nicely on the screen, that which we would not have been able to see on a blackboard. However, I don't think that everything should be online, there should be a combination".

"Online learning is OK for us, but since I am conducting some ecological workshops with children from the first/second to the seventh grade... it is difficult for me to describe to you what those children don't know, and how socially underdeveloped they are. Everyone is an individual, there is no team".

"I am not afraid of Corona as much as I am afraid of what will come after it, considering that many surgeries [are not being performed], and that people in general avoid contact, and preventive and regular medical examinations, which they are now not getting because of the current situation. I don't even want to talk about the surgeries that are being postponed, and I think that real chaos will begin when we return to normal. That's when things [health centres] will become crowded, and there will be no room for everyone, and I don't know how we will survive, and that scares me".



OPINIONS ABOUT VACCINATION

Young people think that media are pressuring people to get vaccinated, and that a gap and tensions between the unvaccinated and vaccinated citizens are created deliberately. People fear being stigmatised or verbally and physically attacked in public if they do not wear masks, or if they say they have not been vaccinated. The prevailing opinion is that vaccination should not be mandatory and that it is the right of each citizen to make a decision whether to be vaccinated or not. If they do not want to do it, they should not suffer any condemnation and pressure.

Although none of the participants in the focus group discussion were vaccinated, the attitudes of young people towards vaccination range from completely negative to slightly positive. Confusion and distrust of vaccines are evident and are caused by contradictory information coming from the media. This refers to the fact that certain vaccines are favoured, which is also considered a part of the political game and causes distrust. Another argument against vaccination is that vaccines have not been sufficiently tested, as evidenced by the fact that prior to vaccination citizens must give written consent to take responsibility for possible adverse effects of the vaccine. The speed with which the vaccine was created also casts doubt on its effectiveness. Contrary to this opinion, the participants see no problem and think positively about all the other vaccines they received so far.

They believe that, if we live in a democratic society, citizens should be able to choose for themselves whether they want to be vaccinated or not, since they are those who are responsible for the possible consequences of vaccination. They explicitly oppose the introduction of the Covid pass, stating that it represents another form of discrimination against people.

"I have not been vaccinated, and I never will be. The first reason is that the vaccine is officially still in the experimental phase and I am not interested in being anyone's guinea pig. Another reason is this: there are diseases such as cancer and HIV, they've been around for a hundred years and we know everything there is to know about them, the scientists know everything about them, and there is no cure. But suddenly, they found a cure for a disease about which we know nothing. I don't need it, I'm healthy, I don't want that in my body. [If I get the virus,] I will treat myself as I want, I don't need anyone, I simply want them to stay away from me and leave me alone".

"I have not been vaccinated, but I do not think that vaccination is necessarily bad. What bothers me is the pressure that is being put on unvaccinated people, that everyone must be vaccinated, the restrictions, the creation of divisions once again. I simply think that people should have the right of choice, if they want to get vaccinated, if someone is older and has certain diseases – it's their right to try to protect themselves. No one guarantees them that this vaccine will protect them, but if they believe that it might help them, it's okay for them to be vaccinated. I just don't think it's something we must all do. I do not consider myself a part of any vulnerable category. I also don't know what's in that vaccine, it's all insufficiently tested and I feel no need to experiment".



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