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## LIFE IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS: CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF SPECIFIC SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC<sup>3</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** A little over two years have passed since the WHO declared the COVID-19 pandemic on 11 March 2020. Faced with imminent risk, countries throughout the world responded differently in the way they managed the pandemic crisis and changed their strategies throughout to match the information updates. Likewise, world populations differently adapted their own everyday- and social-life practices to the pandemic information and government demands for the citizens to channel the pandemic. The aim of this paper is to present a portion of the results of a study designed to determine changes in the social life of Serbian citizens due to COVID-19 during the time when the pandemic was just beginning to take hold. The paper focuses on citizens' attitudes regarding the ecological dimension of the pandemic effects, on certain prevailing practices (e.g., reverse migrations from cities to villages), and on the attitudes that reflect solidarity within local communities and the degree

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of satisfaction the most relevant institutions/organizations during the pandemic. The data were obtained from a sample of 602 over-18 respondents from Serbia by means of an online study conducted in May 2020 and a questionnaire distributed via e-mail and social networks with multiple access points.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19 pandemic, Serbia, ecological attitudes and practices of citizens, confidence in institutions, solidarity.

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## INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION

After the declaration of the global COVID-19 pandemic on 11 March 2020, in an attempt to “flatten the curve” (Ward, 2020: 726) of the number of people infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, governments of different countries introduced measures to protect the health of their citizens. A broad spectrum of measures was implemented, ranging from physical distance recommendations to full lockdowns. Some authorities restricted the movement of specific portions of the populations for several days or urged the vulnerable social categories to refrain from going outside and from any other social activities. Some countries banned social gatherings, which practically erased sports, art, and cultural events from the activity agenda of the local population. Many industrial complexes temporarily ceased their activity, while work was increasingly performed online wherever possible. The purpose of certain jobs was brought into question, especially those involving direct contact. In addition to the justified fear of disease, the pandemic brought along a series of consequences to social life, both individually and on the general societal level. These ranged from an overall sense of insecurity, changes in the quality and frequency of social interactions, and serious existential problems of households with breadwinners suddenly becoming unemployed or working at reduced rates, to general issues of crisis management in various aspects of social life, including the economic sphere. During the pockets between pandemic waves, some social actions were temporarily restored, while others retained their newly-acquired features resulting from new ways of organizing social life.

## METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to present a portion of the results of a study conducted in April and May 2020 using an online survey, designed to determine changes in the social life of Serbian citizens due to COVID-19 during the time when the pandemic was just beginning to take hold. The study focuses on citizens’ attitudes concerning the ecological dimension of pandemic effects and specific prevalent practices (e.g., reverse migrations from cities to villages) and on their attitudes regarding solidarity within local communities and the degree of satisfaction with the most relevant institutions/organizations during the pandemic.

The study was conducted by the Centre for Sociological Research in cooperation with the Serbian Sociological Association. The data were obtained from the sample of 602 over-18 respondents from Serbia, who were given a questionnaire via email and social networks with multiple access points. Since the key difficulty in data collection via the Internet is the impossibility to control the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, weighting was applied to correct the share of respondents only according to gender and education, as other characteristics did not significantly deviate from their distribution in the base population.<sup>4</sup> The structure of the weighted sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of respondents according to the most relevant sociodemographic characteristics

Gender	F	%
Male	292	48.7
Female	306	51.3
Education level		
Primary	165	27.6
Secondary	316	53.1
College and higher	115	19.3
Age		
18-24	108	18.1
25-34	137	23.0
35-44	171	28.6
45-54	113	18.8
55-64	56	9.3
65+	13	2.2

Several assumptions regarding the aforementioned aspects of citizens' life in Serbia during the pandemic were tested. The first assumption is that the spread of COVID-19 focused the citizens' attention on the impact of ecological factors on human health. The second assumption is that the pandemic-induced crisis influenced the migration from urban to rural areas and that villages were now seen as a more favourable natural and social life environment. Third, considering that the government could not provide support services for COVID-19 patients and those placed under self-isolation fast enough, the assumption was that during a health crisis citizens relied on solidarity within their primary groups and cultivated social networks. Finally, the idea was to test the degree of satisfaction with the most relevant institutions-organizations during the pandemic, with the assumption that the degree was not high but that it indicates only a slight change in the degree of confidence the citizens already express in specific institutions.

<sup>4</sup> The weights were created on the basis of the available estimates of the educational and gender structure of the population obtained from the Survey on the Workforce from 2019.

## ECOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF LIFE DURING THE FIRST COVID-19 PANDEMIC WAVE IN SERBIA

The ever-extensive literature on the topic of ecological aspects of the pandemic includes emphases of a wide variety of issues resulting from the spread of the virus and people's attempts to reduce its impact. Within this context, there are debates about the positive and negative environmental impacts of the coronavirus. The most important negative impacts include the following: increased medical waste, disposal and handling of infectious waste, postponed implementation of regulations concerning the use of plastic bags in certain countries, postponed environmental studies due to closed borders and researchers' inability to travel, increased municipal waste and difficulties with its management, and so on. The most prominent positive impacts include the following: short-term reduction of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, reduced water pollution in developing countries in which waste is dumped into rivers without being treated, reduced noise levels due to lighter traffic, and so on (Buck & Weinstein, 2020; Rume & Islam, 2020; Guo & Lee, 2022). Some authors also identified neutral impacts, such as animal species populating habitats that they previously avoided due to human presence (Buck & Weinstein, 2020).

The present study focuses on how the Serbian population views the role of ecological factors in health protection<sup>5</sup>, whether the care (or lack thereof) for the environment had any influence on the spread of the virus, and whether people recognized the benefits of living closer to nature during the pandemic and the way this affects the change of residence (urban dwellers staying in / moving to the countryside).

When asked on what human health depends most, over a half of the respondents (52.7%) thought that one's lifestyle directly affects one's health. The second most frequent response was that environmental preservation affects human health to the greatest extent (20.6%). Another relevant factor is the genetic factor, per every eighth respondent (12.5%) (Table 2). Some respondents also listed medical research (4.3%) and healthcare activities (4.5%) as essential factors of health protection. This indicates that a significant portion of the Serbian population are aware of the crucial impact of preserving the natural component of human environment on human health.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, air pollution has been recognized as one of the most significant environmental factors negatively affecting human health (e.g., see Đorđević, Miltojević & Todorović, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Human health preservation, their survival, as well as the survival of other beings depend on the quality of the natural environmental component, which entails the existence of such environmental conditions and impacts that do not endanger the proper functioning of the 'nature-society' system and that facilitate sustainable development (see Miltojević, 2006: 432-436 and Miltojević & Petrović, 2020).

Table 2. Distribution of respondents' responses to the question of what human health depends on the most today (%)

	F	%
God	17	2.8
Genetics (hereditary factors)	75	12.5
Lifestyle	317	52.7
Scientific research and development in medicine	26	4.3
Environmental preservation (clean air, water, and soil; biodiversity preservation)	124	20.6
Fortune or fate	16	2.7
Healthcare activities (work of healthcare institutions and workers)	27	4.5
Total	602	100

Even though Serbian citizens were justifiably uncertain about the crucial factor of impact on human health, they unequivocally stressed the importance of ecological factors for infectious disease prevention, including the current COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents predominantly agreed with the statement that *the current crisis caused by the pandemic is a consequence of the negative environmental impact of humans/society* (as many as 70.4% completely agreed or mostly agreed). An even larger share of the respondents (almost three-quarters) agreed with the statement that *the modern way of life and disturbed balance between society and nature increasingly exposes humanity to the hazards from infectious and other diseases* (42.9% completely agreed and 40.7% mostly agreed). Finally, we were interested in learning whether thus manifested ecological awareness was also present in the attitude that ecological risk warranted attention even after immediate danger had passed. Over two-thirds of the respondents (68.3%) completely agreed with the statement that *after the pandemic caused by the coronavirus, the world needs to seriously focus on resolving the ecological issues and reducing the ecological hazards it faces*, while another 24.6% mostly agreed (Table 3). This amounts to a total of 92.9% of the respondents who maintain that ecological issues need to be tackled in the future. This confirms the initial assumption that the COVID-19 pandemic revitalized people's interest in ecological issues, as they understood that a portion of ecological and social risks originates from the disturbed balance between social and natural factors. Of course, it is up to the sociologists to examine whether such attitudes are a consequence of current circumstances or a more permanent change in citizens' opinion.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Similar results were also obtained by a group of researchers from the Institute for Sociological Research in Novi Sad. According to their findings, 44.5% of respondents thought that the coronavirus emerged as a consequence of excessive human interference with the natural processes (Pajvančić Cizelj, Čikić, Ristić, 2020).

Table 3. Respondents' attitudes about the environmental impact of humans (%)

	1	2	3	4	5	Σ
The current crisis caused by the pandemic is a consequence of the negative environmental impact of humans/society	30.2	40.2	12.6	9.5	7.5	100
Modern way of life and disturbed balance between society and nature increasingly exposes humanity to the hazards from infectious and other diseases	42.9	40.7	8.6	3.7	4.2	100
After the pandemic caused by the coronavirus, the world needs to seriously focus on resolving the ecological issues and reducing the ecological hazards it faces	68.3	24.6	2.2	2.5	2.5	100

Legend: (1) I completely agree; (2) I mostly agree; (3) I mostly disagree; (4) I completely disagree; (5) I don't know

One of the survey questions concerning the ecological dimension of the effects coronavirus spread focused on potential migration from urban to rural areas. This aspect was considered on the basis not only of population density in the cities, as a potential factor of higher incidence of illness,<sup>8</sup> but also on the challenges associated with other social factors of city life. Namely, it is no secret that the underprivileged social strata more often contracted the disease in the cities, considering that they were unable to ensure sufficient physical distance in their homes or to reduce the risk of social contact (grocery shopping etc.). This is precisely why some authors emphasize that the type of population density is perhaps even more important than the physical population density itself, viewed strictly in statistical terms (Florida, 2020, according to Božilović and Petković, 2020: 839). As the pandemic progressed, cities lost their main urban features, as cultural institutions, restaurants, and parks became hazardous areas to be avoided because of the high risk of disease transmission. There was a “transformation of urban places from invigorating to threatening, from cultural enclaves to viral epicentres”, which “has also transformed their rural counterparts”, now turned into places of safety (Malatzky, Gillespie, Couch, Cosgrave, 2020: 2). Since reverse migration is especially characteristic of developed countries,<sup>9</sup> the question is how the Serbian population perceived the risk of

<sup>8</sup> The analysis of illnesses and infection spread in the rural areas of Italy also confirms the importance of population density, together with economic and environmental factors (Agnoletta, Manganelli, Pirasa, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> In Great Britain, interest in buying a countryside house in June and July 2020 spiked by 126% compared to the same period the year before (Village enquiries double as city dwellers escape to the country). Similar trends were observed in Sweden (Söder-mäklaren: “Inte många sänderrenoverade bostäder här”). According to the report by the Republic Geodetic Authority of Serbia, real estate sales actually decreased at the onset of the pandemic, only to surge after the state of emergency ended, while the purchase of country retreat houses also increased, their prices ranging

illness in cities and the rigorous measures of the Crisis Response Team<sup>10</sup> and what kind of reaction ensued. Data indicate that the population migration from urban to suburban and rural areas began only two months after the pandemic had been officially declared. Even though the migration intensity at the time was not that high, the statistic showing that 8% of the respondents who had lived in a city prior to the pandemic changed their place of residence afterward is noteworthy. It is highly probable that the share of citizens moving from the city to the countryside increased after two years of the pandemic, especially considering the upheaval on the real estate market and the growing demand for country retreat houses and rural homesteads, as well as the sudden price increase of such real estate, previously heavily undervalued.

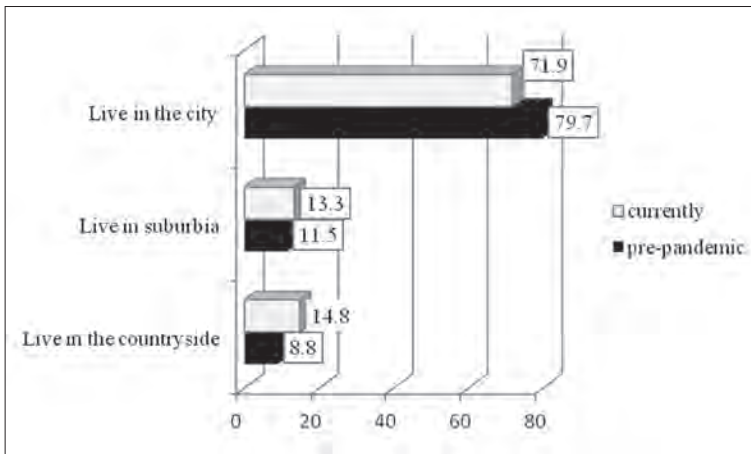


Figure 1. Migration from urban to rural/suburban areas during the pandemic (%)

This assumption is in a way validated by the findings obtained after asking the questions about whether the pandemic influenced the respondents and their family members to consider buying a house in the countryside or outside the city.<sup>11</sup> Almost

from €3,000 to €253,000 depending on location and surface area (Report on the State of the Real Estate Market for 2020).

<sup>10</sup> It should be remembered that restriction of movement was in force before this study was conducted. In Serbia, the state of emergency was declared on 15 March 2020 and a curfew was imposed from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. beginning 18 March, whereas people over the age of 65 were prohibited from leaving their home altogether (with the exception of smaller rural areas and settlements with a population smaller than 5,000, where the age limit was raised to 70). During the state of emergency, total curfew was imposed for all citizens during the weekends. Other measures pertained to specific categories of the population or specific activities (Decree on Measures of Prevention and Control of COVID-19).

<sup>11</sup> According to the findings of real estate agents in Sweden, one in three persons has changed their residential preferences since the beginning of the pandemic and 5% would want to move to the countryside (Söder-mäklaren: "Inte många sönderrenoverade bostäder här").

one-quarter of the respondents (22.8%) answered affirmatively. A similar number of respondents (28.2%) believe that in the future the pandemic experience will steer people toward a life in the countryside and away from the cities. With over a third of the respondents (36.5%) who are undecided regarding this question, there is a significant portion of the population that are potential candidates for reverse migration – from the city to the countryside.

Such a conclusion is further supported by the answers of the respondents concerning their perception of the countryside as a favourable environment for settlement. Namely, as many as 88.7% of the respondents think that rural areas offer better virus protection options and even more think that rural life allows freer movement because of a smaller population (95.5%) and more quality time during isolation (86.7%). Evidently, strict epidemiological measures were instrumental in shaping the citizens' opinion that rural environments are a better choice for spending time during the pandemic. However, even in a general assessment of the comparative advantages of rural living, a high percentage of the respondents see rural environments as safer and of high-quality natural environments (as many as 95.2%), as environments that allow better cooperation, solidarity, understanding, and mutual assistance (65.9%), and as areas in which higher-quality agricultural products are more readily available (85.2%).<sup>12</sup> More than a half of the respondents (58.3%) even think that rural environments offer more possibilities for complete satisfaction of all existential needs (Table 4).

Table 4. Citizens' attitudes toward the benefits of rural living compared to urban living (%)

	Yes	No	Σ
Offers better virus protection possibilities	88.7	11.3	100
Allows freer movement because there are fewer people	95.5	4.5	100
Provides more quality time during isolation	86.7	13.3	100
Is a safer and better (natural) living environment	95.2	4.8	100
Allows better cooperation, solidarity, understanding, and mutual assistance between residents	65.9	34.1	100
Offers improved availability and quality of agricultural products	85.2	14.8	100
Offers more possibilities for complete satisfaction of all existential needs	58.5	41.5	100

Such an idealized notion of villages is not based on factual judgments, as clearly demonstrated by a study of the sustainability of Serbian villages during the pandemic, whose data indicate that rural living during the pandemic does not offer distinct benefits compared to city living, regardless of the rural area in question, regardless

<sup>12</sup> A sense of freedom and improved quality of life were the main drivers of migrations in Sweden (Aberg, Tondelli, 2021: 6), which did not even impose such rigorous measures as Serbia and other European countries during the pandemic.



of the population category, etc. (for more, see Lukić & al., 2021).<sup>13</sup> In other words, it can be sociologically determined that health and quality of life in the countryside are determined both by the development level of the infrastructure and investment in agricultural production and by different social factors – population categories, economic status, education and social stratification. Nevertheless, faced with restricted movement, problems with the supply of certain food staples, and anxiety caused by the looming danger of infection, Serbian citizens resorted to leaving the city. However, this suggests that, having spent a relatively short time away from the city, they were unable to observe or experience problems typical of living in rural areas.

### CITIZENS' SOLIDARITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Confronted by a pandemic crisis, citizens were not only forced to rely on the effects of controlled medical and epidemiological measures, but were also driven to resort “to cooperation and solidarity, requiring a certain degree of confidence in the institutions as well as trust on an interpersonal level, and to their individual capacities to function in a crisis” (Pavlović and Petrović, 2020: 560). While solidarity may be viewed from different perspectives, in theoretical terms mostly as a kind of cohesive force that gathers/unites citizens around an identity matrix, idea, value, political agenda, and the like (for more, see Vasiljević, 2018: 361-375), and thus legitimizes them, the present study focuses on situational solidarity of the citizens in terms of empathy, mutual assistance, and support from citizens in the pandemic.

According to the obtained data, during the first wave of the pandemic and the state of emergency, a little over a half of Serbian citizens had to care not only for the family members within their household but also for persons living elsewhere. The respondents stated that they mostly cared for their older and/or sick relatives (32.4%), neighbours (11.5%), friends (7.7%), or other persons (7.8%). The least demonstrated form of solidarity was volunteer work in a humanitarian organization (4.8%).

When the above responses are compared to those regarding who the respondents would turn to first for help, if necessary, it is indicative that 81.2% would rely on their family members for support. Even though a significant number of the respondents claimed that they cared for their sick relatives and neighbours, in the event of their own illness or isolation, they would more often turn to their friends. This warrants the question whether the respondents answered the previous question in a socially desirable manner or they directed their solidarity toward those who could not reciprocate through help and support (Table 5).

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<sup>13</sup> Similar results were obtained by other researchers studying life in rural areas during the pandemic.

Table 5. Support and assistance practices during the pandemic

Persons the respondents cared for during the pandemic outside their household	%	Persons the respondents would ask for help	%
		Family members (spouse, child/children, parent(s))	81.2
Older and/or sick relatives	32.4	Relatives	2.7
Older and/or sick friends	7.7	Friends	7.0
Older and/or sick neighbours	11.5	Neighbours	2.2
Fellow citizens as volunteers in an organization (the Red Cross, local volunteer organization, the church, UNICEF, etc.)	4.8	Volunteers	2.3
Someone else	7.8	Co-workers	1.3
No one	49.3	No one	3.3

The respondents who had been in self-isolation were asked who took care of them and helped with grocery shopping and other needs. Although the number of such respondents was small at the time of the survey (N= 114), most of them primarily relied on their family members (70.2%), significantly fewer respondent relied on their friends (7.9%), while only one in twenty respondents was able to count on the help from their relatives or neighbours, usually in the form of additional help. It is a matter of some concern that as many as 20.2% of the respondents did not receive assistance from anyone during isolation, especially considering that many of them stated that they cared for someone outside their household and that local self-governments organized groups of volunteers tasked with assisting citizens who could not receive support from their families or social circles.

Table 6. Distribution of the respondents' answers to the question of who provided them with assistance while they were sick or in self-isolation

	%
Family members (spouse, child/children, parent(s))	70.2
Friends	7.9
Relatives	5.3
Neighbours	5.3
Volunteers	2.6
No one	20.2

## CITIZENS' SATISFACTION WITH THE WORK OF INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Organization of work during the pandemic was particularly challenging for most institutions, especially while this research was being conducted, and only partly due to the numerous unknowns about the virus, the dynamic of its propagation, the lack of prevention measures (vaccines), and the like. Efficient operation of institutions also involved a certain degree of citizens' confidence in the institutions and their cooperation, in order to maintain the course of everyday social life on the one hand and to protect people's health and prevent potential effects of the extreme spread of the virus among the population on the other hand.

Considering the "legitimacy deficit of political institutions" (Kovačević, 2010), the consequent relatively low degree of confidence in the institutions exhibited by the Serbian citizens and citizens of other countries in the region for many years prior to the pandemic (EVS, 2020; EVS, 2022; Golubović, Džunić, Golubović, 2015), the respondents were asked how the general crisis was reflected in their degree of satisfaction with the work of specific institutions that played the key role in crisis management during the pandemic. As it has been previously established, confidence in institutions and organizations and in what they do during a crisis "is based on the efficiency assessment of the very institutions that need to accomplish the set goals" (Lipset & Schneider, 1983, according to Bešić, 2011: 123), so the respondents were not expected to express prominent satisfaction with the institutions' work even during the pandemic. It is our interpretation that satisfaction with the work of institutions under such circumstances could not significantly differ from the general assessment of the state of the society, for which the observed institutions are partially responsible.

However, deviations from the expected degree of satisfaction were observed in comparison to previous prolonged confidence trends. The deviations occurred in relation to those institutions that did not properly adjust their activities during a threat to public health. For instance, citizens in Serbia traditionally place a higher degree of trust in the church, but in this study, they expressed a relatively low degree of satisfaction with its dealings, which might be due to rather controversial conduct of the church authorities in the early days of the pandemic. It needs to be emphasized that the Serbian Orthodox Church invited people to attend worship services and even communion before Easter, despite the appeals by the Crisis Response Team to avoid mass gatherings!<sup>14</sup>

As presumed, the respondents were least satisfied with the work of the so-called political institutions (government, prime minister, president), but also with the work of the media, especially print media, and the judicial authorities. This result was to be expected, since the studies of confidence in institutions both in Serbia and in other

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<sup>14</sup> During those days, a fierce debate took place among the public, demonstrating a symbolic conflict "about the classification/identification of communion as either a healing and multipurpose religious ritual or a high-risk practice that can endanger one's health" (Jovanović, 2022: 12).

countries indicate that people are more prone to trusting the so-called traditional institutions, such as the military, the police, the healthcare or the education system, while being less trusting of political institutions (Table 7).

Table 7. Distribution of respondents' responses to the question: To what extent are you satisfied/dissatisfied with the work of the following institutions during the state of emergency and the pandemic? (%)

	1	2	3	4	5
Serbian Government	12.1	21.3	22.3	19.9	24.4
Serbian Prime Minister	12.8	17.3	22.3	15.6	32.1
Serbian President	12.3	18.6	18.6	14.1	36.4
Military	22.1	25.6	26.9	10.6	14.8
Police	19.8	27.4	25.6	12.5	14.8
Church	12.8	20.1	28.2	11.6	27.2
Judicial system	9.0	17.1	37.2	13.8	22.9
Healthcare system	23.6	29.2	26.6	12.5	8.1
Education system	21.3	34.7	29.1	9.6	5.3
Social welfare system	13.0	24.8	39.4	13.1	9.8
Domestic NGOs	9.6	23.4	45.3	10.8	10.8
International NGOs (UNICEF, WHO)	8.8	26.4	44.5	10.1	10.1
Print media in Serbia	7.3	16.9	27.4	24.8	23.6
TV and radio stations in Serbia	9.8	21.9	27.6	23.1	17.6
Digital media	11.3	27.7	30.9	17.4	12.6
Banks	20.1	30.9	33.7	8.5	6.8

Legend: (1) I am completely satisfied; (2) I am mostly satisfied; (3) I am neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; (4) I am mostly dissatisfied; (5) I am completely dissatisfied

Even though the respondents were divided in their attitudes, according to the calculated general satisfaction index,<sup>15</sup> they were most satisfied with the work of the healthcare and education systems, the social welfare system, as well as banks, the military, and the police. It should be noted that the respondents were more satisfied with the activity of digital media and international and domestic NGOs than with traditional political institutions (Table 7 and Figure 2).

<sup>15</sup> General index of satisfaction with the work of an institution was calculated by multiplying by four the share of the respondents completely satisfied with the work of an institution, by three the share of those mostly satisfied, by two the share of those neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and by one the share of those mostly dissatisfied. The share of completely dissatisfied respondents was multiplied by zero, which means that it was disregarded. The sum of all products was then divided by 100.

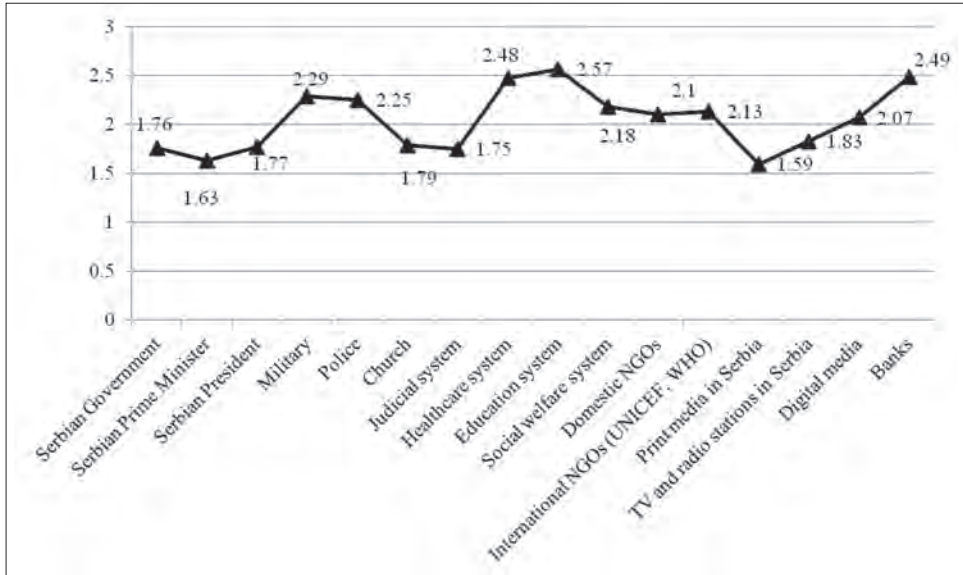


Figure 2. General index of satisfaction with the work of an institution

Despite the impossibility of direct comparison with the data from the European Values Study, the findings confirm the trends observed in the fifth wave of European research; however, we believe that the pandemic raised the trust in specific institutions that made decisions benefitting the citizens. For instance, during the first wave of the pandemic, banks placed a loan moratorium<sup>16</sup> for citizens and entrepreneurs, which helped them considerably while their livelihood was in jeopardy. On the other hand, this would later incur additional costs from the citizens. In addition, although most people were dissatisfied with the work of political institutions, the share of respondents who were satisfied with their work indicates that the circumstances influenced one-third of the population to value the efforts of political institutions to provide the necessary assets for COVID-19 treatment or the recommended medical supplies for disease prevention (face masks, vaccines, etc.).

## CONCLUSION

Directly or indirectly unfavourable epidemiological circumstances affect everyday life of people and global flows in demographic structure, economy, politics, culture, the environment, etc. In addition to these, the experience of the current pandemic has shifted the focus to the issues of environmental quality and human health. With the understanding that the human environment is a totality of natural and social factors and

<sup>16</sup> See: Decision on Temporary Measures for Banks to Mitigate the Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic with the Aim of Preserving Financial System Stability

using the obtained data, we established that the majority of the respondents associated health with lifestyle and environmental quality and agreed with the opinion that modern lifestyle and the negative environmental impact of people/society increase the risks from the pandemic. Since modern lifestyle is associated with urban environments, the global as well as Serbian trend of reverse migration from urban to rural areas comes as no surprise, considering the measures imposed during the pandemic. Only time will tell whether the pandemic caused a more permanent change in attitudes of Serbian citizens regarding the benefits of rural life or whether this is only an acute reflection of the ongoing crisis due to the pandemic, and whether the enduring low investment in rural areas will nonetheless prompt citizens to choose living in the city – in other words, whether the attitude that rural environments are safer and more natural living environments will triumph over the adversities with which the rural population is faced. Some of the most prominent adversities are poor infrastructure and limited availability of healthcare services, depending on the level of regional development. If the claims stand that the COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the connections between human health and the health of ecosystems, as highlighted in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (EU, 2020), and that increased reverse migrations (city to countryside) occur throughout the world, this would be the moment to change Serbian policies aimed at rural areas and boost investments in their properly planned development.

Empathy and solidarity are of paramount importance as factors of the social component of human environment, both within local communities and globally. The search for a global response to COVID-19, regardless of all the disagreements regarding the origin of the virus, measures, vaccines, and distribution of aid, suggests a certain degree of international solidarity. With regard to the respondents in this study, only slightly more than a half stated that they cared for someone outside their household during the pandemic, which could indicate alienation and lack of solidarity on the one hand, but may also be interpreted as a consequence of fear of the diseases due to confusing and often contradictory statements of physicians and officials concerning virus transmission and risk of contagion. In other words, it is entirely possible that insistence on physical distancing helped create an image of other people as risk carriers, which resulted in stigmatization and absence of solidarity in some respondents. Family solidarity in the pandemic was shown to be the most powerful and most frequent mechanism of support for the sick, the isolated, and the elderly during the state of emergency. The importance of family was also corroborated by the piece of data that the respondents who were sick and isolated predominantly received help and support from their family members and that most of the other respondents would ask for help and support from their family members.

Since risks associated with the pandemic require responsible actions from institutions, another objective of the study was to determine the respondents' satisfaction with the work of specific institutions/organizations during the pandemic. The highest degree of dissatisfaction was expressed in relation to political institutions, while the respondents were most satisfied with the work of the healthcare system, the military, the education system, the social welfare system, and the banks. Considering the general

importance of information, especially during the crisis, it was interesting to learn how satisfied citizens were with media activities during the first wave of the pandemic. The deepest dissatisfaction was expressed for the work of Serbian print media and radio and TV stations, while the greatest satisfaction was expressed in relation to the work of digital media. Even though such results can be partially explained by the fact that the surveyed population sample consisted mostly of younger and middle-aged population, it should be noted that, owing to restricted mobility, the pandemic prompted increased use of digital technologies. It was thus reasonable to examine the efficiency of specific media in a crisis as well as the longevity of information source preferences after the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic raised numerous research questions: from the impact of the pandemic on the economy, the environment, health, personal liberties, and democracy to interpersonal and international relations. It is up to researchers, prominently including sociologists, to continue to deal with these issues and seek adequate solutions for mitigating the negative impacts of this infectious disease. The role of sociologists is to either come up with new or adapt the existing concepts and theories in order to explain the changes caused by the health crisis: perception of risk sources, interpersonal trust and confidence in institutions, types of coping with existential risks among specific population groups, growing inequalities in access to proper medical treatment, limited freedoms in a crisis, and longevity of the newly-built 'barriers' toward other people; in particular, sociologists need to examine the longevity of these changes.

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