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Vera Arežina\*

Nenad Spasojević\*\*

## ATTITUDES OF THE CITIZENS OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA ABOUT THE COVID-19 VIRUS

### *Abstract:*

*In this paper, we will present the research on the attitudes of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. This virus has become a global problem and has shown how powerless the whole world is due to sudden dangers. Also, its continuing presence has left a huge impact, and the negative effects, primarily on the economy of the whole world, will only be reflected in the coming period. Within teaching activities on the subject Methodology of Political Science Research with Statistics at the Faculty of Political Sciences, we have conducted research with undergraduate students at the beginning of April 2020, among the citizens of the Republic of Serbia. Based on more than one thousand surveys, performed through program SPSS, we will present the attitudes of citizens on various issues related to the COVID-19 virus, such as information, decisions of the competent authorities, as well as the impact of the virus on the daily and foreign policy level.*

*Key words:* pandemic, COVID-19, survey, Republic of Serbia.

### 1. COVID-19 virus as the main global problem in 2020

At the end of 2019, in the Chinese city of Wuhan (Wǔhàn) the first case of a person infected with the unknown COVID-19 virus had been recorded. It turns out that, in the days and months to come, this will become the most popular and most frequently used word in everyday conversations as well in the headlines in the media around the world. As the virus spread around the world, it became increasingly clear that this was not a naive situation at all, and that the consequences of this virus would be worse than it was originally understood. In March 2020, *COVID-19* was characterized by the World Health Organization as a *pandemic* (WHO 2020).

Although we have encountered many diseases centuries ago, which in turn affected tens of millions of human lives, a cure has been successfully found for most of them. Various viruses and diseases, even today when it is assumed that the state of medicine as a science is far better, still take a lot of lives. Also, even today, many occurring diseases often present a new and difficult challenge for researchers in different scientific fields, from medicine, veterinary to political science and others. For example, although *COVID-19* virus is still a hot topic around the world, there is great uncertainty about the final solution. This virus obviously surprised everyone with its appearance, but it also showed, as many times before, that human civilization is still not old enough to cope with such challenges quickly. Consequently, problems such as climate change (BBC 2020), population migration, poverty and hunger are currently left aside.

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\* Assistant Professor, PhD, Faculty of Political Sciences University of Belgrade.

E-mail: [v.arezina@yahoo.com](mailto:v.arezina@yahoo.com).

\*\* MA, Faculty of Political Sciences University of Belgrade.

However, we should not forget that even if the crisis with the *COVID-19* virus is resolved as soon as possible, the world will be left with all of the above, as well as many other problems. In this way, it can be said that *COVID-19* is just one big warning, from which we, as a civilization, should draw a conclusion about the importance of cooperation, investment in science and research (Termiz & Arezina 2015, 30), but also how much solidarity, and not just the pursuit of profit is more than ever important to all of us.

## **2. Research - Attitudes of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia about the *COVID-19* virus**

During the first part of this year, students of the Faculty of Political Sciences<sup>1)</sup> conducted a research entitled *Attitudes of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia about COVID-19*, with the aim of examining the attitudes of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia about the current pandemic, which at the time greatly affected the entire world, including Serbia.

The research was conducted in the period from April 06 to April 18, 2020, and respondents have filled out an online Google questionnaire consisted of 25 questions, which were closed, open and mixed. The total number of completed surveys is 1,039, and they were sent by citizens from all parts of Serbia. The processing of the obtained data was performed through a specialized data processing program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences–SPSS*. It is one of the specialized programs used for data processing in public opinion research (IBM 2020). After entering the data, descriptive and inferential statistics were used during data processing. Descriptive statistics were used to process easily understandable data. On the other hand, inferential statistics were used for the purpose of a deeper analysis of correlations between certain groups of research participants and their answers to certain important questions.

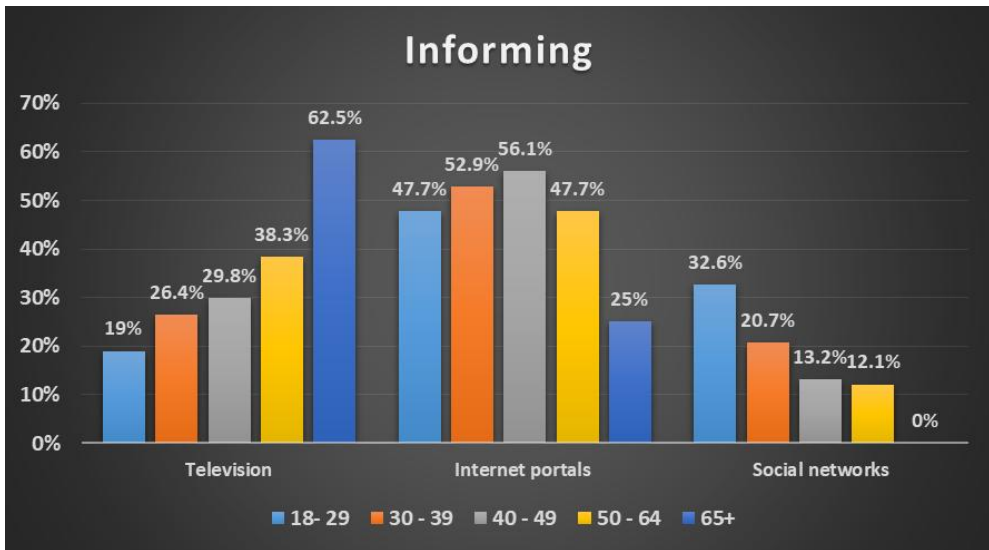
The opinion poll aimed to examine several entities that are related to the current *COVID-19* pandemic. Thus, it was examined how citizens view the situation when it comes to the virus pandemic in Serbia, how they are informed and how do they behave, and whether the new situation has caused the change of their life habits. From the political and economic side, there were interesting questions that referred to the state of the health system in Serbia, the impact on the economy, but also to the political events and international cooperation of Serbia in solving this problem. Thus, the research achieved to be comprehensive, because it included a wide range of different issues related to this virus.

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<sup>1)</sup> The research was conducted by the second-year students of the Faculty of Political Sciences, from the Department of Political Science and International Relations, within their regular activities on the subject “Methodology of Political Science Research with Statistics”.

Out of the total number of respondents, the largest percentage are women, 64.1%, while men make up 35.9%. The largest percentage of respondents by age structure was represented by young citizens aged 18 to 29 - 67.56%. Other, general questions about the respondents referred to education, employment status and the regions in which they live. When it comes to their level of education, most were those who completed a four-year high school - 41.1%, followed by those who have completed college - 37.6% of respondents. The issue of employment status showed that most respondents belong to the group of pupils or students - 50.7% or unemployed; of the employed, 18.3% work in the private sector, while 13.8% in the public sector. Regarding the place of residence, we had the largest percentage of respondents from Belgrade - 57.7%, while 19.8% of respondents live in Western and Central Serbia.

In the modern world, the media has great power, if their role in informing citizens around the world on a daily basis is taken into account. At the beginning of the *COVID-19* pandemic, the media in Serbia were constantly reporting on the situation with the virus in the country and in the world, but also regarding all those topics related to this virus. Thus, the main source of information for the citizens of Serbia was examined, and the following data were obtained. About half of the respondents, more precisely 47.8% of them, pointed out internet portals and newspapers as their primary source of information. The answers of the citizens showed that the press and radio, as the oldest mass media, are at a negligibly low level, given that they are the main medium of information for less than 1% of the respondents. Social networks, on the other hand, play an important role in the information process, and more than a quarter, i.e., 27% of respondents, pointed out this source as the main one. The research showed that in Serbia, first of all, the way of informing is completely different among older fellow citizens in relation to the younger ones. A group of respondents aged 18-29 is mostly informed through social networks, while older people, in over 50% of cases, are informed through internet portals and newspapers, and the oldest citizens over 65 use television as a source of information in 62.5% of cases.



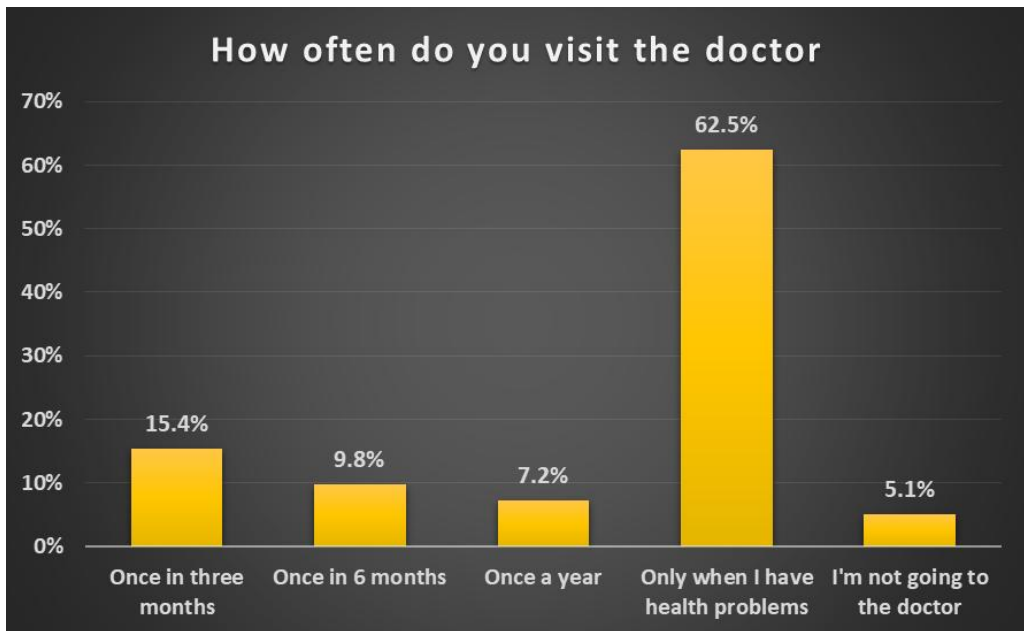
**Table 1. How citizens in Serbia are informed by age structure**

When it comes to information and events regarding *COVID-19*, the majority of respondents, that is, more than a half – 58.9%, answered that they „mostly follow” events with the virus, while another 17.9% of respondents answered that they very often follow information about the *COVID-19* virus. The other 23.2% of respondents said that they very rarely follow information about the virus, and they represent a group of people who obviously want to avoid the daily preoccupation of the media with this topic. The largest percentage of citizens of the Republic of Serbia, 34.4% of them, cited the public service Radio Television of Serbia - RTS, a television with a national frequency, as their source of information about *COVID-19*. The results of the research also led to the conclusion that every fourth respondent is informed about the virus via N1 television and the NovaS portal. Based on the data we collected, we can see that the largest percentage of citizens do not fully trust Pink and Happy television, while the largest percentage of citizens fully trust RTS - 12.7%, and a slightly smaller percentage fully trust N1 and Nova S 12, 5%.

Considering that the *COVID-19* virus has shaken the world to a great extent since its appearance, we were also interested in the attitudes of Serbian citizens regarding its impact on finance, but also how the presence of the virus will generally affect the overall economic situation. Thus, the citizens assessed their satisfaction with their current financial situation. Out of the total number of respondents, less than half of them, more precisely - 41.7%, gave an average grade of 3, which is also the highest percentage of citizens within this issue. The second most common assessment of the respondents was grade 4, where 28.5% of the respondents said that they were mostly satisfied with the financial situation, while the smallest number of respondents, 7.4%, assessed that they were not satisfied at all. Overall, this indicates that there are more people who are on average satisfied with their finances.

One of the data that was certainly interesting is that 36% of respondents have a neutral attitude regarding concerns about the *COVID-19* virus. A slightly lower percentage of respondents are mostly concerned - 30%, while the percentage of those who are not at all worried about the virus is small, only 5.4%. On the other hand, it is interesting that only 14.6% of the respondents are completely worried about the pandemic.

The *COVID-19* virus has caused major problems regarding hospital capacities, and it has created huge problems in many countries around the world. We were also interested in how many citizens visit health institutions, excluded the current state of the pandemics. The largest number of respondents, 62.5%, pointed out that they go to the doctor only when they have a health problem, and 15.4% of them visit a doctor once every three months, while 9.8% of respondents visit a doctor once every six months. In addition to these data, it should be noted that 5.1% of surveyed citizens do not even go to the doctor. It is concluded that citizens mostly go to the doctor only when they have problems and when they have to, and that they largely bypass the preventive controls that are recommended in order to preserve health. When it comes to the assessment of the health system, citizens answered that our health system is mostly neither good nor bad - 37%, while the percentages are very similar between the two extremes, and that is mostly bad - 22.2% and very good - 21.1%, whilst the lowest percentage thinks that the health system is very bad.



**Table 2. How often do citizens go to the doctor for examinations?**

When it comes to the level of preparation and equipment of hospital capacities in Serbia, the majority of respondents do not think that doctors and hospitals are well equipped. Partial disagreement with the said statement prevails, with 31.2% of

respondents who mostly disagree, while only slightly less of them completely disagree - 26.9% of them. Also, 37% of respondents believe that the health system in Serbia is neither good nor bad, but still mostly agree that hospitals are not well equipped.

Since chronic respiratory patients, diabetics, asthmatics, heart patients and nephrologists were in a very risky group who could first be infected with the *COVID-19* virus, we also checked whether the subjects had chronic diseases. Of all respondents, 17.1% of citizens of the Republic of Serbia suffer from a chronic disease, while 82.9% of respondents do not have contact with chronic diseases. Here we can take into account that the largest number of respondents belonged to the younger population of 18 to 29 years, which reduces the chance of having a chronic disease. Also, the respondents pointed out the data on the situation with chronic diseases in their family. Thus, 54.9% of respondents answered negatively, while 45.1% of them answered affirmatively, i.e., that one of their family members is a chronic patient.

Given the overall situation with this virus, which surprised everyone, it was difficult for Serbia to deal with the virus on its own, and in order to solve the problem, international aid arrived. We also wanted to examine the attitudes of citizens about how they see the importance of that assistance, and Russia, China and the EU were the subject of research, that is, the trust of citizens in the efficiency of their assistance. Thus, we found data that the European Union comes to the fore when it comes to citizens' distrust, which is shown by the data that 12.4% of respondents believe that help will not help, and 34.3% that it will not help at all. Also, distrust can be seen in the fact that a small number of respondents, 5.9%, believe that EU assistance will have a great impact on the fight against the virus. China, as the country where the virus broke out and which was the first to deal with it to the greatest extent, ranks best, according to our research. We will see that in each section, the data showing confidence in China are positive. Only 2.6% of respondents believe that help from China will not help at all, while 52% believe that they mostly will. In the end, there is Russia, where 50.5% of respondents believe that help from Russia will mostly help, and another 14.7% of respondents believe that it will help a lot.

Immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic, the question was asked everywhere in the world, whether the countries reacted in time and what was their attitude towards this problem. Thus, in our research, the largest number of citizens, 37.2%, said that they agreed that the Republic of Serbia reacted in a timely fashion to the pandemic, taking the necessary measures to protect against the virus, and another 15.6% of them would fully agree. On the other hand, as many as 23.8% of respondents do not agree with that at all, and believe that the state did not react in time, while 19.9% of citizens generally do not agree that Serbia introduced a state of emergency and other necessary protection and prevention measures on time. Here we come to the conclusion that the citizens are quite divided on the issue of satisfaction and timeliness in the state's response to the situation with the pandemic.

After the official confirmation of the first case of *COVID-19* and the introduction of the state of emergency in Serbia, the daily informing of citizens about

the situation in the country through conferences of the crisis headquarters and web portals began. In this regard, we were interested in the position of our citizens on the issue of whether the state informs them responsibly and regularly. The largest number of respondents, more precisely 31.2% of them, believe that the state is mostly responsible for this task, while another 12.3% of respondents fully agree with it. However, a total of 53.2% of respondents do not agree at all or mostly with this, and the attitude of citizens on this issue is very divided.

Due to the fact that government representatives have appeared in the media in our country almost every day, as well as representatives of the crisis staff composed of doctors and experts, we wanted to check how their performances and statements are evaluated by the citizens of the Republic of Serbia. The largest number of respondents, more precisely 39.1% of them, do not agree at all with the statement that the state and its representatives do not spread fear and panic, while 25.2% of respondents generally do not agree with this statement. On the other hand, the opposite position is represented by a significantly smaller number of respondents - almost one third. By drawing a parallel with the previous question, one can find one of the possible explanations for the predominantly negative attitude of the respondents about informing the public by the state, as well as their opinion that the state is irresponsible in that aspect.

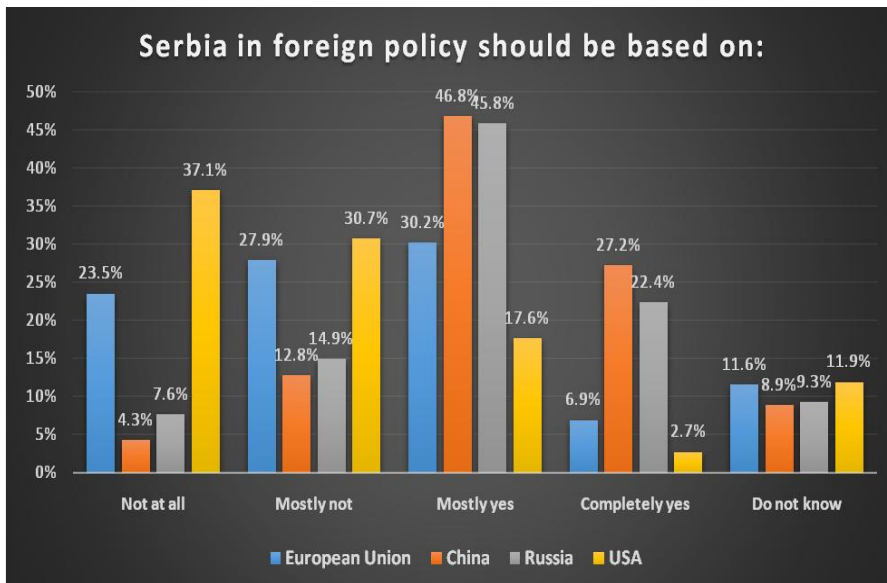
Regarding the trust to the representatives of the crisis staff, the data showed a more positive attitude of citizens towards them. Almost 60% of the respondents pointed out that the crisis staff instills confidence, and 20% of respondents agree with that attitude, while 15.7% said that the crisis staff does not instill confidence in them. On the other hand, the citizens of the Republic of Serbia generally do not trust the decisions made by politicians during the *COVID-19* virus pandemic. What is interesting is that citizens trust experts more than politicians, because 44.9% of respondents do not trust politicians, and also 39.5% of respondents trust the crisis staff which consists of doctors.

Restrictions on the freedom of movement of citizens were introduced as a form of reducing the spread of the virus. In the research, the data show that the respondents mostly completely agree with the introduction of this measure - 42.4%. A slightly smaller number of respondents said they generally agreed - 30.6%. On the other hand, 11.3% generally disagree and 8.4% do not agree at all that restriction of freedom is a necessary measure. Therefore, the citizens of the Republic of Serbia mostly fully or mostly agree that it is necessary to restrict freedom of movement during a pandemic of this virus.

When it comes to the introduction of a state of emergency, almost three quarters of respondents support this decision, of which the majority - 44.9% fully agree with the decision, and 29.3% generally support it. Less than a fifth of the respondents were against the introduction of the state of emergency, of which 10.3% were to a lesser extent against it. Also, a large percentage of over 70% of retirees answered that they

fully agree with that decision. Respondents aged 18 to 64 also fully agree, but this percentage is significantly lower than pensioners, more precisely less than half of the respondents fully agree with the decision to introduce a state of emergency. Therefore, the citizens have supported the measure to introduce a state of emergency.

With the issue of introducing a state of emergency, as well as adhering to the introduced measures, the attitude of the respondents about the success of the introduced measures against the spread of *COVID-19* in Serbia is largely positive. Almost three quarters of the respondents believe that the introduced measures managed to help prevent the further spread of the *COVID-19* virus infection on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. When asked what measures you adhere to during the state of emergency, most of the respondents pointed out that they respect the main measures of protection and prevention from the virus. Thus, as many as 69.4% of them stay at home and go out only for basic groceries, 61.3% wear protective masks, and 60.3% keep a certain distance from other people. Based on the obtained data, 41.2%, representing a significant percentage of citizens, in addition to masks, also wear gloves to further protect themselves. A large number of respondents also try to avoid closer contacts with other people, as many as half do not shake hands with anyone, and 43.6% of respondents do not kiss when greeting friends. Based on these data, it can be concluded that our citizens largely adhere to protection measures.



**Table 3. The focus of Serbia's foreign policy according to the opinion of the citizens**

When it comes to the attitudes of our citizens regarding when the Republic of Serbia should rely on in foreign policy, a positive opinion about Russia and China dominates. Most of our respondents think that it is best for Serbia to be mostly tied to



China with 46.8% and Russia with 45.8% in cases. When it comes to relying on the United States when it comes to foreign policy, 37.1% of our respondents believe that Serbia should not be tied to the United States at all. As far as the European Union is concerned, the prevailing opinion is that it is a bad foreign policy partner for Serbia, but a lot of respondents, 30.2% of them, said that they should mainly rely on the EU in that field. To this should be added the fact that our respondents believe that the aid coming from Russia and China can help the most in combating the virus epidemic, while attitudes about aid coming from the European Union are similar to foreign policy - most believe that the said aid would help in general or mostly that it wouldn't help.

### **3. Changes in the attitudes of citizens regarding the *COVID-19* virus during the year**

The *COVID-19* virus was inevitably the number one topic throughout 2020. At certain moments, the pandemic paralyzed the entire world, and as this year is coming to an end, the situation is no better. On the contrary, around the world, and even in Serbia, the situation is getting worse again. As the virus is very unpredictable, and thus the changes it causes, that is, the reactions that are necessary to prevent its further spread are unpredictable as well, the virus itself has managed to create a very dynamic course of change. Accordingly, the research we conducted in March, the results of which are presented in Chapter 2, have largely changed, primarily because the decisions and measures taken by the state together with the crisis staff have changed. For that reason, as an additional analysis that would serve to compare changes in attitudes among the citizens of the Republic of Serbia when it comes to the *COVID-19* pandemic, we will use public opinion polls conducted in the same period or months after our research.

Two surveys conducted in a time interval that largely coincided with the student survey were conducted by one private agency and one organization. The research of the agency for consulting activities - House of Win, was realized from March 30 to April 11, 2020. In a combination of a telephone interview (CATI) and an online survey, on a representative sample of 4,133 respondents over the age of 18, the following results were obtained. In this research, the citizens ranked the *COVID-19* virus among the biggest problems, that is, as the biggest problem at the time. Also, in the assessment of the attitude of state bodies towards solving the problem with this virus, an average score of 3.11 was given. Respondents also pointed out that the measures that were adopted were good and adopted on time - 25.4%, but also 31.5% of them pointed out that although the measures were good, they were late. Regarding the attitude of the authorities towards this problem, 40.3% of the respondents think that, in the beginning, the representatives of the authorities were not serious, but later they realized the seriousness of the situation (House of Win 2020).

Another research that was conducted during almost the same period as the research conducted by the students at the Faculty of Political Sciences, is a study

conducted by the Center for International Public Policy - CMJP. This research was conducted in the period from April 8 to 15, 2020. In a sample of 5,989 respondents, the results of this study are as follows. According to the data, the citizens of the Republic of Serbia, despite the pandemic, still do not feel too much fear of the *COVID-19* virus. However, the percentage of 86% shows that they are still careful, but also that 70% of them are ready to go to the doctors in case they notice or feel the symptoms of the virus. Many of the respondents - 60% of them do not trust the media that inform the public on a daily basis about the situation with the *COVID-19* virus. The results also showed that the appearances and statements of state officials among citizens cause the development of unrest and panic in 55% of cases (CMJP 2020).

The above researches show the degree of agreement on several similar issues. This reflects the moment of conducting the research, i.e., the fact that the measures that were adopted were in action at the moments when these researches were realized. However, a few months later, the situation with the measures continued to change, and then at one point there was a relaxation with it to a great extent. Accordingly, the next research includes a cross-section of a few months later during which much happened.

In mid-September 2020, the research publishing center - Demostat conducted another public opinion poll, where the focus was on the topic of the *COVID-19* virus. On a sample of 1,200 respondents, a survey was conducted through a personal interview, where the attitude of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia towards the coronavirus pandemic was examined. This research also showed a trend of continued fear of the virus, which is still in the first place in terms of risk among citizens - 25%. When it comes to vaccination, a dose of trust is still applied to doctors, and citizens in this research state their readiness for vaccination, if it is suggested by experts. However, there is a noticeable number of those who would not want to be vaccinated in any case, which can be related to the fear caused by various theories about this virus, but also information that has not yet been sufficiently verified, regarding the quality and performance of the currently tested vaccines. Also, citizens still respect the measures of distance (Arežina-Đerić2009, 140-43) and wearing masks, so 68% of them always respect, and about 22% of them sometimes do, and sometimes do not respect this measure. In the end, when it comes to trust, doctors still have the highest percentage of trust among citizens - 44%, while government officials, but also the media, are the ones with the highest percentage of distrust, and not much trust (Demostat 2020).

#### **4. Negative effects of the *COVID-19* virus on everyday life in Serbia**

With the first information coming from China at the end of 2019, more precisely from the city of Wuhan, about the appearance of the first case of an infected with the *COVID-19* virus, no one in Serbia could have guessed what would happen to us in 2020. After the increase in the number of infected people around the world, including in Serbia, the situation got out of control and the news that arrived every day largely showed all the unpreparedness for such a dangerous virus. The consequences of the *COVID-19* virus, after the measures (Arežina-Đerić 2009, 140-45) were relaxed during the summer period of 2020, began to show the first signs of problems that will inevitably be felt in the coming months. This primarily refers to the problems with the economy, because this virus has largely paralyzed trade and business around the world, even when it comes to Serbia, and a tribute to that is yet to be expected. However, when we take a closer look, we can see that the consequences are reflected in the everyday life of citizens in Serbia.

The obligatory wearing of masks as one of the measures shows only one example of how citizens are starting to change their daily habits due to the current situation. However, as much more pronounced examples of everyday changes in the lives of many citizens in Serbia, we can cite problems with fear and psychological consequences caused by the presence of this virus among citizens. Thus, the general presence, and in recent weeks the increase in the number of infected people in Serbia, certainly create a huge dose of fear among the citizens. At the same time, everyday information about the current situation with the virus, but also the uncertainty regarding the vaccines that are still being tested, is causing constant anxiety among citizens. From the psychological point of view, this virus will inevitably leave long-term consequences on individual citizens, because everyday habits have changed a lot, and the quarantine period has only made additional changes for all citizens.

It is necessary to return to the economic aspect. Serbia is not an economically strong country, and even the much stronger economies of the world are already feeling the consequences of the presence of *COVID-19*. Accordingly, in the coming months, as the overall situation with the virus continues, as well as its resolution, it is to be expected that economic consequences will continue to appear more and more. Suspensions and reductions in transport and trade have largely paralyzed economies, and in Serbia, small and medium-sized enterprises are slowly beginning to slow down under the pressure of the situation. Unfortunately, we can expect such a dark trend in 2021, but certainly that large companies are and will be suffering the consequences of the virus crisis. Viewed in this way, for many citizens, everyday life in Serbia will certainly be more difficult than usual, and in the long run, their finances will have additional charges caused by the current virus. All in all, it is difficult to fully predict how the situation will develop in the coming period, but what should certainly worry us are the current consequences of the *COVID-19* pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the entire survey conducted during April 2020, we can see that citizens are already aware of the dangers caused by the virus, but also that they are ready to adhere to the measures in accordance with the recommendations. As we can see based on the obtained data, the citizens are primarily satisfied with their financial situation, and they also believe that the pandemic of the *COVID-19* virus will not cause them great financial loss.

Citizens largely followed the information on social networks, internet portals and televisions, but they had some doubts about that information, as expected, given that many conspiracy theories caused by the appearance of the virus emerged. Interestingly, although citizens largely read internet portals, most of them stated that they obtained information through television media, concluding that citizens followed direct statements by politicians who appeared on television programs. As for the question of politicians, citizens do not trust them to a large extent, unlike the crisis staff, whose expertise they rely on to a greater extent, which leads us to the conclusion that respondents trust the professional staff much more than politicians who took measures in consultation with doctors.

Given that there was information in the media about the competition in providing assistance by the great powers, the citizens answered that question by giving preference to Russia and China in every sense. First of all, after four months of fighting, the People's Republic of China almost „exterminated” the virus, and sent its experts around the world to help prevent the further spread of the pandemic. Certainly, the citizens agreed that the help of other countries is always welcome, as it is necessary in such situations, where the whole world is fighting against the „invisible enemy”.

The goal of the research was achieved, considering that, based on the obtained data, we were able to conclude how citizens behave when the world is in a crisis and when no one cares what the outcome will be in the end.

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