

# There is No Democracy in Serbia, nor is it Desirable



## Author:

Predrag Petrović, Srdjan Hercigonja

© All rights reserved to Kosovar Center for Security Studies. Law on Copyright and Related Rights protects rights and intellectual property. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any forms or by any means, electronic, mechanical or other, without the permission in writing from the publisher. Commercial use of all media published by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) is not permitted without the written consent of the KCSS. Please contact: [info@qkss.org](mailto:info@qkss.org) or +383 38 221 420.

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.

Supported by:



Consortium led by:



# **THERE IS NO DEMOCRACY IN SERBIA, NOR IS IT DESIRABLE**

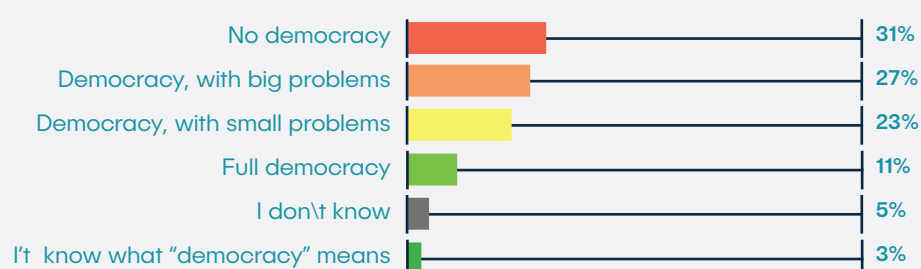
January 2022



# THERE IS NO DEMOCRACY IN SERBIA, NOR IS IT DESIRABLE

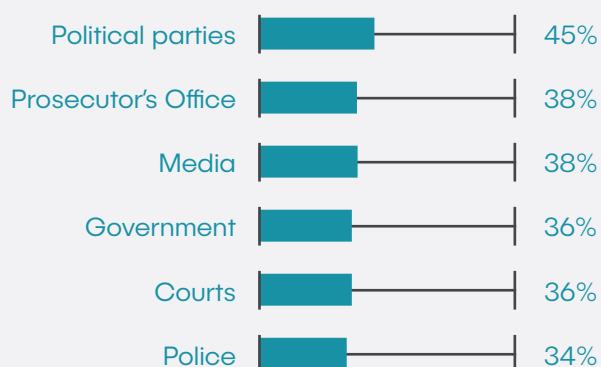
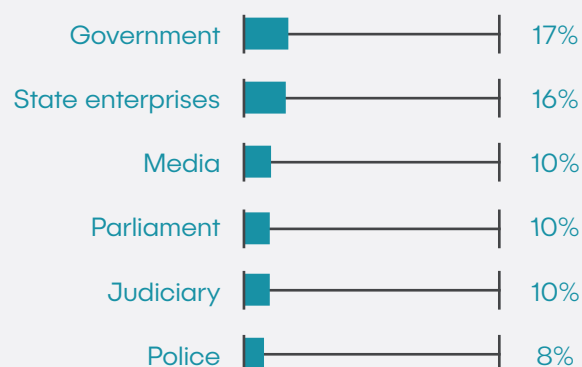
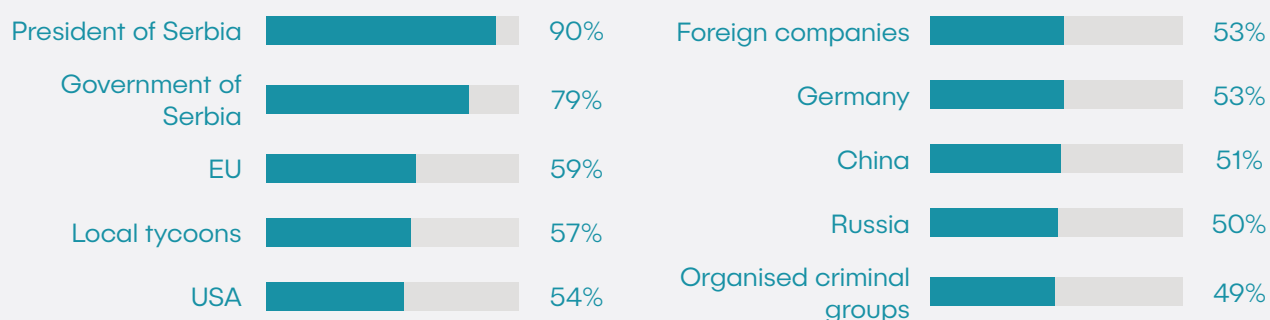
"When I see what is going on, institutions that should be state-owned and of use to every citizen look to me more like a criminal organisation than something that works in the interest of the people..."<sup>1</sup>

**TABLE 1** HOW DO YOU ASSESSTHE STATE OF DEMOCRACY  
IN SERBIA

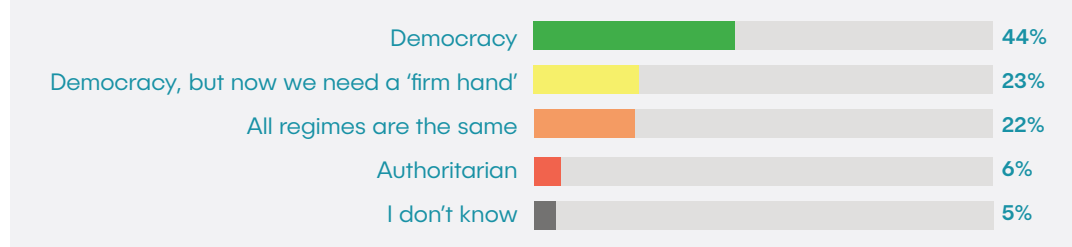


Almost one third of the Serbian citizens feel that there is no democracy in the country, while half of them believe that it does exist, but that it experiences smaller or bigger problems. This opinion is shared mostly by young people and the population aged 30 to 39, as well as by citizens who live in Belgrade. The explanation for this view can be found in the citizens' assessments that the main state decisions are made by the executive power, that politicians use power for the realisation of their personal interests, and that corruption – from either domestic or foreign sources – is the main driving force in the state. Consequently, almost two thirds of the population believes that politicians, organised in interest groups, abuse power for the sake of their own personal interests. They do this through the Government and the Parliament, the judiciary and the police, the state-owned enterprises and public companies that serve to manage significant public resources, and through the media as instruments that are used to legitimise the actions of politicians. These views of the citizens have been reflected also in the perception of corruption; they thus believe that political parties, the government, the judiciary, the police and the media are among the most corrupt actors in the country. In addition, 86% of the respondents believe that employment in public administration and state-owned enterprises can be gained only through corrupt mechanisms, i.e. bribery or political/family ties.

<sup>1</sup> Participant in the focus group discussion held on 12 October 2021

**TABLE 2****POLITICIANS, ORGANISED INTO INTEREST GROUPS, ABUSE POWER FOR PERSONAL INTERESTS****POLITICIANS IN POWER WORK IN THE INTEREST OF THE CITIZENS, AND NOT IN THEIR PERSONAL INTEREST****TABLE 3****MOST CORRUPT INSTITUTIONS****MOST CORRUPT INSTITUTIONS****TABLE 4 ACTORS' INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL DECISION MAKING**

The citizens' negative image of the democracy and corruption situation in Serbia is reflected in their views on the influence of various actors on politicians for the purpose of achieving their own particular interests. More than half of the population believes that such influence is exercised by domestic and foreign tycoons, i.e. companies, as well as by foreign governments. Although Serbia is nominally a parliamentary democracy in which the parliament makes and confirms the most important political decisions, the vast majority of citizens believe that it is the President of the Republic that has the main influence on decision-making in Serbia. If one takes into account the previously presented findings on corruption and the corrosive influence of various domestic and foreign actors on politics, one can basically conclude that the President of the Republic is in fact the centre of political corruption in Serbia.

**TABLE 5** MODE OF GOVERNANCE THAT SUITS SERBIA THE MOST

The question however arises as to whether the citizens of Serbia even care about democracy. Namely, according to the findings of this survey, a large number of citizens have nothing against autocracy and even favour that form of government. Almost a quarter of the respondents are of the opinion that democracy is desirable, but that in the current conditions we do need a “strong hand”, while one fifth of them believe that all regimes are the same. Young people, residents of Central and Western Serbia, and citizens with incomplete primary education are also among those who believe that all regimes are the same.

The findings of the focus group that was organised for young people as part of this survey can provide additional understanding of the citizens' views on democracy. A group of young people perceived democracy as a political system that gives everyone the right to free opinion and speech, the right to participate in the media life without censorship, and the right to equal participation of individuals in the community and the decision-making process at local, regional and national levels. In relation to the ideal of democracy, young people are of the opinion that in today's Serbia democracy does not exist in the true sense, and that – instead – a form of a hybrid regime has managed to survive for the last twenty years. They see it as a mixture of democracy and the legacy of communism, dominated by partial interests (most often financial) of those in power and causing the laws to be applied in accordance with those interests. Therefore, young people have an enormous distrust in institutions, and there is a prevailing belief that the authorities (previous and current) “use democracy as they see fit”, invoking it “as needed”. Similarly, the media present news in a way that suits those with the money to fund the media outlets, and we actually have the illusion of media freedom. Corruption is so widespread that all institutions are affected by the problem, and mutually interconnected.

Focus group participants believe that the following is required to improve democracy and reduce corruption: it is necessary to increase transparency; laws should apply equally to all; decisions should be made by the majority, and not the minority in power; and citizens, themselves, need to become more involved in their own (micro) environments. Notwithstanding the above, participants in the focus group showed a tendency towards authoritarianism, albeit enlightened, because among the desirable qualities of a political leader, apart from expertise, education, regular and sincere contacts with the people, they also singled out that s/he should have a “firm hand”, because that is the only way to do something in Serbia. Or, as one of the focus group participants put it, a political leader should have “Vučić's skills, but he should work in the interest of his people and not in the interest of others”. So, what Serbia actually needs is a “new Vučić”.

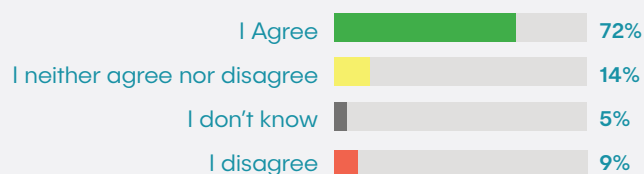
Eliminating general corruption and promoting democracy will be difficult, but greater involvement of the citizens should not be expected even though the participants in the focus groups stated that it was necessary. Namely, only 3% of the respondents to the



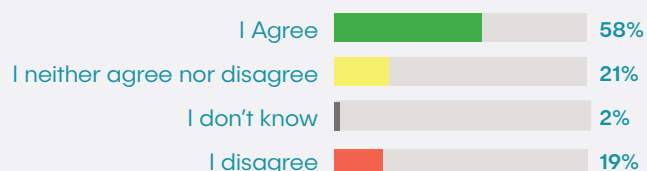
public opinion survey intend to join an activist initiative, while only 20% of them have participated (regularly or occasionally) in activist actions. Also, activism and change of government through demonstrations, as a way out of the current situation, are not at the top of the participants' list of priorities. They are mostly in favour of lustration of those responsible, and for the formation of a special prosecutor's office and police force composed of honest people. However, considering that – according to the respondents – these institutions are highly corrupt and abused by politicians, the question arises as to how this process should be carried out. Do the institutions have enough “honest people”, and how should one gather and organise them? The impression is that citizens expect this responsibility to be taken over by a leader who will know what to do and have a “firm hand”.

**TABLE 6 WHAT WOULD BE THE BEST WAY TO FORCE POLITICIANS TO WORK IN THE INTERESTS OF CITIZENS AND NOT ABUSE STATE RESOURCES FOR PERSONAL INTERESTS**

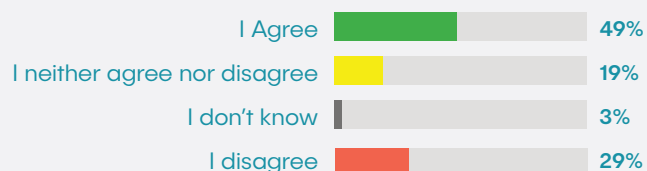
**LUSTRATION, THAT IS REMOVAL FROM OFFICE OF THOSE WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ABUSES**



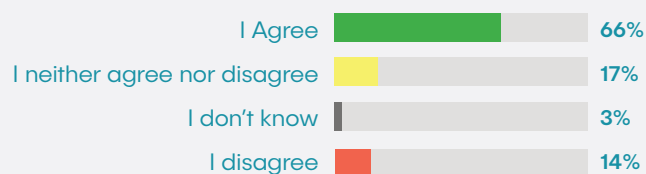
**CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT THROUGH ELECTIONS**



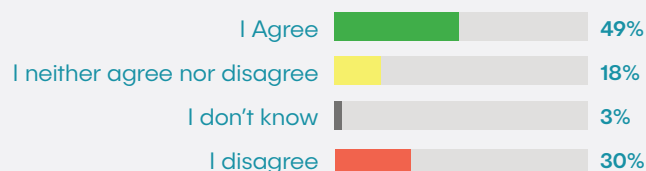
**EU SHOULD PUT PRESSURE ON OUR POLITICIANS**



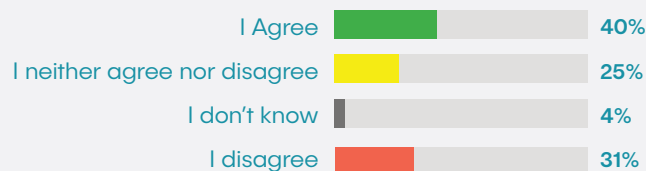
**IT IS NECESSARY TO FORM A SPECIAL PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE AND POLICE UNIT STAFFED BY HONORABLE PERSONNEL**



**PROTESTS, CIVIC ACTIVISM AND CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT**



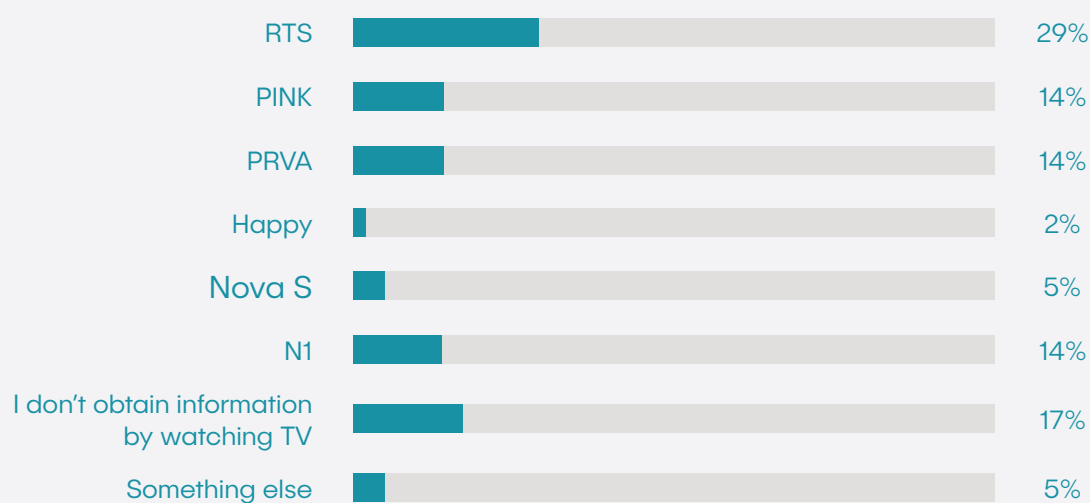
**IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO FIGHT IT**



It is interesting to note that the respondents believe that politicians abuse the army and the BIA [intelligence agency] the least, although there are numerous media and investigative reports that indicate that it is precisely these state institutions that are the

subject of great political abuse.<sup>2</sup> Such an optimistic view of these institutions can be interpreted as a result of the lack of credible information and great exposure of citizens to the government's media propaganda, as most respondents obtain information by watching pro-regime TV channels. On that note, almost two thirds of the citizens trust RTS [Radio Television Serbia], "Pink TV" and "Happy TV" the most. In the last few years, the authorities have been presenting a continuous narrative about strengthening the Serbian Army by procuring weapons from abroad, as well as from domestic companies. There is also the narrative that Serbia is exposed to the activities of the intelligence services of Western and surrounding countries, as well as to those of organised criminal groups, and that domestic intelligence services have prevented a number of assassinations and coups.

**TABLE 7 TV MEDIA MOST TRUSTED BY CITIZENS**



<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Predrag Petrović and Jelena Pejić Nikić, eds., 2020, *Capturing the Security Sector in Serbia*, Belgrade, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

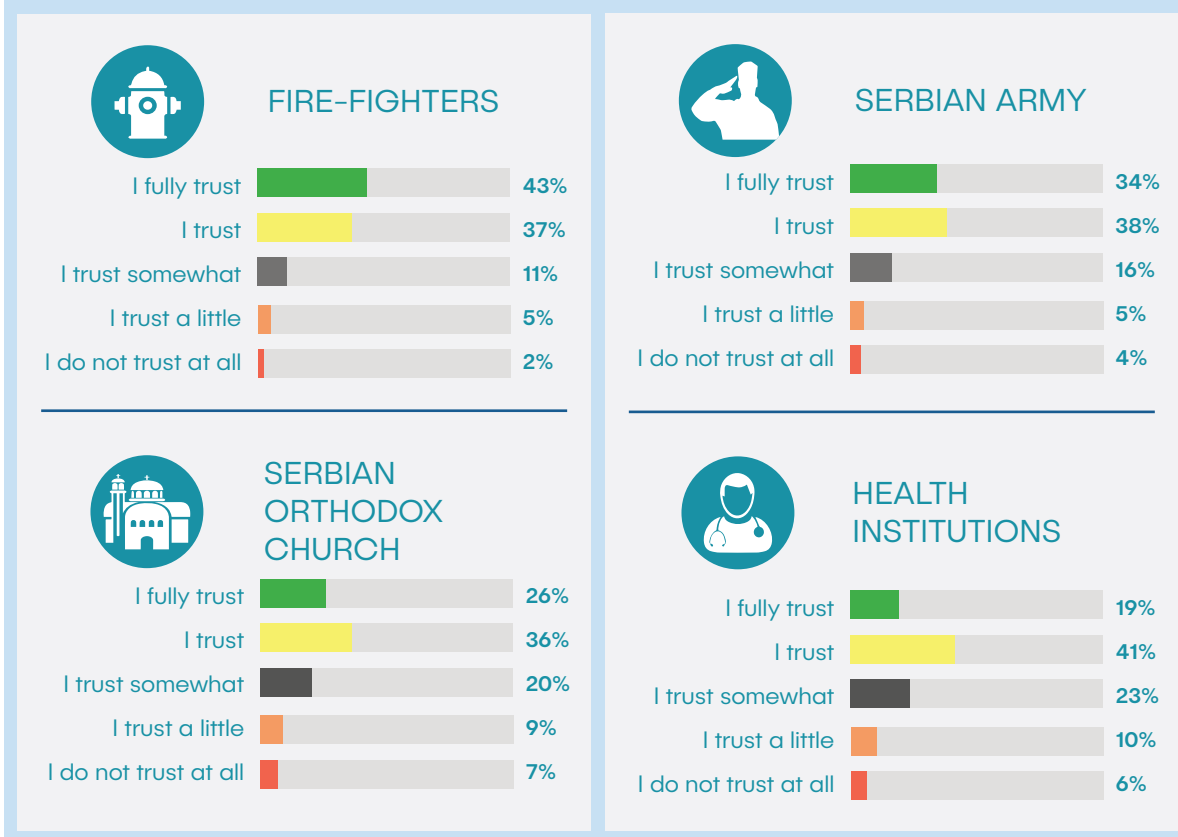


# CITIZENS DO NOT TRUST STATE INSTITUTIONS, BUT ARE UNWILLING TO TAKE PART THEMSELVES

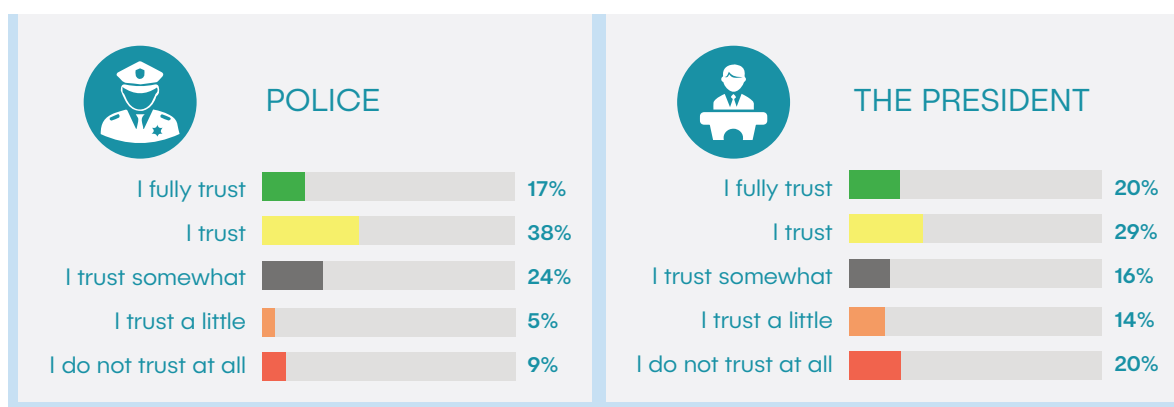


Considering the above findings concerning the citizens' perception of most corrupt institutions, the survey results on their trust in institutions are not surprising: they trust fire-fighters and the army the most. These are followed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, the health institutions and the police. The Serbian Orthodox Church has enjoyed great popularity in society for many years; however, compared to previous surveys, trust in the Serbian Army has increased. In addition to the above, many citizens also trust the institution of the President of the Republic (49%). This was influenced by the constant presence in the media of the current President of the Republic, who presents himself as a central figure in the decision-making process concerning Serbia's internal and external affairs. The majority of citizens are not even aware that the institution of the President of the Republic has been abused by the President of the Serbian Progressive Party, who almost daily exceeds the competencies granted to him by the Constitution and law, and uses state office to promote the ruling party.<sup>3</sup>

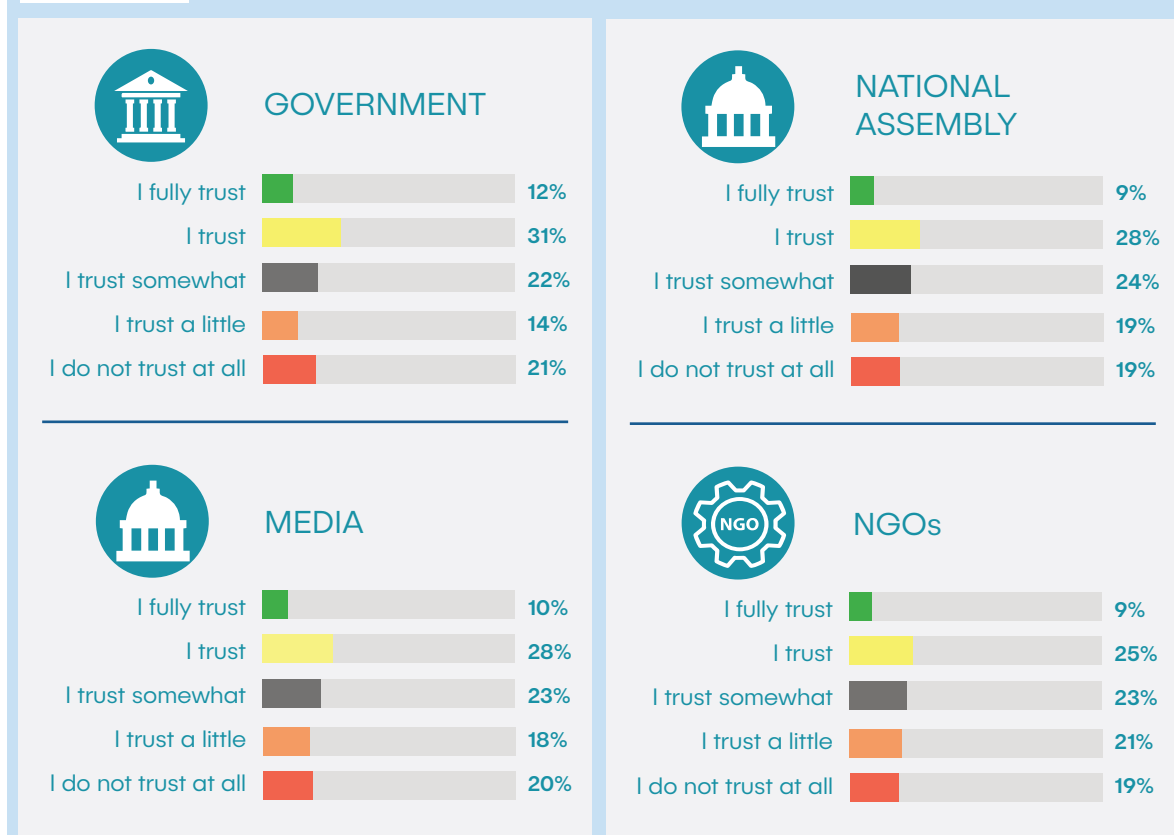
**TABLE 8 CITIZENS' TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS**

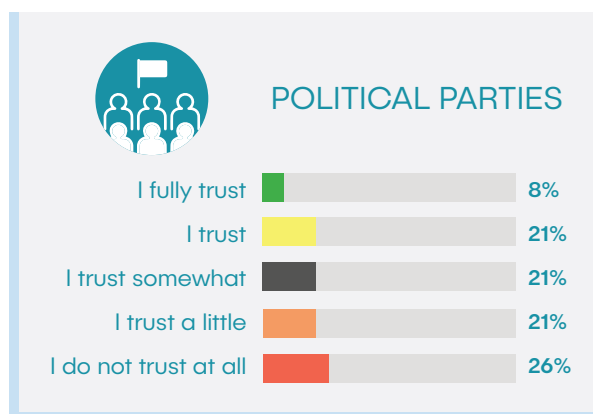


<sup>3</sup> Report of the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) from the 2020 parliamentary elections, <https://crt.rs/parlamentarni-izbori-2020-zavrzni-izvestaj-sa-preporu-kama/>, and the analysis of media coverage of the coronavirus epidemic in Serbia, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/e/457648.pdf>



Based on the findings regarding the degree of corruption, citizens trust political parties the least. The parties are immediately followed by non-governmental organisations, the Serbian Government and the National Assembly. These findings are also complementary to the citizens' opinions about the level of democracy in the society and the state. Serbia is nominally a parliamentary political system; consequently, such a low level of trust in the parliament and the political parties, which should act as transmitters of the political will of the citizens, speaks volumes about the perception of democracy. Finally, the low level of trust in non-governmental organisations (and, in a broader sense, the entire civil sector), as correctors of the government and decision-makers, clearly indicates a great crisis of democratisation in society.

**TABLE 9 CITIZENS' TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS**




Trust in institutions differs significantly depending on the age of the respondents and their place of residence. Citizens aged 60 and over have significantly higher trust in institutions, while the level of trust of those up to 30 years of age is significantly lower. Also, in the areas that are economically developed (Belgrade and Vojvodina), citizens trust institutions much less compared to those from areas that are less developed (Southeast Serbia and Central and Western Serbia). Citizens are alienated from most state authorities and public institutions since, in the last year, most of their contacts were with the health system (67%), educational institutions (30%), municipal/city administration (27%) and religious organisations (28%).

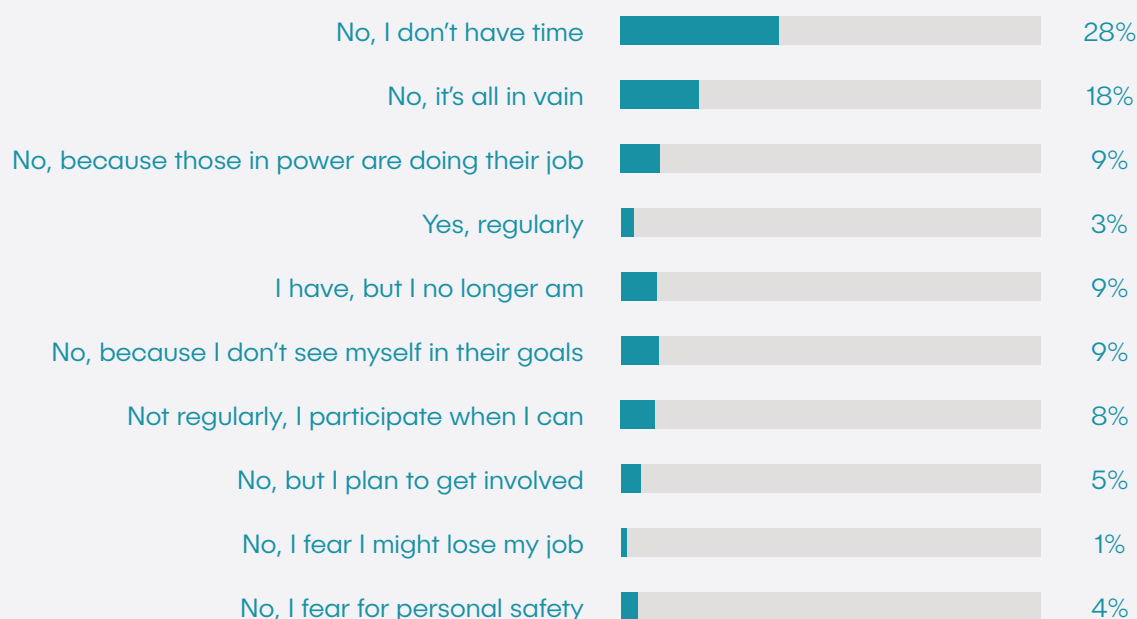
In this regard, the statement of one of the participants from the young people's focus group is very illustrative: "When I see what is going on, institutions that should be state-owned and of use to every citizen look to me more like a criminal organisation than something that works in the interest of the people... We hear so much about the problems of corruption, people don't know whether they will be fired tomorrow if they do something. The whole thing looks more like a criminal organisation than something that is there to preserve our freedom and protect us".

As for the perception of corruption, the institutions that enjoy the greatest trust of the citizens are those that are perceived as the least corrupt: the army, the fire-fighters and the religious communities. As already pointed out, corruption is mostly associated with political parties, media, courts and the prosecutor's office – more than 30% of the citizens believe that these institutions are either corrupt or very corrupt, while 47% have the same opinion of political parties.

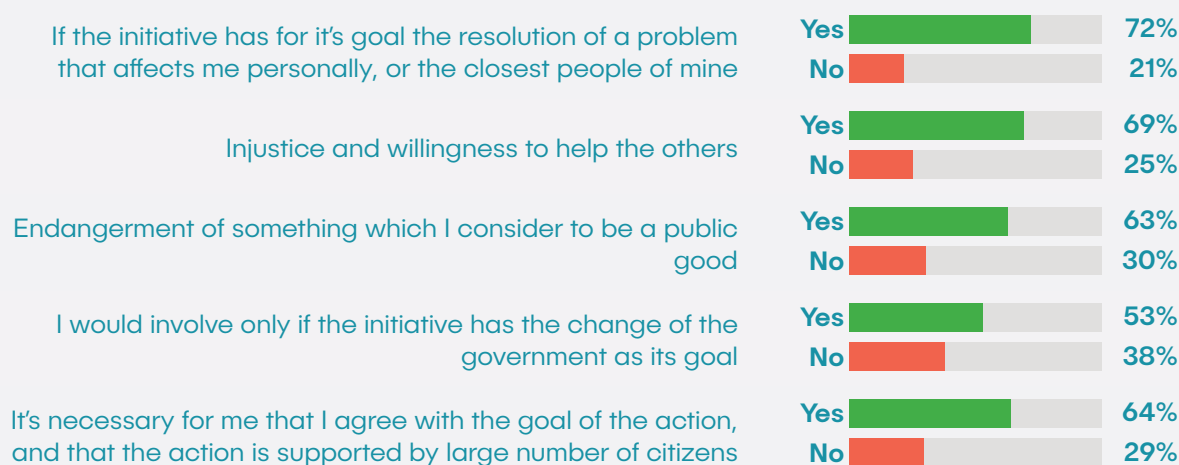
In principle, there is a prevailing positive attitude towards civic engagement aimed at achieving social and political goals. However, only a small percentage of citizens believe that activism can bring about changes in the society and the state. The majority are therefore passive and do not join activist initiatives. The reasons for this are various. The ones that are most often cited are lack of time and absence of faith that anything can be changed through activism. While only 4% of citizens regularly engage in civic activism, others state that they do participate when they can, and that they plan to get more involved in the near future. Such results of public opinion polls should be interpreted in the context of growing social inequality, distrust of citizens in democratic procedures, and the widespread perception that decision-making power is in the hands of only one person and that it is therefore impossible to influence. Finally, the problem of media capture affects citizens' awareness of the success of

numerous civic initiatives, while attacks on activists <sup>4</sup> by the government and media close to the ruling party contribute to the passivity. In this regard, the statement of one participant of the young people's focus group is quite illustrative: "Any person who thinks that something ought to change should become involved. Of course, people think 'Well, it's not up to me' or 'How can a single person change anything'. And they all say the same thing, one after the other, and as a result most people don't even begin to fight for what they want. Also, I feel that even when we want to fight for something, we are somehow silenced. At the moment, I don't see any point in doing it, because I don't see anyone who will hear it, or respect it in any way".

**TABLE 10 HAVE YOU EVER BEEN INVOLVED IN AN ACTIVIST INITIATIVE?**



**TABLE 11 WHAT SITUATIONS CAN MOTIVATE CITIZENS TO ENGAGE IN ACTIVISM?**



On the other hand, it is important to emphasise that citizens are highly motivated to get involved in civic initiatives that look as if they might be able to solve something that affects

<sup>4</sup> See a map of incidents against human rights defenders: <https://www.yucom.org.rs/mapa-incidenata/>

them personally, or if they involve a problem that does injustice to other citizens. Also, many are ready to join activist initiatives if they feel that something that is considered a public good is in danger. The discrepancy between the motivation of citizens to be part of, or involved in, activism and the fact that most of them are not involved, and are not part of any activist initiatives, is the result of the following: great distrust in civil society and its ability to bring about change; lack of trust in institutions; and the fact that citizens notice that all political power in Serbia is concentrated in one man, more precisely the President of the Republic. They are also aware of the great disproportion of power that exists between the civic initiatives/organisations and the authorities, i.e. decision makers. As the most acceptable form of expressing dissatisfaction, citizens list protest rallies and prevention of destruction of natural resources, while blocking embassies and traffic are viewed as the least acceptable. Finally, a large percentage of the population believes that violence in certain situations is justified: to protect one's personal safety or the safety of one's family (70%), to protect the country, i.e. the people (64%), or to protect traditional values and lifestyle (56%).

**TABLE 12 HOW LIKELY ARE YOU TO THINK THAT SOME FORM OF VIOLENCE WOULD BE THE ONLY POTENTIAL SOLUTION IN THE FOLLOWING SITUATIONS**



Katalogimi në botim **(CIP)**

Biblioteka Kombëtare e Kosovës - "Pjetër Bogdani"

303.425.6(497.1)

Petrović, Predrag

There is No Democracy in Serbia, nor is it Desirable : what Citizens Want Is a New  
Vučić / Predrag Petrović, Srđan Hercigonja. - Prishtina : Kosovar Centre for Security  
Studies, 2021. - 11 f. : ilustr. ; 24 cm.

Testet e opinionit publik – Serbi

**ISBN 978-9951-799-42-3**

Aleph [000099862]





ISBN 978-9951-799-42-3



9 789951 799423

