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# Elections and COVID-19 Response Analysis

## *2020 Parliamentary Elections in Serbia*



**December 2020**

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Elections and COVID-19 Response Analysis: 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Serbia  
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## Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has placed a burden on electoral processes worldwide. As demonstrated in the *Global Democracy & COVID-19: Upgrading International Support* report under the Defend Democracy global initiative, the risks countries are now facing are not only those directly related to the spread of COVID-19 during electoral events, but also those that threaten to disrupt the democratic process, influence trust and enfranchisement of democratic rights and the preservation of democratic principles.<sup>1</sup> Based on data compiled by The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and IFES,<sup>2</sup> at least 25 referendums, national, local and presidential elections in Europe were postponed in the period between the March 1 and September 1, due to the outbreak of the coronavirus. Out of this number, four elections are postponed to 2021,<sup>3</sup> 12 are postponed to the end of the year and nine, including the Serbian parliamentary elections, were held after initial postponement. According to this same record, the parliamentary elections in Serbia, held on June 21 were the first national elections to take place in Europe amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic.

As the first country in the region to hold national elections during COVID-19, the Serbian experience in organizing national elections during the pandemic offers insight into the impact of the pandemic on the electoral process. Using assessment findings and lessons learned based on IFES' experiences while providing assistance in-country is of great importance to inform and direct the administration of elections in other countries in the region and beyond. As a part of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Global Elections and Political Transitions (GEPT) project *Political Process Strengthening Activity in Serbia*, in the weeks prior to the June 21 elections, IFES provided technical assistance and support to the Republic Electoral Commission of Serbia (RIK) to assess and address risks related to COVID-19 during the election period as well as to inform voters and polling board members on adapted procedures and measures to ensure the safety and integrity of the 2020 parliamentary elections.

The goal of this analysis is to provide a comprehensive assessment of how electoral and government authorities in Serbia adjusted planning and operations to address COVID-19-related concerns. This includes the work of election administration, government institutions and electoral stakeholders, risk mitigation efforts, inclusive enfranchisement and overall public confidence and trust in the electoral process. The analysis is based on extensive IFES research under its COVID-19 Briefing Series,<sup>4</sup> a COVID-19-specific risk assessment, Election Day observations, stakeholder discussions and an evaluation of the impact of implemented mitigation measures and procedures. It assesses not only different aspects of the election process, but also the preconditions and ramifications that the COVID-19 response influenced. The analysis offers an in-depth reflection of the pre- and post-election environment, while giving a methodological assessment of the implementation of international good practices and procedures recommended in order to ensure the safety, inclusion and meaningful participation of all actors in the electoral

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ned.org/new-report-on-covid-19-and-democracy-calls-for-urgent-measures-by-governments-and-civil-society/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>  
<https://www.ifes.org/publications/global-impact-covid-19-elections>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/electoral-assistance/elecdata-covid-impact>

<sup>4</sup> The IFES COVID-19 Briefing Series can be found at <https://www.ifes.org/ifes-covid-19-briefing-series>

process. The aim of the study is not only to give an analysis of the COVID-19 response and offer recommendations on how to overcome and address the challenges governments are facing in regards to organizing elections during the pandemic, but also to determine some of the risks that threaten the democratic process and how such risks can be mitigated.

In that regard, this analysis is focused on the risks and challenges that are beyond Election Day mitigation measures, including protecting electoral integrity in an infodemic, ensuring inclusion and meaningful political participation, preserving independent and accountable institutions in respect to the rule of law and preventing government corruption during crises.

## Background of Elections and COVID-19 In Serbia

### Context of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections

The 2020 Serbian parliamentary elections were called by President Aleksandar Vučić on March 4, 2020 and scheduled for April 26 before the COVID-19 pandemic postponement was announced on March 16. Following a two-month State of Emergency until 6 May, the elections were held on June 21. Repeated elections were held on July 1 in 234 polling stations following cited irregularities, including in election result tabulation.<sup>5</sup> According to the election management body (EMB), RIK, more than six million Serbian citizens were eligible to vote in these elections and more than three million citizens turned out to vote at 8,253 polling stations in and outside the country (48.9 percent), the lowest participation in parliamentary elections since 2000.<sup>6 7</sup> The organization of the elections was led by the RIK, which coordinated the training and work of almost 50,000 polling board members who administered the elections on Election Day. After the last two parliamentary elections, these parliamentary elections were scheduled regularly, at the end of the mandate, and were held together with provincial and local elections.

Overall, 21 candidate lists were submitted and accepted by the RIK, presenting around 3,400 parliamentary candidates running for 250 seats in the National Assembly. With the final count tallied, just three lists passed the minimum threshold<sup>8</sup> and entered the National Assembly: the ruling party Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) list Aleksandar Vučić – Za Našu Decu; Ivica Dačić – “Socijalistička partija Srbije (SPS), Jedinstvena Srbija (JS) – Dragan Marković Palma”; and Aleksandar Šapić - Pobeda Za Srbiju.<sup>9</sup> The elections were observed by two national missions,<sup>10</sup> as well as by accredited international observer missions from the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO). The ODIHR mission, initially announced as a full assessment mission, was scaled down to eight long-term observers. The election campaign was also monitored by the

<sup>5</sup> The annulment of voting in 234 polling stations was the largest in Serbia in the past 20 years, with 203,346 citizens eligible to recast their votes. This volume of new votes held the possibility to somewhat alter election results (Center for Research Transparency and Accountability -CRTA, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Serbia Public Opinion Poll, June 2020, National Democratic Institute.

<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the 2016 parliamentary elections had a turnout rate of 56% while the 2012 parliamentary elections turnout rate was 58% and the 2008 parliamentary elections turnout rate was 61%.

<sup>8</sup> Prior to this election cycle, the threshold to enter the National Assembly was five percent of the total number of votes. In February 2020, the National Assembly approved a change in the law to lower the threshold to three percent.

<sup>9</sup> There were also four minority lists accepted, which are exempt from the required threshold.

<sup>10</sup> CRTA - “Citizens on Watch” mission; The Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) observation mission.

Anti-Corruption Agency of Serbia (ACAS), who deployed 120 observers to monitor the campaign nationally, and the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (REM).

The context in which elections were held was altogether unprecedented for all actors, including a partial opposition boycott, continued democratic backsliding<sup>11</sup> and extreme political polarization, in addition to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Once the State of Emergency was lifted following a steady decrease in reported cases, the Serbian government was obliged to provide conditions for the safe resumption of the campaign while ensuring the rights of all electoral participants were protected. Even though the government reported lower cases and higher containment, and the ban on gatherings and public events was lifted, a number of electoral contestants held reservations in conducting traditional campaign activities. This restraint not only drew on the conditions of the pandemic and related health considerations, but also extended to long-standing issues such as the lack of an independent media environment,<sup>12</sup> undue voter pressure, the abuse of state resources and other irregularities noted in previous election periods.<sup>13</sup>

According to the findings from the OSCE/ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission preliminary report<sup>14</sup> and the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability's (CRTA) observation report,<sup>15</sup> a variety of irregularities and challenges were noted in the campaign and on Election Day. The OSCE/ODIHR preliminary statement highlighted that the campaign saw the ruling party dominate the electoral environment, especially in the media, concluding that "the advantage enjoyed by the governing parties, the decision of some opposition parties to boycott the elections, and limited policy debate narrowed the choice and information available to voters."<sup>16</sup> CRTA's initial report stated that while the parliamentary elections met minimum democratic standards, their observers noted irregularities in almost ten percent of polling stations, twice as many as in the 2016 parliamentary elections.<sup>17</sup>

Aside from the complex political environment and partial opposition boycott, there were also challenges concerning the administration of elections during the pandemic. By law,<sup>18</sup> RIK had formal jurisdiction in determining changes to Election Day procedures, including the possibility to amend them in order to ensure safety of voters and poll workers on Election Day. At the same time, the development of mitigation measures and subsequent guidance were within the mandate of the COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team, the task force formed to address the government's pandemic response. RIK received this official guidance from the task

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<sup>11</sup> Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2020* ranks Serbia in the global largest declines in democratic freedoms in the last ten years.

<sup>12</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) Needs Assessment Mission Report, Parliamentary Elections in Serbia, 2020, pages 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/serbia/466167>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/serbia/455155>

<sup>15</sup> <https://crt.rs/en/summary-crt-long-term-observation-report-elections-2020>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/e/455155.pdf>, page 1.

<sup>17</sup> <https://betabriefing.com/news/politics/11252-crt-serbian-election-meets-minimum-democratic-standards>

<sup>18</sup> The Law on the Election of Members of Parliament, Article 34 states the Republic Electoral Commission is to "prescribe the forms and rules for carrying out the electoral procedures" and in the Article 37 of the Law it is stated that: "More detailed rules of procedures of the polling board shall be defined by the Republic Electoral Commission."

force on June 15, only days before the elections, making it more difficult to implement and communicate mitigation measures appropriately.<sup>19</sup>

## Government's Response to COVID-19 and Public Perception of Response

### *Government narrative*

During a press conference in late February 2020, President Vučić dismissed fears of the novel coronavirus as an overblown threat. However, the narrative completely changed in March when President Vučić, President of the National Assembly Maja Gojković and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić jointly declared a state of emergency that led to the postponement of the elections. The State of Emergency also suspended the ongoing election campaign and the government decision to ban gatherings of more than fifty people enabled suspension of parliamentary sessions.<sup>20 21</sup>

During the peak of the crisis, restrictive measures were justified as part of the government's determination to protect citizens' lives. President Vučić stated on several occasions that he personally arranged the purchase of ventilators and other essential equipment on the "semi-black market" to ensure Serbians would be safe despite a global shortage of these items.<sup>22</sup> CRTA and Transparency Serbia, both reported that President Vučić had continued campaigning during the State of Emergency when he traveled to a hospital in Novi Pazar to personally deliver medical equipment.<sup>23</sup>

After the State of Emergency was lifted, most Serbians, including leading public figures, abandoned preventive practices. President Vučić also defended authorities who allowed 25,000 people to attend a soccer match in June.<sup>24</sup> Four days before the election, during a press conference in which the main topic was the upcoming talks on Kosovo, President Vučić answered a question about the elections saying that "it is important for me that people in the election boards wear masks. Those who come to vote should stay as short as possible. That is due to technical things. The success of the list I lead is important to me."<sup>25</sup>

Following the June 22 publication of a Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) report, accusations that the government concealed accurate data in order to hold the elections with support from citizens spread.<sup>26</sup> Opposition parties and civil society claimed the action had

<sup>19</sup> <https://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Zakljucak-Kriznog-staba-za-suzbijanje-zarazne-bolesti-COVID-19-u-okviru-odrzavanja-predstojećih-izbora.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.danas.rs/politika/maja-gojkovic-tvrdi-da-je-vanredno-stanje-vedeno-u-skladu-sa-ustavom/>

<sup>21</sup> This interpretation of the Law, that enabled suspension of the Parliamentary work based on the Government decree was challenged by different actors - <https://www.istinomer.rs/izjava/saziv-parlamenta-nemoguc-zbog-zabrane-skupovavise-od-50-ljudi/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/watchdogs-warn-of-high-corruption-risks-amid-virus.html>

<sup>23</sup> V.I.P. Daily News Report, Wednesday, April 8, 2020 (CRTA).

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.transparentnost.org.rs/index.php/sr/aktivnosti-2/pod-lupom/11424-korona-kampanja> (Transparency Serbia).

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.eurosport.com/football/serbia-lets-25000-attend-soccer-derby-as-coronavirus-lockdown-eases\\_sto7772193/story.shtml](https://www.eurosport.com/football/serbia-lets-25000-attend-soccer-derby-as-coronavirus-lockdown-eases_sto7772193/story.shtml)

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2020&mm=06&dd=17&nav\\_id=108711](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2020&mm=06&dd=17&nav_id=108711)

<sup>27</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/22/serbia-under-reported-covid-19-deaths-and-infections-data-shows/>



diminished trust in the elections and threatened the safety of citizens, while also leading to anticipated increases in the number of cases.<sup>27</sup> Despite denying the accusations that elections had an impact on the rise of cases in the days following them, the government changed its narrative, stating that the epidemiological situation had become critical and that COVID-19 posed a significant public health risk.

### *Government measures*

In the lead up to the lifting of the State of Emergency, although restrictive, the measures imposed by the Serbian government were implemented selectively. Indoor gathering restrictions affected schools, theaters and restaurants, but companies were allowed to continue to require their employees to show up. The harsh penalties established to sanction curfew violations were also not enforced against some churchgoers.<sup>28</sup>

In the post-election period, measures began to be reintroduced. On July 3, two days after repeated elections took place in 234 polling stations across the country, an emergency situation was declared in Belgrade, with stricter measures in place to contain the resurgence of the virus.<sup>29</sup> On July 17, additional measures were put in place across the whole country and by the July 22, an emergency situation was declared in more than 30 municipalities across Serbia.<sup>30</sup> Additional measures issued on July 17<sup>31</sup> again raised a ban on public gatherings for more than 10 people,<sup>32</sup> and introduced face mask requirements in all communal and indoor spaces as well as in outdoor spaces where adequate distance could not be kept. As of the date of this report, face masks are still required in closed spaces,<sup>33</sup> while in the meantime theaters and cinemas are allowed to open while respecting measures, cafe and restaurant working hours have been prolonged<sup>34</sup> and the ban on public gatherings was amended to allow gathering of up to 30 people.<sup>35</sup> On August 24, the government again amended the decree on the measures for preventing and suppression of the infectious disease COVID-19 to allow public gatherings of up to 500 people during cultural events in closed environments while respecting measures in place (social distancing and wearing face masks). On September 1, schools re-opened in hybrid forms, allowing parents to decide whether their children will attend classes online or in school.<sup>36</sup>

The timeline below (*Table 1*) shows the main measures taken by the government during the public health crisis.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/17/serbia-denies-hiding-covid-19-impact-to-push-ahead-with-election>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.balkanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Serbia/Serbia-coronavirus-and-autocracy-200873>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30703877.html>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Serbia.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/zbog-epidemije-u-vise-od-30-gradova-i-opstina-proglasena-vanredna-situacija/>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/uredba/2020/100/1/sq>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/nove-mere-kriznog-staba-maske-obavezne-na-teritoriji-cele-srbije/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/uredba/2020/66/1/reg>

<sup>35</sup> Odluka Vlade: Uredba o dopuni Uredbe o merama za sprečavanje i suzbijanje zarazne bolesti COVID-19, Službeni glasnik RS 109/20, 27 avgust, 2020

<sup>36</sup> Odluka Vlade: Naredba o izmeni Naredbe o zabrani okupljanja u Republici Srbiji na javnim mestima u zatvorenom i otvorenom prostoru, Službeni glasnik RS 111/20, 28 avgust, 2020

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/250484/Sarcevic-Roditelji-biraju-da-li-ce-im-deca-ici-u-skolu-ili-nastavu-pratiti-na-daljinu.html>

Date	Event
March 6	First confirmed case of COVID-19
March 13	The government forms the <i>COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team</i>
March 15	With 55 confirmed cases and no deaths, President Aleksandar Vučić declares a strict state of emergency, including the following measures:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Closing of Serbian borders to all foreigners not living in Serbia</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Mandatory self-quarantine of 14 days to Serbian citizens reentering the country (violators subject to criminal charges of three years in prison)</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Closing of all schools, universities, and kindergartens</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Public transportation suspended at night and reduced during daytime</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Military deployed to guard hospitals and police monitoring people in self-isolation</i></li> </ul>
March 16	RIK decides to suspend all electoral activities and postpone the parliamentary and local elections originally scheduled for April 26
March 21	Movement of older people is restricted
March 28	With 659 confirmed cases and 10 deaths, new restrictive measures are implemented:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Self-isolation for those reentering the country extended from 14 to 28 days</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Weekend curfews extended (from 5pm start to 3pm start)</i></li> </ul>
April 2	• <i>Temporary hospitals opened for less severe cases</i>
	New restrictive measures are introduced:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Curfew extended once again, starting at 1pm</i></li> </ul>
April 2	• <i>Public gatherings of more than two people are banned</i>
April 10	The government announces the first economic relief package, which includes tax and other measures for the private sector in addition to unconditional direct cash transfers to all citizens over 18 and a one-time payment to all pensioners.
April 13	First cases in retirement and nursing homes <sup>37</sup>
April 21-30	Beginning of lifts of restrictions:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Curfew is shortened</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Public transportation between cities is reestablished</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Markets, beauty salons, fitness centers, and gyms are allowed to open</i></li> </ul>
April 26	Citizens start to bang pots in protest of the government's restrictive measures
May 5	The government announces June 21 as the new date for elections

<sup>37</sup>In the city of Niš, one nursing home has 144 confirmed cases and its director is arrested for neglect.

May 6	State of Emergency is lifted, no enforcement of curfews. Social distancing and face mask requirements still in place in public transport
June 6	Sudden jump in number of recoveries as methodology changes to require only one negative COVID-19 PCR test (as opposed to two 24 hours apart)
June 13	<i>COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team</i> issues recommended instructions for election mitigation measures
June 15	RIK adopts recommended instructions from the <i>COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team</i>
June 21	<b>Election Day</b>
July 1	Repeated elections are held in 234 polling stations
	Restrictive measures are reintroduced in cities with emergency situation:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Face masks required on public transportation and indoor spaces</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Limited number of people in gatherings (five people)</i></li> </ul>
July 3	Emergency situation announced in Belgrade
July 17	Restriction measures extended to all of Serbia:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Face masks required (indoors and outdoors when there is no possibility for keeping the distance)</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Limited number of people in gatherings (limited to ten persons, indoors and outdoors)</i></li> </ul>
August 24	Some restrictions measures lifted:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Opening of theaters, cinemas and visits allowed in the assisted living facilities</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Concerts in the cultural institutions allowed (up to 500 people with respect of the measures)</i></li> </ul>
August 30	The government adopts new set of economic measures to help the economy <sup>38</sup>
August 28	Relaxation of some of the restrictive measures (in the LSG where the emergency situation was declared):
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Limited number of people on gatherings raised to thirty</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Catering facilities working hours prolonged</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Masks still required in communal spaces</i></li> </ul>
September 1	Schools are opened under the altered working regime

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.paragraf.rs/koronavirus/strucni-komentari/analiza-novih-mera-pomoci-privredi-direktna-davanja-fiskalne-pogodnosti-privatni-sektor.html>

### *Serbia's COVID-19 task force*

Across the globe, countries have almost uniformly established some sort of a task force or working group charged with handling the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>39</sup> Serbia was no exception, as on March 13, one week after the authorities publicly announced Serbia's first COVID-19 cases, the *COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team* was established, led by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, but also included membership of the Minister of Health and the Director of the Health Insurance Fund, among others.

The exact composition of this task force was unclear, as the names of the medical or public health experts and government representatives involved in the group were not officially available ahead of the elections.<sup>40</sup> According to interlocutors, different medical doctors talked to the press and it was not always clear whether they were part of the task force. President Vučić took the spotlight most of the time, as he reportedly personally delivered some of the medical equipment across the country.<sup>41</sup> Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, as head of the task force, stated that, “our health system remains functional thanks to Vučić.”<sup>42</sup> It can, however, be established that RIK was not an official member of the task force and therefore had to rely on information received from the task force to inform decisions.

### *Public perception*

According to IPSOS survey results published in late April, 92 percent of Serbians approved of the government's COVID-19 measures.<sup>43</sup> The flattened curve and the relatively low number of deaths reported in the country may have helped boost perception that the virus did not pose an imminent threat. The lifting of restrictive measures may have served as further fodder for citizens to perceive lower risks to participate in the elections and thus increase turnout.

Public perception and timing were particularly important factors as they were likely to have affected the government's delayed action in issuing instructions on mitigation measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 during elections. As citizens were resuming their normal lives under the assumption that the crisis was over, reinstating measures of any kind, especially for Election Day, may have indicated the COVID-19 threat persisted and could undermine government efforts to entice voters' participation in the elections.

Following the reinstatement of restriction measures and national lockdown, public perception turned sour. On July 8, thousands of protesters gathered in front of the National Assembly to protest the newly introduced weekend-long curfew, resulting in clashes with the police and the

<sup>39</sup> For a brief overview of COVID-19 Task Forces and EMB collaborations, please see a recent paper published by the British Academy <https://www.ifes.org/publications/ifes-experts-co-author-british-academy-briefing-elections-during-covid-19>

<sup>40</sup> In the post-election period, after the public debate and public pressure, the membership of the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team was published in the media <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a624448/Ko-su-sve-clanovi-Kriznog-staba.html>

<sup>41</sup> <https://today.rtl.lu/news/world/a/1531178.html>

<sup>42</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/07/serbias-president-turned-the-pandemic-into-a-tacky-campaign/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/ipsos-survey-92-of-citizens-support-government-measures-against-coronavirus/>

use of tear gas bombs, which led to injuries among protesters and police alike.<sup>44</sup> Protests continued until President Vučić recalled the curfew, though continued with plans for the lockdown.<sup>45</sup> Young people were especially concerned when President Vučić announced that there will be more strict measures introduced and that students' dorms in Belgrade will be closed and students sent home, due to alleged rise in the number of people infected in Belgrade. Almost immediately after the announcement, there were student protests organized in different parts of the city. One of those protests ended in front of the Serbian Parliament<sup>46</sup> where students interviewed by media stated they would not go home and that “the government allowed coffee shops to work, elections to be held, everything was allowed, and now as soon as the elections are over, they need to abandon their dorms.”<sup>47</sup> The decision on closing the dorms was eventually recalled, but it seems that together with the protests, allegations that the government hid the real COVID-19 data and its different approaches to public communication damaged its reputation and perception.

## Elections and COVID-19 Response Analysis

### Elections and COVID-19 Response Analysis Methodology

The foundation of this analysis methodology is IFES' COVID-19 Briefing Series, which is a collection of briefing papers on key aspects of the electoral and democratic process, and how the COVID-19 pandemic might impact them.<sup>48</sup> These papers present a solid ground for assessing and reflecting on the relevant, cross-cutting issues that have, or could have, influenced the preservation of democracy, safeguarding citizens' health and the elections and ensuring enfranchisement during the pandemic.

Using the discussion on best practices on multiple areas of the electoral process in these briefing papers, IFES developed a list of key indicators under each theme. These indicators pose questions to effectively analyze the extent to which electoral stakeholders, specifically state institutions, responded to the challenges associated with conducting the Serbian parliamentary elections on June 21 during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The full list of indicators can be found as an annex to this report.

IFES employed both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to assess the indicators, though it should be emphasized that both data collection methods have limitations that do not provide a fully representative assessment of all opinions and experiences by engaged stakeholders and citizens. Through a post-election public opinion survey, IFES was able to measure citizen perspectives on how COVID-19 affected the elections and on the perception of

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<sup>44</sup> <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/07/08/violent-protests-in-serbia-as-vucic-announces-another-lockdown-after-weeks-of-alleged-pre-election-cover-ups/>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/08/coronavirus-protesters-attempt-to-storm-parliament-in-serbia-as-lockdown-measures-are-rein>

<sup>46</sup> <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a615964/Studenti-zvizducima-reagovali-na-najavu-zatvaranja-domova-protest-u-Studenjaku.html>

<sup>47</sup> <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a615964/Studenti-zvizducima-reagovali-na-najavu-zatvaranja-domova-protest-u-Studenjaku.html>

<sup>48</sup> The IFES COVID-19 Briefing Series can be found at <https://www.ifes.org/ifes-covid-19-briefing-series>.

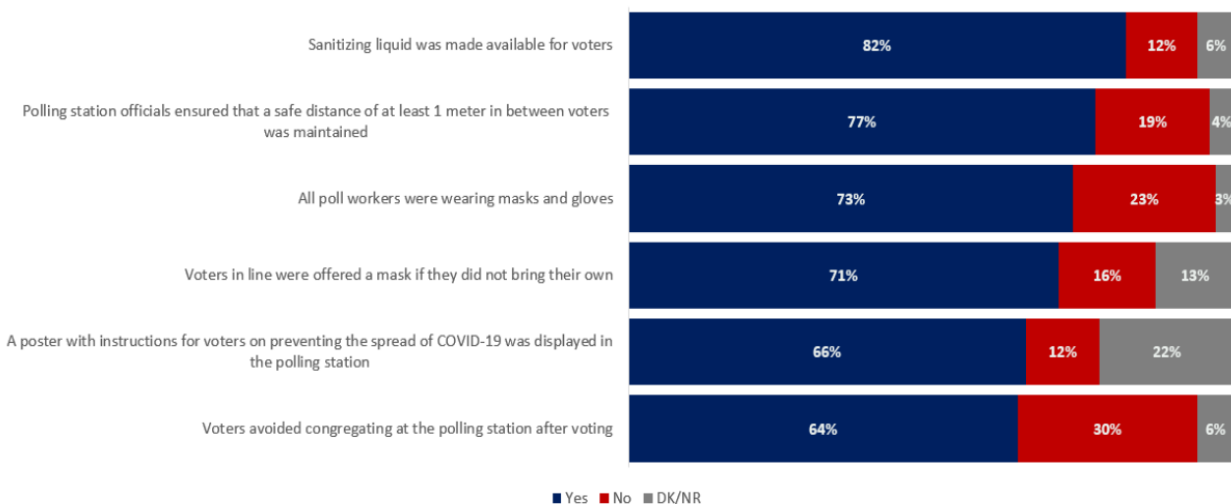


the government's COVID-19 response as it related to the elections, with the caveat that it was not possible for data to be disaggregated by multiple demographics, including disability or ethnic/linguistic minority identity.<sup>49</sup>

To complement this data, IFES conducted a series of stakeholder consultations, including with election administration authorities, polling board members, civil society and media representatives, government institution officials, political party members, observer missions and international organizations. Stakeholders were interviewed with the promise of anonymity to ensure transparent and honest responses to questions posed by IFES. IFES experts developed a list of standardized questions that informed the analysis of stakeholders' responses to the challenges posed by COVID-19, and relevant questions were used to collect data in these stakeholder consultations. IFES also reviewed both legal and public outreach documentation in order to further inform the analysis and both complement and fact check responses provided by stakeholders.

## Public Opinion of COVID-19 and Elections

In IFES' post-election survey, respondents were positive on the conduct of elections with 31 percent saying the elections were completely legitimate and 29 percent stating there were only some flaws but were generally legitimate. Respondents also expressed an overall satisfaction of their Election Day experience, with 87 percent expressing they were satisfied with the organization of the process inside the polling station, 76 percent satisfied with the impartiality of polling staff, and 74 percent satisfied with the competence of the polling boards. The majority of respondents also confirmed they experienced mitigation measures put in place by the government for Election Day, including the availability of sanitizing liquid, maintenance of social distancing and the use of masks and gloves.



Graph 1: "For each one, please say YES if you experienced it or NO if you did not experience it personally on Election Day:" (n=687), IFES post-election survey, 2020.

<sup>49</sup> IFES' post-election survey was conducted between August 5-9, 2020.

It was also noted that respondents were mixed in their confidence of RIK to organize legitimate elections; 50 percent had at least some degree of confidence while 46 percent had little to no confidence in RIK at all. The discrepancy between the mixed perception of RIK but overall positive view of the conduct of elections reflects the need for RIK to more transparently address public concerns and create communication channels that highlight its work, which would especially be useful in crisis situations, such as the one posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Risk Mitigation in the Electoral Process

Election administration can lack comprehensive plans to manage electoral activities amid widespread disease outbreaks, leading to insufficient time, resources and information to make necessary adjustments and hold election events safely when public health crises suddenly materialize. In order to assess how election administration and government authorities considered and implemented risk mitigation in the electoral process, IFES used the following indicators to assess Serbia's COVID-19 response in this regard:

- Recommended mitigation measures were appropriately adopted;
- Adopted mitigation measures were communicated to voters and poll workers in an inclusive and comprehensive manner;
- Mitigation measures were appropriately followed by voters and poll workers;
- Variance in the number of new COVID-19 cases 12 days before Election Day and 2-14 days after Election Day;
- Designated COVID-19 task force was relevant and effective in implementing its mandate in relation to the electoral process.

### *Appropriateness of COVID-19 mitigation measures*

To assess the overall appropriateness of mitigation measures adopted and implemented by government authorities, IFES analyzed 1) the extent to which the mitigation plan covered existing risks, 2) the degree to which measures were coordinated with competent authorities and carefully planned, 3) whether resources were sufficient to allow for proper implementation, and 4) whether measures were adopted consistently throughout the country. Given that the mitigation measures were issued for Election Day only, IFES' analysis does not extend to the safety of pre-electoral activities such as voter registration, candidate nomination or initial polling board members training sessions.

The official recommended instructions for Election Day mitigation measures issued by the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team and implemented by the election administration made it mandatory for polling board members to wear face masks and gloves and recommended voters to wear face masks. It also required social distancing of minimum one meter (3.3 feet) to be followed at all times, including during queueing and in the set-up of poll worker seating and polling booths. Polling boards were obliged to keep the polling stations well-ventilated and sanitized. Polling board members were also requested to sanitize their hands frequently. Finally, voters were reminded not to engage in personal contact with others, not to stay longer than 15 minutes at the polling station and to avoid gathering outside the polling station after voting.

While the measures adopted for Election Day in theory covered all major transmission factors (reducing chances of infection by respiratory droplets and contaminated surfaces), it is worth noting that there were no attempts to introduce or expand any alternative remote methods of voting to account for the COVID-19 risks. The Serbian legal framework allows for mobile teams to visit voters who are not able to attend a polling station (“vote outside the polling station”), but there was contradictory information on the expanded role of these mobile teams, including the extent to which they were allowed in assisted-living facilities and hospitals, which may have had a disproportionate impact on older voters and voters with disabilities. Although the percentage of voters who requested to vote from home increased from 1.5 percent in 2016 to 3.3 percent in 2020, it was not clear to what extent this increase was due to COVID-19. It was also unclear whether voters in self-isolation or in quarantine could have requested a visit from the mobile team, leaving them with a difficult choice between foregoing their right to vote or potentially putting others at risk of infection.

As mentioned earlier in this report, although RIK’s mandate allowed for it to make decisions on the “forms and rules for carrying out the electoral procedures,”<sup>50</sup> the commission only acted upon receiving official recommended instructions from the task force, six days before Election Day.<sup>51</sup> Interlocutors did confirm that RIK had been consulted by the task force while developing guidance for Election Day, but this delay to adopt crucial measures, however, evidences a lack of a proactive and timely approach to issuing mitigation measures and communicating with the public. Election administration officials interviewed for this post-election analysis shared that they knew very little about the process through which the task force developed the mitigation measures, mentioning they had no insight into the process. One polling board representative said that consulting polling board members would have helped identify the limitations of some mitigation measures early (such as obstacles to social distancing in certain small polling stations). An election administration official said this issue was raised by some during RIK meetings, but never put in the agenda to be addressed.

Even with little time between the implementation of mitigation measures and Election Day, the National Health Insurance Fund provided needed protective material, which was distributed to polling stations across the country, indicating that lack of resources and logistical disruptions were not an issue. During IFES’ visits to polling stations, the teams observed that several boxes of face masks were labeled as coming from the European Union and from China, possibly through donations. The National Health Insurance Fund did not publicly release detailed information on how items were procured or received. On March 11, the Serbian government issued a decree making all information on medical equipment and resources, as well as donations and procurement processes, strictly confidential.<sup>52</sup> According to CRTA’s preliminary report on Election Day,<sup>53</sup> 97 percent of polling stations had received the kits with personal protective equipment (PPE) and disinfectant.

Based on findings from IFES’ post-election survey, Serbians were largely satisfied with the efforts of RIK to protect voters from the spread of COVID-19, with 69 percent expressing their

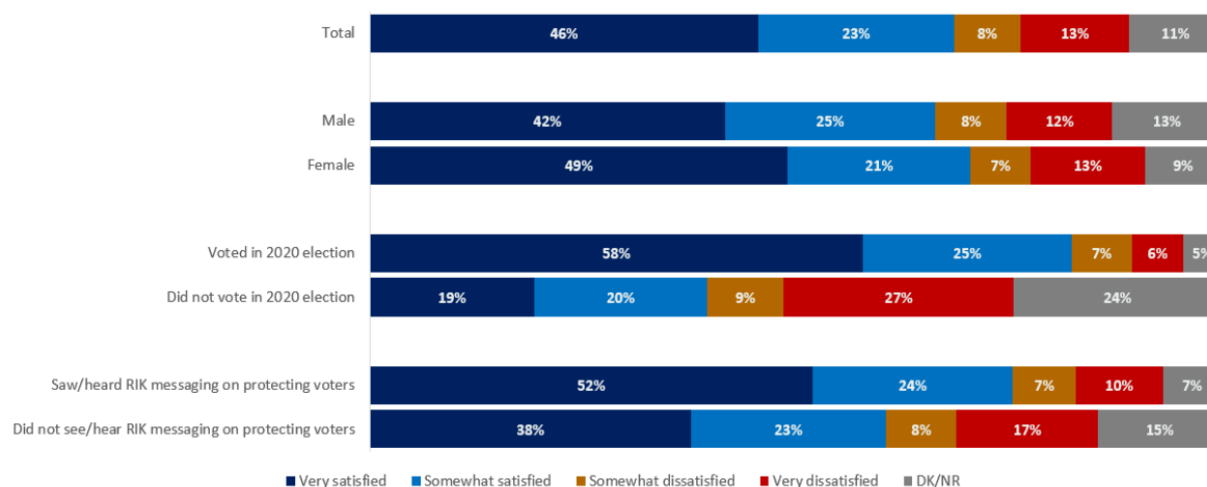
<sup>50</sup> Law on the Election of Members of Parliament, Article 34.

<sup>51</sup> The recommendations from the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team were not received by RIK until June 15, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Government Decision Number 00-96/2000-1. This decision was not released publicly.

<sup>53</sup> <https://cрта.rs/en/elections-2020-preliminary-report-on-the-election-day-june-21st-2020>

satisfaction. Satisfaction was even higher among respondents who also confirmed they had either saw or heard RIK voter information messages.



Graph 2: “How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the measures implemented by the Republic Electoral Commission to protect voters from COVID-19 spread during recent parliamentary elections?” (n=1,000), IFES post-election survey, 2020.

### *Appropriateness of training of polling board members and communication and dissemination of COVID-19 measures*

The delay in implementation of mitigation measures naturally impacted RIK's and other stakeholders' capacity to disseminate them to the public. The official communication from RIK to both voters and poll workers was issued only four days before Election Day, long after training sessions for polling board members had been completed. No new or additional training on COVID-19 mitigation measures were provided to polling board members by election administration, though the instructions for these measures were delivered to polling stations with polling station kits and election materials.

During interviews with election administration officials and observer groups, IFES gathered different perspectives from those representing the ruling party and those representing opposing parties. Despite the fact that instructions were included in polling station kits, there were varying accounts of the extent to which polling board members were given ample access and time to review and familiarize themselves with the instructions. While one party polling board member seemed to be satisfied with the level of information received on COVID-19 mitigation measures, other parties' polling board members mentioned not having officially received the instructions and only having had access to it through the media. Polling board members from other parties also mentioned that the instructions produced by the task force were not clear about who was responsible for ensuring implementation of mitigation measures and that they had not had a chance to discuss the information in the document. The aforementioned party polling board member, however, reported that polling board chairs in his/her region organized an informational meeting on mitigation measures a few days before the election.

Voters relied on public service announcements (PSAs) issued via television, radio and social media a few days before Election Day, newspaper leaflets with key information and a poster with detailed instructions displayed at polling station. To address lack of time and capacity to design, produce and disseminate some of these materials, RIK sought external support from IFES to complete these efforts. Despite such efforts, according to IFES' post-election survey results, only 54 percent of respondents said they were exposed to information on COVID-19 mitigation measures in place before Election Day. A large majority of those (86 percent) were exposed through the television PSA. Fifteen percent of respondents stated having seen the leaflet in the newspapers, 10 percent having heard the message on the radio and only nine percent reported having seen related information on the internet, including social media.

At the time of this analysis, RIK did not have a Facebook page and its Instagram account only had around 1,000 followers. RIK's Instagram post related to the COVID-19 mitigation measures was promoted to users of all demographics in the country, but the low percentage of respondents who reported seeing this indicates that RIK needs to enhance its online presence. However, among those who were exposed to RIK's COVID-19 messages before Election Day, 86 percent considered it to be very or somewhat useful, though most messages were unable to be provided in accessible formats (see *Targeted and inclusive information dissemination* section below for further details).

Also, according to the same survey, a majority of voters (66 percent) who turned out to vote acknowledged seeing the poster with COVID-19 guidance at their polling station on Election Day, confirming the importance of making this information visible and prominent. During IFES' visits to some polling stations in Belgrade on Election Day, the teams noticed that although most posters were displayed in visible spots, some were placed far from voters and polling board members. It was also noticed that, especially in schools, where the walls were full of other posters and drawings from students, the posters became less prominent. Some polling stations tried to place them above boards and other items already hanging on the walls, but signs placed too high were also hard to see. For more consistent and effective placing of posters, specific guidelines could have been provided to polling board members. Guidance should include the placement of posters close to their intended audience and at the eye level.

### *Level of compliance with mitigation measures*

Even when EMBs take appropriate measures and provide necessary supplies for their implementation, *compliance* can be a major challenge. This is particularly evident when people perceive the risk posed by COVID-19 to be low and therefore are more likely to be complacent, as well as when there are no mechanisms available to ensure respect to the rules, as was the case in Serbia ahead of the elections. According to IFES' pre-election survey in Serbia,<sup>54</sup> on a scale from zero to 10, 10 being extremely concerned about the health of respondents and their family because of coronavirus, citizens averaged 5.32, indicating relatively low levels of fear.<sup>55</sup> This relatively low level of fear may have been connected to government messaging ahead of Election Day, fueled by the under reporting of new cases and deaths. Further, RIK also did not

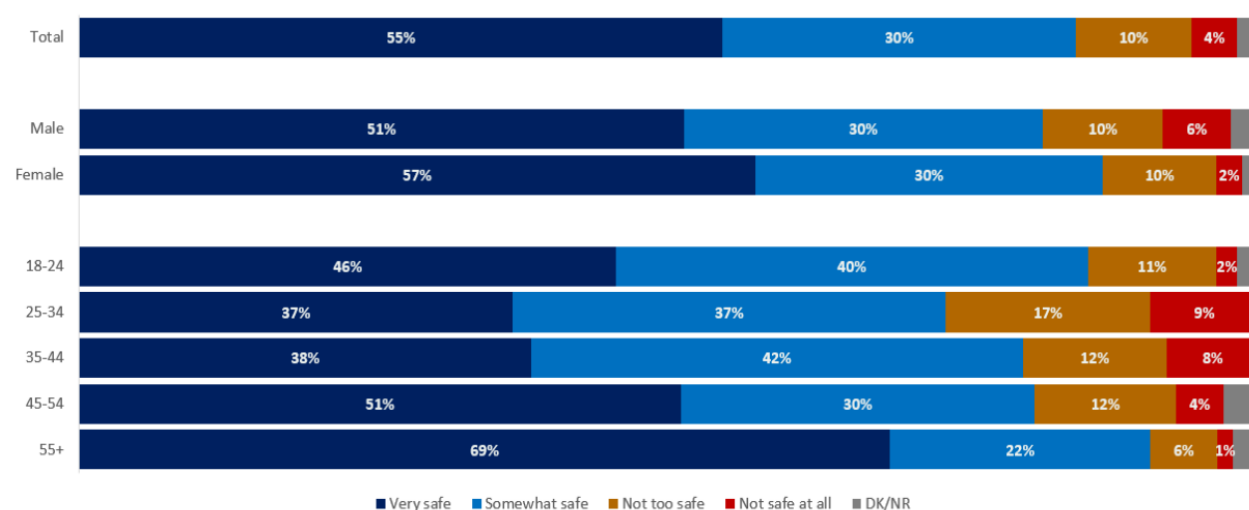
<sup>54</sup> IFES' pre-election survey was conducted between June 4-6, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> For comparison, in similar surveys conducted by IFES, respondents in the Dominican Republic averaged 8.53 and, in Nigeria, the average response was 8.67.



issue any guidance on the enforcement of mitigation measures or potential sanctions for violations to incentivize compliance among voters and polling board members.

Surprisingly, according to IFES' post-election survey, 85 percent of voters who participated in the June 21 elections reported having felt very or somewhat safe while voting. It is also noteworthy that although they are in a higher risk group for COVID-19, 91 percent of voters aged 55 and older indicated they felt safe or very safe voting, and in fact were more likely to feel safe voting than their younger peers. Additionally, the vast majority of respondents, 82 percent, said disinfecting products were available for voters, 77 percent said social distancing was respected and 73 percent reported that polling board members were wearing masks and gloves. In general, 87 percent of respondents who attended a polling station said they were satisfied with their Election Day experience.



Graph 3: "Given the COVID-19 situation, how safe did you feel voting in the 2020 parliamentary elections??" (n=687), IFES post-election survey, 2020.

Despite these very positive numbers, the in-person observations the IFES teams made during visits to 23 polling locations on Election Day identified some concerns:

Ventilation – Most polling stations visited did not have more than one window completely open or a few windows just partially open. The rain and cooler temperatures might have contributed to this restriction.

Arrangements – Some polling stations were not large enough to allow for the proper distance between polling board members. Most locations, however, did have enough room for all members to sit in accordance with the guidance received and, yet, few of them did so.

Voting booths – The IFES teams observed different practices in the arrangement of the polling booths. While some largely complied with the one-meter distance requirement, others violated it by placing them much closer to one another or by intersecting two cardboard pieces in order to create four conjoined booths. The polling board president in one of these polling stations said only one or two of them were being used at a time.

Use of face masks and gloves – While availability of PPE was not a problem during Election Day, its use certainly was. The IFES teams saw consistent violations of the requirement to properly wear face masks by polling board members. Many polling board members were wearing the masks below their chin or nose, some did not wear them at all, and only very few polling board members wore the masks properly. Group behavior seems to have played a role: when a polling board member was not wearing a mask, others around her/him were more likely to not be wearing one. The observer effect was also strong, and the teams noticed that many members put masks on or adjusted theirs in compliance with the guidance for proper use once they realized they were being observed. Several polling board members with whom the teams discussed provided unsolicited excuses for not wearing a mask, claiming they had difficulty breathing while wearing a mask or had just finished eating and not had the chance to put the mask back on.

Voters were more likely to wear masks, according to the IFES teams' observations of polling stations in the wider Belgrade area. Most of them either arrived at the polling station already wearing a mask or accepted to wear the ones offered by polling board members. The IFES teams observed very few individuals actively refusing to wear the mask when offered one. In one of these cases, the voter did not put the mask on because she was tired of walking up the stairs to reach her polling station and was experiencing trouble breathing. This indicates a challenge in selecting accessible polling locations for persons with health conditions or disabilities, despite a RIK decision to require polling station audit assessments ahead of their selection.<sup>56</sup> Several of the polling stations visited by IFES on Election Day were located in classrooms in public schools that were inaccessible for persons with disabilities, such as polling locations above the ground floor or without ramps for voters using wheelchairs.

Although a recommended practice according to the instructions issued by the task force, gloves were only used by a very limited number of polling board members observed. While the non-use of gloves does not necessarily constitute a risk if hands are frequently sanitized (with soap and water or minimum 60 percent alcohol-based solutions), polling board members (and voters) were only seen using disinfectant before or after interactions in very few occasions.

Disposal of masks and gloves – In general, the disposal of used PPE was not conducted properly, and the IFES teams observed several used masks on the floor and outside polling stations.

Personal contact and congregation outside polling stations – The IFES teams observed no particular refraining from unnecessary touching. Voters who knew each other, especially in the areas outside Belgrade's city center, did not avoid physical personal contact. Voters in these rural areas were also more likely to gather outside the polling station after voting, in violation of the requirement to spend just as much time as needed in the voting facility.

The discrepancies between IFES' in-person observations and the survey results might be due, for example, to a lack of understanding among voters regarding the appropriate way of using PPE. As many polling board members were observed wearing their masks under their chins or not covering their noses, IFES reported those as equivalent to not wearing a mask, while many voters might have seen that use as acceptable.

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<sup>56</sup> On December 20, 2019, RIK passed a decision on mandatory polling station accessibility assessments.

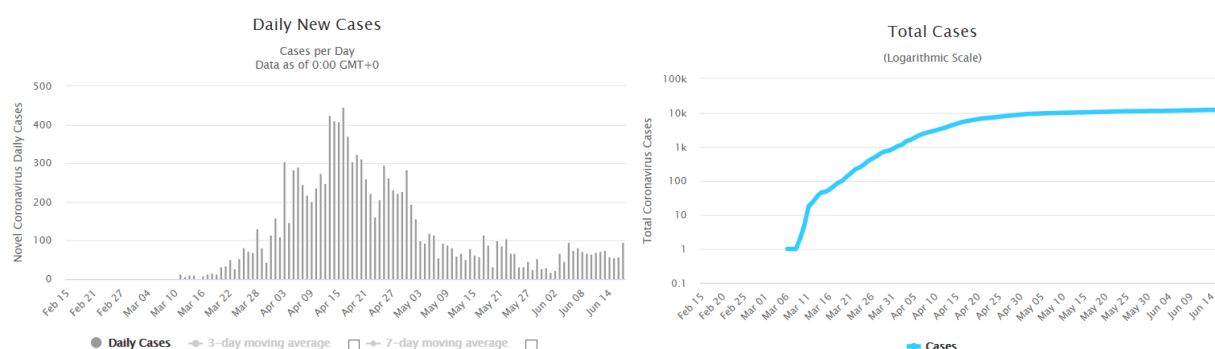
CRTA's observation reports corroborate some of IFES' findings. According to the civil society organization, "there were inconsistencies in the use of protective equipment at the polling stations, and this applies to both members of polling stations and voters."<sup>57</sup> CRTA also reports that compliance rates decreased throughout the day: "the percentage of polling stations where members of polling stations used protective equipment (masks and gloves) decreased from 71 percent, recorded at 2 p.m., to 65 percent, recorded at 6 p.m."<sup>58</sup> The problem was even more accentuated among voters, with compliance declining from 53 percent to 49 percent.

All election administration officials, civil society representatives and observers interviewed in this analysis confirmed that, although measures were "mandatory" for some, they were not aware of and neither had observed any enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance. One election administration official highlighted the existing legal gap affecting this enforcement issue, as polling board members do not have the authority to, for example, deny non-compliant citizens their right to vote.

### *Variance in COVID-19 numbers before and after elections*

On March 1, the World Health Organization's (WHO) Regional Director for Europe, Dr. Hans Kluge, announced that the WHO Emergency Team for Serbia, after consultations with national experts, assessed the country's readiness for dealing with the potential crisis as very positive.<sup>59</sup>

As of June 17, four days before Election Day, Serbia had confirmed 12,522 cases of COVID-19 infection, with 257 deaths. As the graphs below show, the Serbian government reported a decrease in the rate of COVID-19 transmission after it reached a peak of 455 new daily cases on April 16. After recording numbers as low as 18 on June 1, the country saw slight increases, bringing the daily average close to 100. The daily change and logarithmic scale still showed a flattened curve.<sup>60</sup>



Graphs 4 and 5: Daily new cases and total cases in Serbia from February 18 through June 16, 2020, Worldometer, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> CRTA, Elections 2020: Preliminary Report on the Election Day, page 17.

<sup>58</sup> CRTA, Elections 2020: Preliminary Report on the Election Day, page 17.

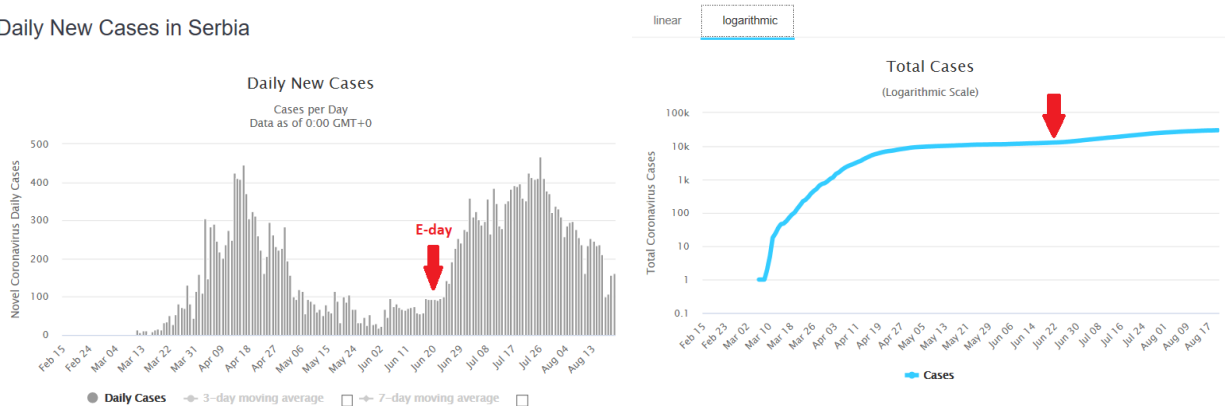
<sup>59</sup> <https://covid19.rs/who-regional-director-for-europe-serbia-is-well-prepared-for-covid-19/>

<sup>60</sup> Graphs retrieved from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/serbia/>

The elections took place around the same time the country was normalizing operations and lifting most restrictions, including on social gatherings. As Serbians resumed larger gatherings indoors and outdoors, the number of new cases increased in the lead up to and after Election Day.<sup>61</sup>

On June 22, the day following the elections, the BIRN report mentioned further above highlighted data revealing that the Serbian government had underreported new cases from June 17-20 and total number of deaths from March 19 to June 1. Rather than the reported average of 100 new cases per day, the data supported estimates of nearly 300 new cases a day, and deaths to be under-reported by more than 100 percent.<sup>62</sup> Government officials vehemently denied efforts to conceal the true data, blaming a system error for the discrepancy.

Daily New Cases in Serbia



Graphs 6 and 7: Daily new cases and total cases in Serbia from February 18 through August 13, 2020 with Election Day in Serbia emphasized, Worldometer, 2020.

As the graphs above show,<sup>63</sup> there was a sharp increase in the numbers of new daily cases before and after the elections. While the number of new daily cases in the 14 days prior to Election Day averaged 75.86 (June 7-20), between June 23 and August 6, new daily cases averaged 245.<sup>64</sup> Given the issues with potential underreporting prior to Election Day and the fact that large gatherings in all spheres were resuming around the same time, and without a more thorough investigation of each COVID-19 case, it is impracticable to associate new spikes to electoral activities. However, this increase of almost 223 percent in new daily cases is worrisome and should trigger action from authorities across government institutions, including the electoral commission.

### *Relevance and effectiveness of the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team*

The COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team model applied in Serbia shows some similarities with other pandemic-related intra-governmental working groups established elsewhere. It was established expeditiously following the public announcement of the country's first patients infected by the coronavirus. It is also widely perceived to have had a broad-based

<sup>61</sup> On June 7, Orthodox Serbians celebrated the Feast of Holy Pentecost, bringing large crowds to churches, where believers kept their tradition of kissing icons. On June 11, 25,000 people were allowed to attend a soccer game in Belgrade without protective equipment or compliance with social distancing measures.

<sup>62</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/22/serbia-under-reported-covid-19-deaths-and-infections-data-shows/>

<sup>63</sup> Graphs retrieved from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/serbia/>

<sup>64</sup> Numbers are being counted from June 23 because the incubation period of the coronavirus is between two and 14 days.

mandate advising the current government on its response to the pandemic in general by applying a whole-of-government approach. The COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team is, furthermore, led by a senior government official, in this case Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. The body is comprised of politicians and government officials as well as a number of medical professionals and serves the function of an *ad-hoc* task force. Critical to note, though, that RIK was not represented in this body, which is highly unusual given practices seen in other country COVID-19 responses. It is also important to note that the Serbian COVID-19 task force solution also deviates in other aspects from other countries. For instance, the task force's opaqueness extended beyond its membership, as its mandate, authority and how it actually made decisions were not revealed to the public ahead of the elections. As outlined in sections below, the Serbian model negatively impacted RIK's ability to effectively communicate mitigation measures to the electorate and election officials manning polling stations on Election Day. It is equally important to note that RIK decisions and actions, such as the decision to wait for the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team to recommend Election Day instructions, further impaired its COVID-19 responses.

The benefits of an EMB's engagement with a country's COVID-19 task force can take different forms. Its planning capacity for elections under COVID-19 could improve as it lacks relevant medical knowledge impacting the timely development of mitigation measures. With close collaboration between EMBs and task forces and effective utilization of relevant public health expertise from other institutions, EMBs' staff are less likely to be overwhelmed with new tasks and the selection and implementation of mitigation measures throughout the electoral process is more likely to succeed. As RIK lacked formal membership in the country's task force, its access to this specific expertise was limited, affecting its ability to integrate health aspects to its operational planning, though RIK did hold formal meetings with the body to consult on mitigation measure decision-making.

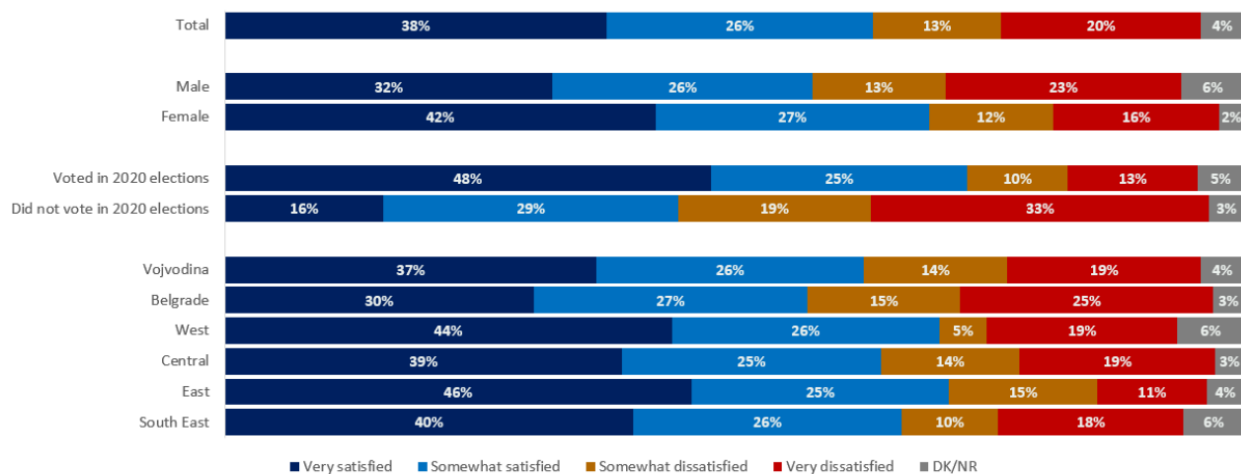
At the local level, some election officials engaged with their counterparts within the public health sector, but this was *ad-hoc* in nature and information and practical adjustments to election operations were not widely shared across municipalities. Instead, it was only once the task force actually published its recommended instructions for mitigation measures shortly before Election Day that RIK embarked upon implementing them across the country and efforts were made to integrate COVID-19 messages into a voter information campaign. However, as this materialized so close to Election Day, mitigation measures were not included in the poll worker training manual or in a uniform manner across the country during poll worker training, as discussed further above. As mentioned previously, RIK did manage to include a copy of the task force's instructions, but they were general in nature and not explicitly tailored to polling station operations, allowing for a divergence in local interpretation and implementation.

Timely, accurate and effective public health messaging is an essential component of the voter education campaign leading up to an election in general, but even more so during a pandemic. Should such an information campaign be late, limited, or confusing to its audiences the voter turnout might be negatively affected as voters are unaware of the new safety protocols and mitigation measures introduced by the authorities to alleviate public health risks. Similarly, if poll workers are not informed about safety efforts, their willingness to show up for work in their respective polling stations could be reduced, negatively impacting an EMB's ability to open up as



many polling stations as originally planned, or operate at a lower capacity causing long lines and delays. In the Serbian case, IFES observed and heard reports of a shortage of polling board members in a limited number of the polling stations visited on Election Day. This was compounded by the late public release of recommendations by the task force, and RIK's decision to await official information from it before adjusting its public information messages to address COVID-19, severely impacted providing information to voters and polling board members timely and effectively (see *Delivering effective voter information* section below for further details).

Yet another reason why it can be valuable for EMBs to be members of a nation's COVID-19 task force would be to gain timely access to sufficient and appropriate PPE, which is instrumental for holding elections during the pandemic. Public health agencies can facilitate procurement by enabling joint procurements between them and EMBs, share time-sensitive information about trustworthy PPE vendors or serve as advisors on the election authority's procurement board. Reports from observer groups, various media outlets and IFES' own observation on Election Day indicate no shortages of PPE in polling stations on Election Day in Serbia. Hence, the government mandate to the National Health Insurance Fund to supply sufficient PPE in time for distribution to polling stations across the country was largely a success.



Graph 8: "What is your level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction so far with the performance of the COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team?" (n=1,000), IFES post-election survey, 2020.

As was noted above, as a result of the Serbian pandemic task force model used, RIK faced critical operational challenges, the primary being an insufficient COVID-specific public information campaign due to the late release of the task force's recommended instructions. The task force's *modus operandi* was characterized by numerous interlocutors to this analysis as being opaque. Complete information on its membership and official mandate were largely unknown at the time and its meetings, decisions and communication with the public often haphazard. Worth noting however, IFES' post-election survey indicates that the general public's satisfaction with the task force was high, as 64 percent of respondents were satisfied, or mostly satisfied, with its work, demonstrated in Graph 8 above.

## Erosion of Information Integrity

Information integrity is a key aspect of broader electoral integrity and COVID-19 in particular may provide fertile ground for information manipulation that can disenfranchise or endanger voters. This section of the report analyzes how the information environment related to the elections was impacted by COVID-19 and how authorities addressed risks and challenges. The following indicators were used to assess the COVID-19 response in this regard:

- Development and dissemination of voter information were prioritized in response to or due to changes in election procedures resulting from COVID-19;
- Dissemination channels were used to share voter information in response to or due to changes in election procedures resulting from COVID-19;
- Public statements from relevant authorities were made clarifying misconceptions or false information;
- Average time of response between authorities' receipt of a request for clarification or identification of piece of content that required correction and deciding and issuing a public response;
- Political parties developed and disseminated voter information that included public health messaging responsive to COVID-19.

### *Disinformation in the electoral process*

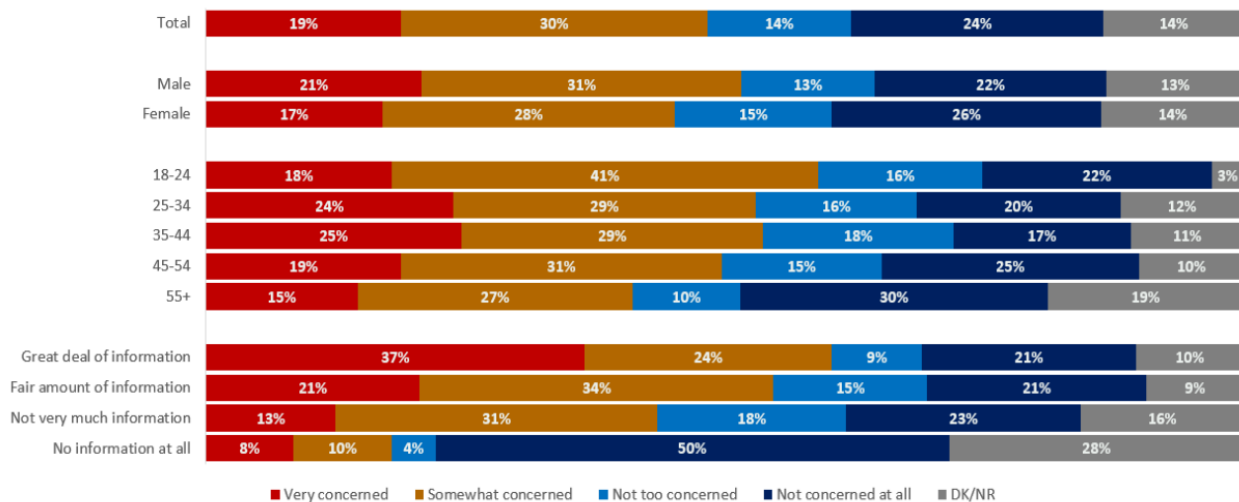
As election authorities work to conduct elections safely during the COVID-19 pandemic, their efforts may be undermined if the information space around elections is inadequately defended. Changes to election procedures and the introduction of mitigation measures due to COVID-19 in particular may provide fertile ground for misinformation and disinformation that can disenfranchise or endanger voters. These COVID-specific concerns come on top of rising concerns about the role of misinformation and disinformation in elections more broadly. While post-electoral survey respondents and stakeholders did not note a significant degree of COVID-specific misinformation and disinformation about the elections, general concerns about the impact of inaccurate and misleading information on the electoral process were common. However, the lack of proactive communication or information exchange with other electoral stakeholders about COVID-related mitigation measures was a missed opportunity to build public understanding of those changes.

Regarding the general perception of information integrity in the electoral process, IFES' post-election survey findings indicated that 49 percent of respondents expressed concern that they received some news and information that was not accurate before the elections. Concern over this trend increased with the level of information respondents say they had about politics and government, with 61 percent of those with a great deal of information expressing concern. A majority said they came across news or information about political parties and candidates that they believe was not accurate at least sometimes in the run-up to the parliamentary elections.<sup>65</sup> These rates were even high among those who were concerned about the accuracy of the news

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<sup>65</sup> 67%, IFES post-election survey.

or information received ahead of the elections and among those with more *information about politics and government in Serbia*.

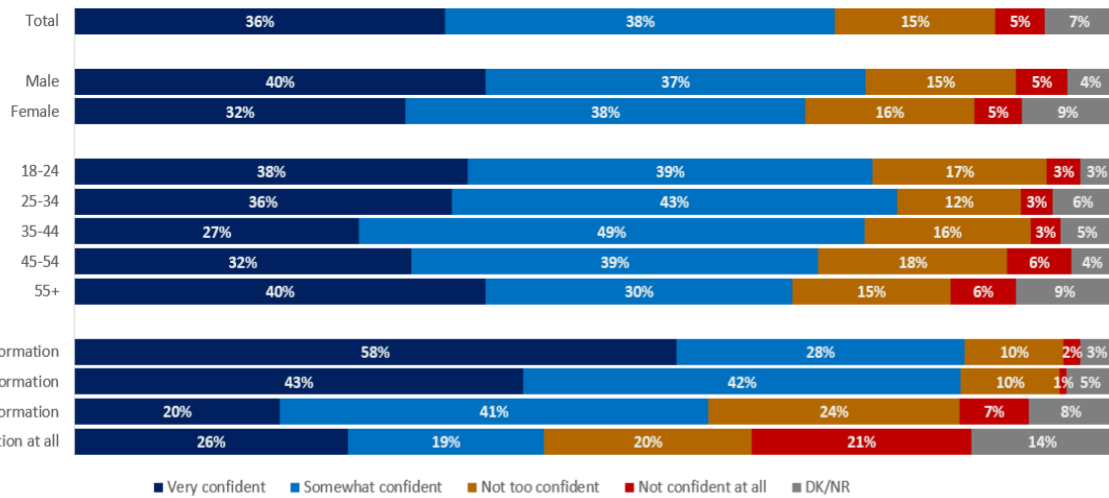


Graph 9: "How concerned are you that some of the news and information you may have received before the election was not accurate?" (n=1,000), IFES post-election survey, 2020.

When looking at the disaggregation of respondent demographics in Graph 9 above, older voters, including those aged 55 and older, expressed less concern about disinformation<sup>66</sup> than younger respondents, but were also slightly less confident that they could identify content intended to deceive. The lack of concern among older respondents may also be related to a lower level of concern about foreign interference in elections overall compared with voters younger than 55. Young respondents aged 18-24 were most likely to say they rarely or never encountered information they thought was inaccurate, yet 77 percent of this demographic thought they would be able to identify disinformation. It is possible this could be a result of young respondents' overestimating their ability to recognize misleading content if they saw it, though it could also reflect overall lower levels of consumption of political content among young people. Separately, women expressed less concern about the accuracy of election information than men, and also reported that they came into contact with misinformation or disinformation about political parties and candidates less frequently, perhaps because they also report less confidence in their ability to identify it than their male counterparts.<sup>67</sup>

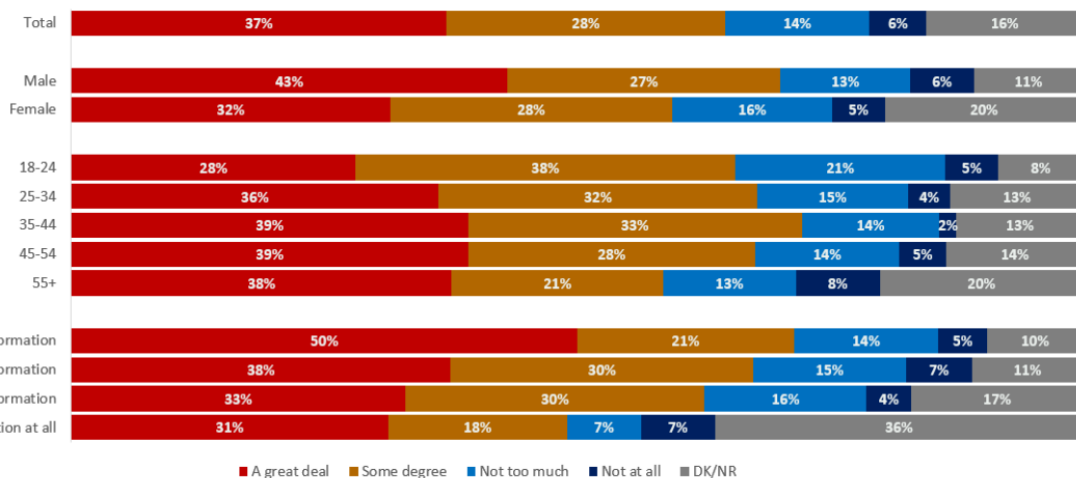
<sup>66</sup> 42% very or somewhat concerned, IFES post-election survey.

<sup>67</sup> 70% of women respondents compared to 77 percent of men, IFES post-election survey.



Graph 10: “How confident are you that you can identify news and information intended to disinform citizens?” (n=1,000), IFES post-election survey, 2020.

There is significant concern over the role of foreign interference in Serbia, which grew at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as President Vučić emphasized China and Russia’s assistance in COVID-19 relief efforts, especially China’s donations of PPE and other health materials, while diminishing European Union support.<sup>68</sup> One opinion poll demonstrates China received an increase in positive attitudes during the months in which the first peak of COVID-19 cases occurred.<sup>69</sup> IFES’ post-election survey findings indicate that there is concern over the role of foreign interference in the elections, with 37 percent saying it plays a role to a great degree and 28 percent say to some degree, though a conclusion cannot be drawn as to which foreign actors are the cause of this concern.



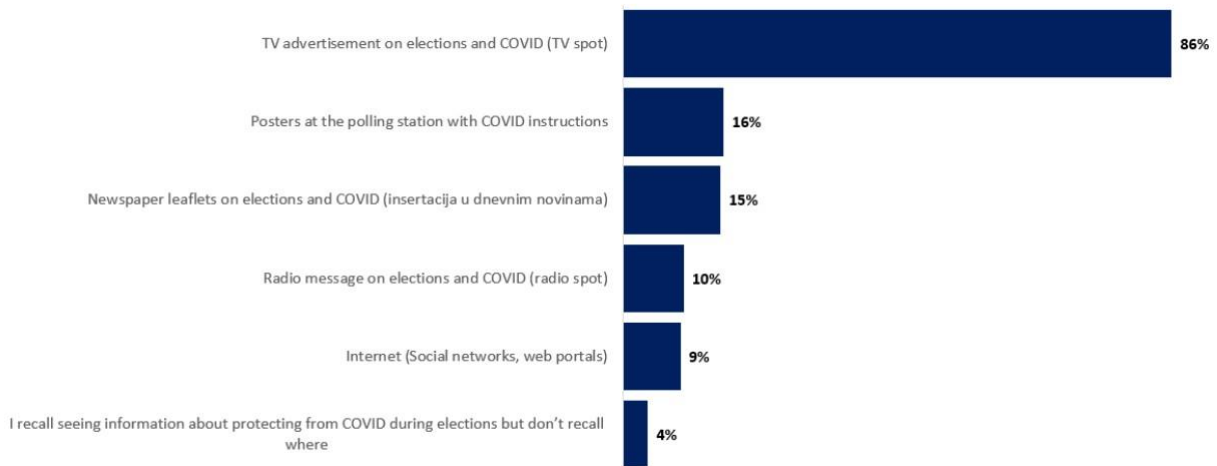
Graph 11: “To what extent do you think foreign interference plays a role in elections in Serbia?” (n=1,000), IFES post-election survey, 2020.

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-turns-to-china-due-to-lack-of-eu-solidarity-on-coronavirus/>

<sup>69</sup> Serbia Public Opinion Poll, June 2020, National Democratic Institute.

### *Delivering effective voter information*

Citizens' concerns about access to accurate electoral information and the potential for foreign interference in elections are useful context for evaluating the comprehensiveness and efficacy of COVID-19-related voter information efforts. Voter information efforts were designed to highlight the changes in Election Day procedures and mitigation measures in place to protect voters and poll workers. Through IFES' support, RIK disseminated a television PSA (which was also boosted to 800,000 users on Instagram), a radio message (shared on a network of 160 radio stations) and informational leaflets in nine daily newspapers. As such, IFES estimates a potential reach of at least 2 million voters.



Graph 12: "Through which of the following methods did you see or hear information regarding the measures from the Republic Electoral Commission about COVID-19 and elections?" (n=538), IFES post-election survey, 2020.

As noted in sections above, only 54 percent of survey respondents indicated that they had seen or heard messages from RIK informing them about steps taken to protect voters from COVID-19 during the election. One interviewee reported that the materials provided by RIK were effective, but the delay in their arrival (four days before the elections) limited the ability to share the information as widely as would otherwise have been possible. Though voter information materials were directly placed in newspapers, television, radio and other communication channels, media representatives indicated that RIK did not share COVID-related voter information messages with them for release to larger audiences, missing an opportunity for wider dissemination.

Interlocutors also shared there were concerns related to contradictory or unclear information around the mitigation measures, which led to confusion among citizens on changes in election procedures. Interview respondents indicated that RIK did not have a process in place for identifying and deciding whether and how to respond to misconceptions or false and unclear information about the electoral process. One stakeholder interviewed reported difficulty obtaining clarification in regard to the rights of COVID-19 positive voters in isolation. While RIK did request the task force to issue additional guidelines for COVID-19 positive voters, no official

public response was published.<sup>70</sup> A number of stakeholders from election administration and civil society also expressed the view that there was a need for more proactive communication from RIK and a civil society stakeholder indicated that RIK did not issue timely public responses to requests for clarification about the electoral process and COVID-19 mitigation measures, despite the fact that requests were made.

However, it should be highlighted that an election administration official reported that widespread misconceptions and fake news did not materialize, which may have led to RIK's lack of urgency to issue public responses, though it should also be noted that RIK did not have any dedicated approach to identify and track misconceptions or fake news. On a similar note, another stakeholder acknowledged that the political situation and expectation for the issuance of recommended mitigation measures from the government's task force put RIK in a difficult position, with any messaging missteps related to the pandemic potentially jeopardizing turnout. This predicament may have also contributed to RIK's limited public responses.

Political parties also reported in interviews that they did not develop any COVID-19 related voter information materials to aid the spread of accurate information about mitigation measures in place. The integration of calls to comply with adopted mitigation measures in line with official instructions in political party messages could have been an opportunity to build awareness and buy-in among the electorate.

## Looming Barriers to Political Access

During the COVID-19 pandemic, marginalized populations living with deeply entrenched and systemic discrimination are frequently impacted the hardest. The pandemic has undoubtedly heightened existing inequalities, threatening both health and democratic freedoms and rights; and hastening political exclusion of many people already underrepresented in political life. The following indicators were used to assess the COVID-19 response's in consideration of the challenges faced by at-risk groups:

- COVID-19 response decision-making was inclusive and responsive;
- Identity-rights groups were consulted in the development and determination of mitigation measures;
- Mitigation measures were communicated in accessible formats, including to people with disabilities and linguistic and ethnic minorities.

### *Consultation with marginalized and at-risk groups*

As described by stakeholders interviewed during this analysis, Serbians who identify with a marginalized group, such as women, ethnic or linguistic minorities, persons with disabilities, and young and older people, experience barriers to inclusion in political and public life. At the same time, some groups, such as persons with disabilities and older persons are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and experiencing more severe symptoms. These increased risks emphasize the need for marginalized populations to be consulted on the development and

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<sup>70</sup> <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/rik-krizni-stab-da-pojasni-postupak-glasanja-za-zarazene/>



decision-making processes of COVID-19 mitigation measures designed to protect the safety of citizens on Election Day.

During the recent elections, marginalized citizens and their organizations reported that they were not consulted about mitigation measures to ensure their safe participation and did not have access to information about COVID-19 mitigation measures in place, aside from the materials developed for the general public, discussed further in the following section. At the same time, RIK published a decision on June 15, based on mitigation measures issued by the task force, that restricted voting in assisted living facilities and social institutions, which may have resulted in the disenfranchisement of older voters and persons with disabilities who are most likely to be in these institutions. However, this order was contradicted on June 18 by The Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans' Affairs and Social Affairs, who stated that voting would take place in these institutions after all.<sup>71</sup> While movement restrictions imposed by the government to stop the spread of COVID-19 were lifted ahead of Election Day, one stakeholder interviewed cited that movement restrictions made it difficult for persons with disabilities to participate in the election. This indicates that this contradictory information could have resulted in confusion among voters with disabilities on their options for voting on Election Day, most likely caused by crowded and contradictory information channels as discussed in the section above.

Furthermore, stakeholders interviewed confirmed that the mandates of the Office for Human and Minority Rights and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality were expired, which may have led to the exclusion of these offices from consultations with the government task force. If these stakeholders had been included in consultations, they may have had raised issues that could endanger the rights of minority communities during elections or in development of mitigation measures.

According to the data gathered in stakeholder interviews, RIK did not seek opportunities to consult with marginalized groups or their organizations on COVID-19 mitigation measures, nor did civil society provide recommendations to RIK on measures to protect their target populations from contracting COVID-19 while participating in the elections. Having regular consultations with activists and civil society leaders from marginalized groups not only would ensure that information about COVID-19 was distributed and messaged in an inclusive way, but it would also help to build partnerships and trust between civil society and RIK, leading to longer term benefits.

This lack of consultation presents a significant missed opportunity to ensure both buy-in from at-risk groups such as persons with disabilities and older persons, as well as young people, ethnic and linguistic minorities and women, on the COVID-19 mitigation measures and to ensure that the government prioritized mitigation measures considered important to marginalized groups. One civil society representative interviewed referenced a suggestion to establish a working group with a diverse group of civil society stakeholders, task force members and election administration, but mentioned this was never discussed or implemented. However, it should be noted that both RIK and disabled people's organizations (DPOs) interviewed described meetings

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<sup>71</sup> The Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans' Affairs and Social Affairs also announced that voters in these institutions must request to vote with RIK and that special spaces within outdoor areas, weather permitting, or in facilities themselves should be dedicated for polling board members and adhere to established mitigation measures (Radio Free Europe, 2020).

between RIK and DPOs on other electoral topics, such as the use of the mobile ballot box, accessibility of the polling stations and other relevant issues.

### *Targeted and inclusive information dissemination*

Information on COVID-19 mitigation measures was primarily encountered by marginalized voters through media outlets and not directly from government institutions, which indicates a gap in targeted information efforts.<sup>72</sup> As mitigation measures were not formally recommended and implemented until six days before the elections, there was insufficient time for information to be properly targeted to reach citizens who identify with a marginalized group, such as women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities or young and older persons. Despite time and resource constraints, the aforementioned PSA video on COVID-19 mitigation measures produced by RIK and supported by IFES included sign language interpretation and subtitles to reach citizens with hearing impairments. However, due to the time required to produce them, other voter information efforts on COVID-19 were not produced in accessible formats such as braille or easy-to-read.

It should also be noted that local self-governments are under legal obligation to translate official government communication in each respective municipality where a certain minority language is an official one, thus RIK was not obliged to offer official translations into minority languages. It is unclear to what extent local self-governments complied with this obligation, as one local election administration official interviewed expressed that they did not receive COVID-19 mitigation measures in their minority language. It is also likely that minority communities' media outlets provided information on mitigation measures in their respective language.

While targeted information was unable to be provided in an inclusive manner within the days before the elections, stakeholders and survey respondents generally rated information received as useful. When disaggregated to evaluate women's perception of COVID-19 voter information, women surveyed claimed that the information they did receive and were able to access on COVID-19 prevention for the elections was sufficient.<sup>73</sup> While women were less likely to receive information on COVID-19 measures taken to protect the health of voters during the electoral process,<sup>74</sup> women respondents were slightly more likely to see the information provided by RIK as useful<sup>75</sup> and slightly more satisfied with the measures taken.<sup>76</sup> Women who did not vote were less likely to receive information on COVID-19 measures than men who did not vote,<sup>77</sup> and women were also slightly more likely to indicate they felt safe or very safe voting than men.<sup>78</sup> These findings highlight the importance of ensuring that information on health and safety measures related to COVID-19 reach all voters, including targeted voter information for women. Understanding how women receive election information is critical to ensure that women voters have equal access to information about voting during the COVID-19 pandemic. However,

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<sup>72</sup> It should be noted that all other voter information, including from RIK, unrelated to COVID-19 mitigation measures were provided in accessible and inclusive formats as provided by the law.

<sup>73</sup> Data collected in IFES' post-election survey was not disaggregated by disability or ethnic/linguistic minority identity, and thus does not represent an intersectional analysis of women in Serbia.

<sup>74</sup> 42% of women respondents compared with 37% of men said that they didn't receive information to this effect, IFES post-election survey.

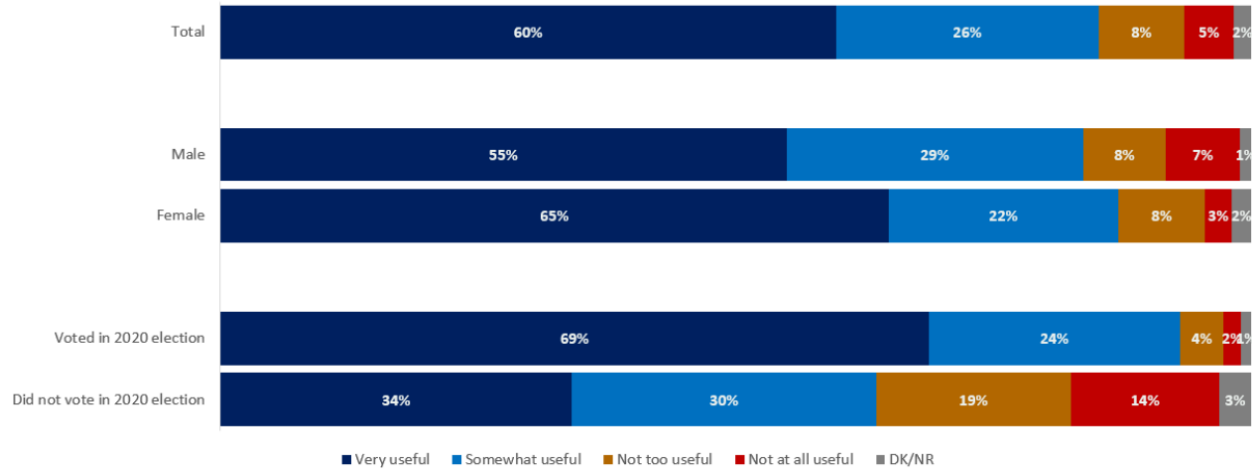
<sup>75</sup> 87% of women respondents compared with 84% of men, IFES post-election survey.

<sup>76</sup> 70% of women respondents compared with 67% of men, IFES post-election survey.

<sup>77</sup> 54% of women non-voters compared with 45% of men non-voters, IFES post-election survey.

<sup>78</sup> 87% of women respondents compared with 81% of men, IFES post-election survey.

interviews conducted reveal women's civil society groups were not consulted on COVID-19 messaging efforts, either on substance of messages or dissemination strategies, largely due to limited time for consultations to take place once mitigation measures were announced.



Graph 13: “How useful was the information from the Republic Electoral Commission about steps being taken to protect voters during the election from COVID-19?” (n=538), IFES post-election survey, 2020.

These findings seem to confirm what a gender analysis of Serbia's COVID-19 response found: that information about the pandemic did not sufficiently reach all women, and in particular, seemed to not be equally distributed to older women, Roma women and women from rural areas.<sup>79</sup> This report also found instances of misogyny and negative gender stereotyping in the media space, which can be harmful for women attempting to access information from those sources and also serves to perpetuate patriarchal cultural norms that hold women back from participating equally and meaningfully in electoral processes.

Traditionally, young people are not perceived as formal political participants in Serbia, as evidenced by low voter turnout among younger demographics. However, information regarding COVID-19 mitigation measures was targeted toward young voters on Instagram through RIK's account. With IFES support, the video PSA developed was boosted on the social network platform. The content boost received a majority of impressions from 18-24-year-olds, followed by 25-34-year-olds. While the information messages themselves were not developed specifically targeting younger audiences due to time and resource constraints, targeted dissemination was conducted to the extent possible. However, as mentioned above, low levels of surveyed consumption of messages on social networks, particularly from younger demographics, confirm the need for an increased online presence for voter information targeted toward young audiences.

## Disruption in the Rule of Law

Electoral processes are founded in the legal framework, which provides for the conduct of elections in accordance with democratic principles and standards. With crises like the COVID-19

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/0/459382.pdf>

pandemic, the rule of law may be jeopardized as governments expand their power in the name of public health. The following indicators were used to assess the rule of law in Serbia during its COVID-19 response:

- Decision to delay the election was made in a consultative manner and communicated in an inclusive and comprehensive manner;
- Flexibility in the law regarding methods of carrying out elections, such as alternative voting methods;
- Modifications to election laws or rules were made in a consultative manner and clearly communicated;
- EMBs used rule-making authorities to develop rules or codes of conduct governing new COVID-19 processes.

### *The State of Emergency*

On March 15, 2020, a state of emergency was declared,<sup>80</sup> but there has been some uncertainty over its legality.<sup>81</sup> Under the Constitution, the power to declare a state of emergency falls to the National Assembly,<sup>82</sup> however, the President, President of the National Assembly, and Prime Minister declared a state of emergency instead, relying on an alternative procedure to be used when the National Assembly “is not in a position to convene.”<sup>83</sup> Even under this procedure, the National Assembly must verify the declaration (and any measures derogating from human rights) within 48 hours or once it is able to meet.<sup>84</sup> There was no clear explanation provided for why the National Assembly was unable to convene, especially given the fact all other legislatures in the region and the European Union, with the exception of North Macedonia, had found safe ways to meet or to amend their rules of procedure to continue operating.<sup>85</sup> On April 30, the President of the National Assembly finally convened the Assembly and retroactively validated the State of Emergency,<sup>86</sup> which was lifted just days later on May 6, 2020.<sup>87</sup>

### *Delaying the election*

According to international standards, the decision to delay an election should be transparent, consultative, and inclusive.<sup>88</sup> To assess the degree to which the decision to postpone the election adhered to these principles, IFES analyzed: (1) whether there were formal/active efforts to consult with both civil society and political parties, (2) the extent to which stakeholder input was incorporated, and (3) whether the decision (and its underlying justification) were transparently communicated to stakeholders and the public.

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<sup>80</sup> Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 29/2020.

<sup>81</sup> <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/24/new-law-for-the-parliamentary-democracy-in-serbia/>

<sup>82</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Arts. 105, 200.

<sup>83</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 200.

<sup>84</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 200.

<sup>85</sup> <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/24/new-law-for-the-parliamentary-democracy-in-serbia/>

<sup>86</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/reflection-paper-on-local-and-regional-elections-in-times-of-covid-19/16809ea3cb>

<sup>87</sup> Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 65/2020.

<sup>88</sup> Ellena, K. *Legal Considerations When Delaying or Adapting Elections*. IFES COVID-19 Briefing Paper. p. 3.

On March 15, the government issued a decree creating regulations for measures during the State of Emergency, including “interrupting election activities,”<sup>89</sup> and on March 16, RIK declared that all election activities for the National Assembly elections would be suspended until the end of the State of Emergency.<sup>90</sup> According to political party representatives interviewed for this analysis, while there was consultation regarding the delay of the election, the meeting was held by the President and was restricted to political parties.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, one political party representative noted during an interview that while the consultation took place, it appeared to be more of a formality and that the decision to postpone had already been taken. These consultations did not include civil society and were closed-door meetings with the president.

Additionally, much like the controversial sidestepping of the National Assembly in declaring the State of Emergency, the foundation of the president’s legal authority to postpone the election is uncertain. There is no provision under the legal framework that directly speaks to the issue of delaying elections during a state of emergency. Under the Constitution, parliamentary elections are to be called by the President of the Republic.<sup>92</sup> However, the Constitution also provides that the National Assembly cannot be dissolved during a state of emergency<sup>93</sup> and must approve any derogations from human and minority rights guaranteed by the Constitution<sup>94</sup> – this would include the suspension of the right to elect and be elected under Article 52.<sup>95</sup> As with the State of Emergency, the Constitution provides derogations to human rights can be made via government decree when the National Assembly is unable to meet, but that the derogations must be validated by the National Assembly within 48 hours or once it is in a position to convene.<sup>96</sup> While the National Assembly did not convene until over a month after the postponement, it remains unclear why it was unable to do so earlier. During interviews with both a constitutional law expert and civil society representatives who participated in earlier discussions on the conditions for fair elections<sup>97</sup> and also monitored the elections, it was indicated that the National Assembly should have had a role in making the decision to postpone elections as per precedent and as required by law.

On May 4 (two days before the State of Emergency was lifted), in a meeting between heads of state and government and political parties’ leadership, the government announced that the election would be held on June 21.<sup>98</sup> Essentially, the campaign period and election timeline resumed once the State of Emergency was lifted; however, the ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission Report noted that “some opposition parties contested the inclusiveness of

<sup>89</sup> Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 110-2515/2020, Art. 5.

<sup>90</sup> Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 32/2020.

<sup>91</sup> <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/01/postponing-the-elections-a-chance-for-dialogue-between-the-ruling-and-opposition-parties/>

<sup>92</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 101.

<sup>93</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 109.

<sup>94</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 200.

<sup>95</sup> As IFES has previously noted, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides an established framework to governments’ emergency measures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Article 4 provides that states may take measures restricting rights “to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation.” <https://www.ifes.org/news/emergency-powers-and-covid-19-pandemic-protecting-democratic-guardrails>

<sup>96</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 200.

<sup>97</sup> The ones organized by the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade and Open Society Foundation and the ones facilitated by the European Parliament representatives held in the Parliament.

<sup>98</sup> <http://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/An-Unprecedented-Election.pdf>

the decision-making process surrounding the state of emergency and the setting of the new date.”<sup>99</sup> Some in the opposition believed that the election should have been delayed further to protect the health of voters,<sup>100</sup> a sentiment that was affirmed in one of IFES’ interviews with a political party representative.

### *Alternative voting methods*

There is very little flexibility in the legal framework to adapt the processes and procedures for voting without making formal amendments. The Constitution prescribes that “voting is carried out by secret ballot in person.”<sup>101</sup> That voting should be carried out in person is reaffirmed under the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament (2020), which states that “every voter shall personally cast a vote.”<sup>102</sup> The process required to establish alternative voting methods would require sufficient time and consensus to amend the legal framework. Given the nature of the COVID-19 crisis in Serbia and the fact it first peaked during the election campaign, there was not sufficient time to pursue any changes to the legal framework that would permit alternative voting methods. However, the law does allow for mobile voting; if a voter is not able to vote at the polling station, a voter can notify the polling board of their desire to vote and three members of the polling board will bring the voting materials to the voter, follow the established voting procedures, and then submit his/her ballot to the polling station for it to be put in the ballot box.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>104</sup> As discussed in a further above section, while mobile voting teams were active on Election Day, and received additional instruction to protect the their safety and that of voters, there was no clear indication if voters in self-isolation or quarantine were permitted to request mobile voting. Procedures have also been established for those in detention or correctional facilities, those serving in the military, and residing outside the country to vote in person at special polling places.<sup>105</sup> The times for polling, requirements to establish identification prior to voting, and locations to ensure voter secrecy are also prescribed by law.<sup>106</sup>

### *EMB exercising rulemaking authority*

RIK was provided a broad rulemaking authority under the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament (2020) to “prescribe the forms and rules for carrying out the electoral procedures under this Law.”<sup>107</sup> This authority could have been used to additionally adopt or amend COVID-19-related procedures and processes for the election. Within this mandate, RIK had the ability to

<sup>99</sup> <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/e/455155.pdf>

<sup>100</sup> <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/e/455155.pdf>

<sup>101</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 52.

<sup>102</sup> Law on the Election of Members of Parliament (2020), Art. 55(a). See *also, Id.* at 53(1) (“A voter shall cast a vote at a polling station where he/she was registered in the excerpt from the electoral roll.”).

<sup>103</sup> Law on the Election of Members of Parliament (2020), Art. 72(a).

<sup>104</sup> Following discussions between RIK and the Center for Independent Living, it was decided that there will be no time limit to request to vote outside polling stations. This permits voters to apply to vote outside polling stations two days before the elections as well as on Election Day until 11am. Before Election Day, voters must send requests to local EMBs, and on Election Day, send requests to their Polling Board (<https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/tekst/sr/8823/kontakt-telefoni-za-prijavu-glasanja-van-birackog-mesta.php>).

<sup>105</sup> Law on the Election of Members of Parliament (2020), Arts. 72(b), 73, 73(a).

<sup>106</sup> Law on the Election of Members of Parliament (2020), Arts. 56, 58, 68.

<sup>107</sup> Law on the Election of Members of Parliament (2020), Art. 34(1)(5).



develop additional mitigation measures aside from those recommended by the government's task force. This sentiment was echoed in interviews with the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) and political party observers, where it was noted that the government task force instructions were late and implemented by RIK without any additional mitigation measures. On the other hand, some of the political party observers interviewed questioned whether RIK had the legal authority to adopt any mitigation measures related to COVID-19.

As noted in IFES' COVID-19 Briefing Series, "it is essential that election management bodies (EMBs) ... make sensible and well-informed decisions ... [that are] informed by health authorities."<sup>108</sup> However, in this case, RIK deferred to the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team. Interlocutors noted that RIK representatives participated in consultations and meetings, rather than, for example, seeking guidance in the drafting of rules or drafting rules and seeking input from the task force.

### *Modification of election processes/procedures*

According to international standards, processes to amend to election rules and procedures should be consultative and inclusive, and the rules must be clear and precise.<sup>109</sup> To assess the degree to which the decision to postpone the election adhered to these principles, IFES analyzed: (1) whether there were formal/active efforts to consult with both civil society and political parties on the COVID-19 measures, (2) the extent to which stakeholder input was incorporated, and (3) whether the modifications to election processes and procedure were clearly communicated to stakeholders and the public.

As discussed in the above section, the decision on Election Day mitigation measures to respond to COVID-19 were developed by the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team, in consultation with RIK. However, as noted in the relevant section above, the technical composition and processes of this task force were opaque, and according to interlocutors there were no consultative processes with either civil society or political parties prior to RIK's implementation of the COVID-19 mitigation measures for the elections. During an interview for this analysis, a political party representative noted that consulting polling board members would have helped identify the limitations of some measures early, but that while an issue was raised by some during RIK meetings, it was never put on the agenda to be addressed.

Because RIK waited for guidance from the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team, the modifications to election processes and procedures were delayed. The regulations were released only six days ahead of the election, and in interviews with civil society organizations, it was indicated that they did not receive direct or sufficient information from RIK to comply with the COVID-19 mitigation measures. As noted in previous sections, voters started receiving guidance only four days before the election and not always in accessible formats, due to a shortage of time and resources. Despite various efforts (including a video PSA broadcast on television and boosted on social media, messages on the radio, and leaflets inserted in nine major newspapers

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<sup>108</sup> IFES, Guidelines and Recommendations for Electoral Activities During the COVID-19 Pandemic (March 19, 2020), available at [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/guidelines\\_and\\_recommendations\\_for\\_electoral\\_activities\\_during\\_the\\_covid-19\\_pandemic\\_march\\_2020.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/guidelines_and_recommendations_for_electoral_activities_during_the_covid-19_pandemic_march_2020.pdf).

<sup>109</sup> Ellena, K. *Legal Considerations When Delaying or Adapting Elections*. IFES COVID-19 Briefing Paper. p. 3.

in the country), IFES' post-election survey results indicated that only 54 percent of respondents were exposed to information on the COVID-19 measures in place before Election Day.

It should also be noted that The Law on the Election of Members of the Parliament and the Local Elections Law were also amended twice in short succession ahead of the elections, although very few modifications were in direct response to COVID-19.<sup>110</sup> As noted by CRTA in a preliminary report on the elections, “Changing the electoral laws in the electoral year is contrary to all good practices and recommendations of relevant international institutions, as these are fundamental changes in the electoral system and in the manner of representation.”<sup>111</sup> Opposition party members interviewed for this assessment, indicated a lack of meaningful consultation on many of the amendments, and any consultation that occurred being very superficial and having no impact on the final decisions. Interlocutors noted no civil society organizations were consulted. This lack of consultation set a precedent for the government’s approach to decision-making during the COVID-19 crisis.

## Government Corruption in Crises

With crowded information environments, economic and humanitarian relief and assistance and centralized control of oversight mechanisms, crises like COVID-19 can increase vulnerabilities to corruption in the electoral process. The following indicators were used to assess how electoral corruption may have been exacerbated in Serbia’s COVID-19 response:

- Oversight mechanism or mechanisms were built into the emergency response, including a special/temporary oversight body or existing oversight institution(s);
- Oversight mechanisms covered all COVID-19 funding, including, for example, spending at the local levels, multi-lateral donor funds or relevant military spending;
- Extension of financial reporting deadlines was made for political parties or campaigns;
- Emergency measures were not unreasonably restrictive for civil society capacity for monitoring, oversight and advocacy (e.g. through restricting physical movement, denying access to information, shutting down internet access, restricting free speech);
- Social or economic relief measures/programs (or media attention derived from implementing them) were not improperly used to support or promote the ruling party or government, public officials, candidates or political parties.

### *COVID-19 relief package*

In addition to COVID-19 containment measures, the Serbian government implemented COVID-19 economic relief measures. The first relief package was approved by the government ahead of elections on April 10 and amounted to about seven percent of GDP.<sup>112</sup> Key measures included

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<sup>110</sup> See e.g., CeSID noted: “On 5 May the Serbian Government approved amendments to the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament and the Local Elections Law. According to these amendments, signatures collected in support of electoral lists for general and local elections will be considered valid if certified by either notaries public or city and municipal administrations, in a bid to reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission.” <http://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/An-Unprecedented-Election.pdf>

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/extfile/sr/6880/Zbirka%20propisa%20za%20izbore%202020.pdf>

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

wage increases in the health sector, increased healthcare spending, universal cash transfer, one-off payment to pensioners, tax deferment, and wage subsidies for small and medium enterprises.<sup>113</sup> This massive public spending to respond to the crisis, coupled with weakened oversight capacity, allowed for instances of increased risks of corruption. This can pose particularly thorny risks of abuse of state resources when COVID-19 response spending takes place ahead of an election or during a campaign period.

### *Oversight of COVID-19 response funds*

An important measure to help prevent corruption in the use of public funds for COVID-19 response is to establish an oversight mechanism with a specific mandate to monitor the spending of these funds. This mechanism could be a special, temporary oversight body created for this purpose, or it may be explicitly included under the mandates of existing oversight institutions such as supreme audit institutions or anti-corruption authorities. In Serbia, there was no oversight mechanism built directly into the emergency response. In fact, the aforementioned Serbian government decree on March 11 making all information on medical equipment and resources, donations and procurement processes confidential, increased the difficulty for both oversight by independent institutions as well as civil society and media.<sup>114</sup> However, there is evidence that some oversight was conducted by oversight institutions, at least for activities that were included under their existing mandate. For example, one stakeholder confirmed that the ACAS did not have a role in overseeing the use of COVID-19 funds but did leverage its existing mandate over public procurement and directed its observers to note potential usage of protective equipment or other materials for political promotion. The same stakeholder did note that the ACAS did not receive any complaints on the handling of COVID-19 response funds. Regardless of these efforts, there were likely still significant gaps in oversight.

Civil society and media representatives interviewed by IFES for this analysis noted that oversight was insufficient to reduce waste or prevent corruption in the COVID-19 response. Media representatives added that there was a lack of transparency in both procurement and distribution of materials as well as the source of funds, and that even where information was disclosed, there were critical gaps.

### *Civil society and journalist capacity for monitoring, oversight and advocacy*

Civil society and journalists can play an important role in monitoring COVID-19 spending and uncovering corruption. However, containment and other emergency measures imposed by government can disrupt these important oversight activities. While the Serbian government imposed very tight restrictions to physical movement, IFES' interviews with media representatives found that these restrictions were not overly disruptive and that the process for receiving permits for movement and attending events worked reasonably well. On the other hand, the primary challenges reported by those civil society and media representatives interviewed by IFES were lack of government transparency and access to official sources of information, as mentioned regularly in the sections above. All of the representatives that did report attempts to monitor the

<sup>113</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

<sup>114</sup> Government Decision Number 00-96/2000-1.

use of COVID-19 funds or relief programs indicated that they were not able to effectively monitor for these reasons.

On April 10, the government issued a decision that restricted media participation during press conferences with the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team, due to health concerns, with no other interactive platform for communication identified.<sup>115</sup> This restricted questions from the media to email, and prevented any “form of online interaction enabling dialogue.”<sup>116</sup> In IFES’ interviews, media representatives noted that when possible to ask questions, there was not enough time or space allowed or the officials did not have the requested information. Other interviewed stakeholders mentioned that it was difficult to get information from government institutions that were not open, and that institution representatives and hospital staff were forbidden from providing any information. Although information processes were never formally suspended during the State of Emergency, in some cases there were delays in issuing relevant information and deadlines for answering FOIA requests were extended.<sup>117</sup>

Additionally, two media representatives mentioned during interviews that journalists were accused of being political and undermining the state, which negatively impacted capacity for monitoring. One mentioned that arrests of journalists for reporting related to COVID-19 had impacted monitoring capacity. In early April, three journalists were arrested in the span of one week for COVID-19 related violations.<sup>118</sup> Notably, Ana Lalić was arrested for “spreading panic and unrest” when she published an article about a lack of personal protective equipment available to medical staff at a health center.<sup>119</sup> Lalić had allegedly violated new rules prohibiting local institutions from releasing COVID-19 information to media “if it was not authorized by the central Crisis Staff in Belgrade.”<sup>120</sup> These rules refer to the March 31 government decision that all data related to COVID-19 must be communicated by the government’s task force, which is still in effect.<sup>121</sup>

### *Political and campaign finance*

As elections move forward during COVID-19 outbreaks, there can be increased risks of violations of political finance regulations or abuse of state resources. It is important that political finance oversight institutions continue to monitor and control political finance during emergency periods, “clearly document when and why extensions are granted for filing of financial reports, and continue to comply with all legal requirements for public disclosure.”<sup>122</sup> In Serbia, the ACAS is responsible for reviewing reporting by political entities, receiving complaints regarding violations and initiating actions against those violating the law.<sup>123</sup> The Law on Financing Political Activities includes the requirement for annual financial reporting by political entities and reporting on

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<sup>115</sup> <https://crd.org/2020/04/11/serbias-authorities-must-respect-media-freedoms-and-citizens-rights-to-be-informed/>

<sup>116</sup> <https://crd.org/2020/04/11/serbias-authorities-must-respect-media-freedoms-and-citizens-rights-to-be-informed/>

<sup>117</sup> <https://www.rti-rating.org/covid-19-tracker/>

<sup>118</sup> <https://ipi.media/three-serbian-journalists-reporting-on-covid-19-issues-arrested-in-one-week/>

<sup>119</sup> <https://ipi.media/three-serbian-journalists-reporting-on-covid-19-issues-arrested-in-one-week/>

<sup>120</sup> <https://ipi.media/three-serbian-journalists-reporting-on-covid-19-issues-arrested-in-one-week/>

<sup>121</sup> Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 48/2020.

<sup>122</sup> Ellena, K., Brown, A., Dreher, C. *Preventing Government Corruption in Crises*. IFES COVID-19 Briefing Paper. p. 15.

<sup>123</sup> Law on Financing Political Activities, Arts. 32, 35.

campaign costs,<sup>124</sup> and the deadlines are set in the law.<sup>125</sup> The normal deadline for campaign finance reports would have been submitted by July 21. However, due to the State of Emergency's interruption of the election campaign timeline, the deadline was extended until August 5, though no formal decision was made to this effect.

Another challenge to political finance oversight is a heightened focus on online campaigning due to social distancing requirements.<sup>126</sup> Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook had announced the expansion of its Political Advertisements Library to Serbia, making compliance with its standards obligatory for advertisements in the country. However, Facebook later postponed the expansion due to COVID-19's impact on the work of content reviewers. The expansion of the library in Serbia would have permitted a more accessible monitoring tool, which would have been especially relevant during a campaign led mainly on online platforms.

As such, efforts to practice online oversight were limited. In IFES' interview with a representative from the ACAS, he/she said that the ACAS did not have adequate resources in place to monitor increased online campaigning due to COVID-19 since the crisis was unexpected, and that it was not a primary focus of monitoring efforts. This sentiment was confirmed in interviews with representatives from media and civil society, who stated that online campaigning was not monitored during the election and that, even outside of the COVID-19 context, online campaigning is not monitored or regulated sufficiently. This will make it difficult for the ACAS to assess the accuracy of campaign finance reporting even though CeSID reported that 120 election observers were hired by the agency to collect data to evaluate costs reported in campaign finance reports.<sup>127</sup>

### *COVID-19-related abuses of state resources*

COVID-19 response, including media coverage and government relief programs, can be abused by public officials for electoral advantage. A representative of the ACAS confirmed that there was no explicit ban on the branding of relief packages, personal protective equipment and medical assistance with candidate or political party images and slogans during an interview with IFES. Separately, the CRTA observation mission preliminary report noted that it had submitted complaints relating to "misuse of public resources, public officials' campaigning, conflicts of interest, as well as violations of the rules of financing"<sup>128</sup> unrelated to COVID-19 funding.

All of the media and civil society representatives interviewed by IFES for this analysis stated that they had observed some level of abuse of COVID-19 relief efforts by political parties, public officials or candidates, particularly during the State of Emergency. They all noted that public officials were communicating COVID-19 relief measures as endeavors or achievements of the president and his party, including the instance reported by CRTA and Transparency Serbia in which President Vučić had continued campaigning during the State of Emergency when he traveled to a hospital in Novi Pazar to personally deliver medical equipment.<sup>129</sup> It should be noted

<sup>124</sup> Law on Financing Political Activities, Arts. 28, 29.

<sup>125</sup> Law on Financing Political Activities, Arts. 28, 29.

<sup>126</sup> Ellena, K., Brown, A., Dreher, C. *Preventing Government Corruption in Crises*. IFES COVID-19 Briefing Paper. p. 15.

<sup>127</sup> CeSID, *Election Monitoring Mission Preliminary Report* (June 21, 2020).

<sup>128</sup> CRTA, *Elections 2020: Preliminary Report on Election Day*, (June 21, 2020), p. 11.

<sup>129</sup> V.I.P. Daily News Report, Wednesday, April 8, 2020.



that the ACAS' oversight mandate of the election campaign was not in effect during the State of Emergency.

In addition to reporting that political activities (particularly the circulation of promotional videos on COVID-19 response) were being carried out by the government during the State of Emergency when the campaign period was suspended, the CRTA Preliminary Election Observation report noted specific examples of related abuses by public officials. For example, the report noted that "a push poll technique" was used throughout the country, where "phone calls were made from the party headquarters in order to first ask citizens to comment on the government's moves during the State of Emergency, and then on their willingness to support the party on the Election Day."<sup>130</sup> In addition, the symbols of the ruling party, the election slogan and the signature of the president appeared in the letter delivered to recipients of one-time payments to pensioners under the COVID-19 relief program.<sup>131</sup> U pismu se navodi da su te mere „rezultat marljivog i uspešnog rada naše zemlje“.<sup>132</sup>

The CRTA observation mission also monitored public appearances by public officials during the campaign period and found that, of the almost 800 appearances, 64 percent appeared in their official capacity, 18 percent appeared in their party function and 18 percent acted in both state and party capacities.<sup>133</sup> From May 25 to June 14, public officials were five times more active than the 12 days of the campaign that occurred before the State of Emergency.<sup>134</sup>

## What's Next? Lessons Learned and Recommendations

This analysis represents a comprehensive assessment of the challenges posed by COVID-19 in the conduct of election administration and oversight as well as how the response of Serbian authorities measured up to addressing identified challenges. Based on the findings elaborated in the sections above, IFES has compiled a list of recommendations under each aspect of the elections and COVID-19 response analysis. These recommendations are integral to safeguarding the health of citizens during electoral events, promoting transparency and integrity of elections and building trust and confidence in electoral process, especially when faced with a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following recommendations are designed for election administration and oversight stakeholders, such as EMBs, oversight institutions, civil society, media and observers, in Serbia and the broader region. They inform guidelines, processes and procedures that should be developed, consulted, implemented and enforced to achieve maximum health and safety among electoral participants. The lessons learned from the Serbian case present opportunities for global stakeholders to consider when managing or supporting elections, from the local to the national level.

Based on the conclusions drawn above, IFES posits that sufficient time and resources is one of the main factors that determine the success of COVID-19 mitigation in elections. Time and

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<sup>130</sup> CRTA, *Elections 2020: Preliminary Report on Election Day*, (June 21, 2020), p. 11.

<sup>131</sup> CRTA, *Elections 2020: Preliminary Report on Election Day*, (June 21, 2020), p. 11.

<sup>132</sup> CRTA, *Elections 2020: Preliminary Report on Election Day*, (June 21, 2020), p. 11.

<sup>133</sup> CRTA, *Elections 2020: Preliminary Report on Election Day*, (June 21, 2020), p. 10.

<sup>134</sup> CRTA, *Elections 2020: Preliminary Report on Election Day*, (June 21, 2020), p. 10.



resources determine the ability to fully assess the risks inherent to the conduct of elections during a public health crisis, consult with a variety of stakeholders on risk mitigation, develop inclusive and targeted voter information strategies and implement proper oversight mechanisms. Of course, during a public health crisis, time and resources are limited, which further contributes to the challenges present in the electoral process. The table below maps priority recommendations that should be considered to the maximum extent possible when developing an elections and COVID-19 response.<sup>135</sup>

<b>Recommendations for Elections and COVID-19 Response</b>	
<b><i>Risk Mitigation in the Electoral Process</i></b>	
➤	A country's COVID-19 task force and the EMB establish an effective and transparent collaboration facilitating identification of health risks and development of a mitigation plan.
➤	Develop clear guidelines for voters in self-isolation and quarantine, striving to enfranchise these voters whether they vote safely at the polling station or from home.
➤	Make decisions on mitigation measures early in the process and allocate sufficient time to communicate those measures consistently and in accessible formats to familiarize voters with measures, build trust in the safety of the process and raise awareness about the importance of compliance.
➤	Allocate proper time and resources to training/informing polling board members (poll workers) on mitigation measures and on polling station set-up, placement of informational material and enforcement strategies.
➤	Coordinate with other public institutions (especially public health institutions) to procure or secure resources such as PPE and disinfectant.
➤	Select polling station locations that permit proper social distancing.
➤	Procure more comfortable and useful PPE, specifically procure masks in different sizes to accommodate different bodies.
➤	Assign poll workers to control queues and enforce compliance with social distancing and the use of masks.
➤	Disseminate guidelines on proper disposal of PPE and provide sufficient number of receptacles at polling stations.
➤	Schedule elections during dry and warm seasons, when windows and doors can remain open.
➤	Encourage observers to consistently monitor compliance with mitigation measures.

<sup>135</sup> The recommendations included here do not encompass an exhaustive list. Each stakeholder considering an elections and COVID-19 response should consider factors relevant to the relevant local context.

<b><i>Erosion of Information Integrity</i></b>
➤ Assist the EMB in the development of proactive communication strategies to build transparency and awareness of electoral processes a to build trust. Efforts should be right sized to fit the human and technical capacity of the EMB.
➤ Communicate accurate information about the changes to electoral processes to the media to enable them to further disseminate key messages.
➤ Establish a media center or other channel to enhance communication between the EMB and the media, particularly in the immediate electoral period, to enable the quick confirmation, rebuttal or clarification of information that may be deceptive or misleading.
➤ Establish a communication channel between regional election authorities and the EMB to enable quick clarification of misconceptions or misleading information that might otherwise impact the ability of on-the-ground election workers to do their jobs.
➤ Understand how different groups access information and ensure that communication strategies are designed to reach all communities, particularly marginalized groups.
➤ To promote the dissemination of accurate information, encourage a wider array of electoral actors, in particular political parties, to share information about public health guidelines and encourage compliance in their voter outreach messages.
<b><i>Looming Barriers to Political Access</i></b>
➤ Proactively and regularly consult with women, people with disabilities, young people, older people and ethnic and linguistic minorities to ensure a diversity of voices at all stages of the electoral process, especially in mitigation measure decision-making.
➤ Design voter education messaging and dissemination strategies from an inclusive lens and keeping in mind the way the people from different marginalized and at-risk communities (such as women, persons with disabilities, minorities and young and older people) access and consume information, including by providing accessible formats such as audio, braille, sign language and easy-to-read.
<b><i>Disruption in the Rule of Law</i></b>
➤ The legal authority and process for postponing elections (or in this case derogating from fundamental electoral rights) should be respected.
➤ Review legal framework and electoral system to assess capacity and ability to manage, introduce, or expand alternative, remote voting methods (in the case of crisis).
➤ Include a variety of stakeholders, including civil society, in consultations ahead of decisions to postpone or modify elections.
➤ Conduct meaningful consultations; consultations should be transparent so that there is a clear record of recommendations and concerns shared with decisionmakers, input should be considered in the decision-making process, and the final decisions (as well as their underlying justifications) should be made public.
➤ EMBs should exercise legally mandated rule-making authority when necessary to respond to an emergency. EMBs should avoid appearances of partisanship by taking a leadership role in developing rules and regulations.
➤ Modifications to electoral processes due to emergencies should be clearly communicated and disclosed as far as possible in advance of the election.
<b><i>Government Corruption in Crises</i></b>
➤ Establish an oversight mechanism for the use of all emergency response funds (including multi-lateral donor funds or spending at the local level). Make the source of funding for emergency response programs and materials clear and transparent to both beneficiaries and the public.
➤ Publicly disclose information regarding emergency spending, particularly beneficiary lists and public procurement information, to enable civil society-led monitoring efforts. Ensure a safe and open environment for journalists to work freely.
➤ Build capacity among government institutions and civil society to monitor online campaign activities to enable effective campaign finance oversight with particular focus on COVID-19 considerations.
➤ Explicitly ban the use of emergency response funds to promote the ruling party or government, public officials, candidates, or political parties. Monitor and enforce violations of existing rules

preventing the abuse of state resources, especially when it comes to social and economic relief programs.

## About IFES Support to Elections and COVID-19 Response

Through the USAID-funded *Political Process Strengthening Activity in Serbia* project, IFES provided extensive technical support to RIK in order to assess and address COVID-19-related risks and challenges that could affect the conduct of the elections. Despite a period of just three weeks, IFES analyzed both the legal and regulatory framework as it related to the RIK and offered more than 30 recommendations for adapting and amending procedures on election and implementing measures that could ensure the safety of both voters and polling board members, as well as how to inform citizens and polling station staff on the measures in place on Election Day. After extensive engagement with IFES and consultations with the COVID-19 Infectious Disease Crisis Response Team, RIK implemented most of IFES' recommendations that were related to voter outreach and PPE usage on Election Day.

IFES also supported RIK in its public communication efforts with citizens to strengthen trust in their safe participation on Election Day and in the RIK to organize elections despite public health risks. With extensive support of the IFES team, public communication materials included posters, newspaper leaflets, television and radio public service announcements and social media content.

IFES' Election Day assessments demonstrated that the timely implementation and communication of measures is of key importance for compliance and enforcement. It was also evident that complex and thorough instructions, such as usage and disposal of PPE and spatial organization of polling stations, must be communicated directly to polling station staff in order to ensure compliance. The Election Day assessment also provided insight into the effects of public communication efforts, showing that intensive and elaborate outreach to voters can influence whether they follow measure. Last but not least, the assessment indicated that a strategic and wide-ranging approach to implementing measures that involves multiple stakeholders from government, civil society and media would improve efforts to ensure the safety and preservation of the integrity of the electoral process.

## Annex 1: List of Analysis Indicators and Interview Questions

### Risk Mitigation in the Electoral Process

#### 1. Were recommended mitigation measures appropriately adopted?

##### a. Method: Scale

INDICATOR	SCALE			
Appropriateness of mitigation measures	(1) Completely applicable	(2) Mostly applicable	(3) Somewhat applicable	(4) Not at all applicable
Mitigation measures covered all core aspects of COVID-19 transmission (distancing, PPE and disinfection, remote options [where possible])				
Mitigation measures were decided ahead of time (to allow for awareness and sensibilization campaigns) and in coordination with other agencies				
There were sufficient resources to implement needed measures				
Mitigation measures were adopted and implemented consistently throughout the country				

Indicator 1	
Stakeholder	Questions
EMB	Was there a protocol/guideline in place for implementation of mitigation measures?
	How was this protocol/guideline disseminated throughout the country, departmental EMBs?
	Was there any coordination between the EMB and other agencies in the development of this document? Who led it? How was the process?
	How much did the EMB receive in additional resources to implement such measures? Was the amount sufficient? Were any mitigation measures discarded for lack of resources?
	Were there any remote voting processes available? (if not, for legal or other reasons?)
Poll workers	Did you receive all material you needed for the implementation of mitigation measures on e-day?
	Based on your experience, how do you assess the overall implementation of these measures?

<b>CSOs/Observers</b>	Did you receive all material you needed for complying with COVID-19 mitigation measures?
	According to your observations, how do you assess the overall implementation of these measures?

**2. Were adopted mitigation measures communicated to voters and poll workers in an inclusive and comprehensive manner?**

<b>Indicator 2</b>	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Questions</b>
<b>EMB</b>	Did the EMB conduct any training on COVID-19 mitigation measures for poll workers? For observers? When? For how many people?
	Did the EMB conduct civic and voter education campaigns covering COVID-19 mitigation measures? Through which media? For how long? How many people were reached? In which languages were the campaigns? Were they accessible to persons with disabilities?
<b>Poll workers</b>	Did you receive any guidance and/or training on implementing COVID-19 mitigation measures? When? Who delivered this guidance/training?
	Did you feel like the guidance/training was enough? Did you feel confident you could implement the measures you were asked to?
<b>CSOs/Observers</b>	Did you receive any guidance and/or training on complying COVID-19 mitigation measures? When? Who delivered this guidance/training?

**3. Were mitigation measures appropriately followed by voters and poll workers?**

<b>Indicator 3</b>	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Questions</b>
<b>EMB</b>	Were there any enforcement measures to ensure poll workers complied with the measures?
	Were there any enforcement measures to ensure voters complied with the measures?
<b>Poll workers</b>	To what extent did you comply with the mitigation measures? What kept you from complying (e.g., lack of supplies, discomfort with masks, not enough people to support with implementation?)
	To what extent other poll workers in your polling station complied with the measures?

<b>CSOs/Observers</b>	To what extent did you comply with the mitigation measures? What kept you from complying (e.g., lack of supplies, discomfort with masks)?
	According to your observations, to what extent were poll workers <i>consistently</i> complying with measures?
	According to your observations, to what extent were voters <i>consistently</i> complying with measures?

4. What was the variance in the number of new COVID-19 cases?  
 a. Method: Reported average numbers 12 days before e-day and 2-14 days after e-day
5. Was the designated COVID-19 Task Force relevant and effective in implementing its mandate in relation to the electoral process?

Indicator 5	
Stakeholder	Questions
<b>EMB</b>	How was the relationship between the EMB and the national task force? How often did reps meet? Was the EMB a member of the task force?
	How would you assess the guidance/advisory provided by the task force (e.g., quality, timeliness, feasibility of requests)?
	How would you assess the material/logistical support provided by the task force?
<b>Poll workers</b>	What is your perception of the national task force and its work to respond to the COVID-19 crisis?
<b>CSOs/Observers</b>	What is your perception of the national task force and its work to respond to the COVID-19 crisis?

### Erosion of Information Integrity

6. Did the EMB develop and disseminate voter information in response to or due to changes in election procedures resulting from COVID-19? What was the number of materials developed/disseminated?

Indicator 6	
Stakeholder	Questions
<b>EMB</b>	What type of voter information materials were developed? What were key messages in these materials?
	How did the EMB decide on the key messages or topics to cover in these voter information materials?



<b>CSOs</b>	Were EMB COVID-related voter information materials accessible to all audiences?
	Were EMB COVID-related voter information materials effective? Why or why not?
<b>Media</b>	Did the EMB share COVID-related voter information messages with the media for release to larger audiences?

7. Which dissemination channels were used by the EMB to share voter information in response to or due to changes in election procedures resulting from COVID-19, and how many?
- a. Disaggregation: Social media platforms used, TV-stations, radio-stations, newspapers, posters, billboards

Indicator 7	
Stakeholder	Questions
<b>EMB</b>	Why were these dissemination channels chosen?

8. Were there public statements from the EMB clarifying misconceptions or false information, and how many?

Indicator 8	
Stakeholder	Questions
<b>EMB</b>	Did the EMB have a process in place for identifying and responding to misconceptions or false information related to COVID-19? If so, what was that process?
<b>CSOs/Media</b>	Did the EMB respond to requests for clarification regarding COVID-19-related information?

9. What was the average time of response between EMB's receipt of a request for clarification or identification of piece of content that required correction and issuing a public response (or making a decision not to issue a response)?

Indicator 9	
Stakeholder	Questions
<b>EMB</b>	Did the EMB have a process in place for deciding if it would or would not issue a public response to a misconception or instance of false information? If so, what was that process?
	Did verification or consultation within the EMB or with external stakeholders take place before a public response was issued? Was the EMB department or individual in charge of making clarifications able to get timely input and responses from those with whom it consulted?
<b>CSOs</b>	Were you or, to your knowledge, other CSOs consulted by the EMB for clarification that was used to issue a response to misleading or false content?

**10. Did political parties develop/disseminate voter information that included public health messaging responsive to COVID-19, and how many parties did so?**

Indicator 10	
Stakeholder	Questions
Political Parties	What type of voter information materials were developed? What were key messages in these materials?
	How did the political party decide on the key messages or topics to cover in these voter information materials?

**Looming Barriers to Political Access**

**11. Were identity-rights groups consulted in the development and determination of mitigation measures?**

- a. Method: Develop a scale
- b. Disaggregation: Type of identity-rights groups

INDICATOR	SCALE			
Consultation of identity groups	(1) Consultation with majority of recommendations implemented	(2) Consultation, some recommendations implemented	(3) Some consultation, recommendations not implemented	(4) No consultation at all
CEC-organized meetings with identity groups to discuss COVID-19 mitigation measures				
CSO-organized meetings with CEC to discuss COVID-19 mitigation measures				
CSO-provided recommendations (outside of meetings) on COVID-19 mitigation measures				

Indicator 11	
Stakeholder	Questions
EMB	Were meetings or feedback sessions held on issues of identity groups (such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, older voters, etc.) on mitigation measures for COVID-19?

	With which identity groups were meetings or feedback sessions held (women, youth, people with disabilities, ethnic/linguistic minorities, older people)?
	Were meetings or feedback sessions held with individuals (such as only older voters or only women), organizations (such as DPOs or youth organizations), or both?
	Were meetings or feedback sessions held with one identity group at a time or with more than one identity group (e.g. people with disabilities and older voters or women and young people)?
	What recommendations were provided from identity groups or their organizations?
	How many recommendations provided by identity groups or their organizations were incorporated into electoral planning and implementation?
<b>CSOs (disaggregated by identity)</b>	Do you/your organization feel that you were consulted in the development of COVID-19 prevention measures?
	Was your organization invited to meetings or feedback sessions organized by the CEC on preventing COVID-19 in elections?
	Did your organization provide recommendations to the CEC on this subject?
	Were recommendations provided through a meeting or feedback session organized by the CEC, a meeting organized by your organization, or another means? If another means, how?
	What recommendations did your organization provide to CEC?
	From your experience in the elections, which of the recommendations shared with CEC were implemented?

**12. Were mitigation measures communicated in accessible formats, including to people with disabilities, and linguistic and ethnic minorities?**

**a. Method: Develop a scale**

INDICATOR	SCALE			
	(1) Yes, reached most people	(2) Yes, reached some people	(3) Produced but did not reach community	(4) Not at all
<b>Accessible information</b>				
Information on mitigation measures was provided in braille				
Information on mitigation measures was provided in easy-to-read and/or wordless				
Information on mitigation measures was provided in Serbian Sign Language				

Information on mitigation measures was provided in large print				
Information on mitigation measures was provided in minority languages				

Indicator 12	
Stakeholder	Questions
EMB	In which languages (oral and sign) were mitigation measures communicated?
	In which of the following formats was information on mitigation measures communicated: braille, large print, wordless, easy-to-read, audio?
	Which of the following were included in TV spots: subtitles/captioning, sign language interpreter, aural information?
	Did TV and radio spots include information in minority languages?
	In what format did TV and radio spots include information in minority languages: audio, subtitles, or both?
CSOs (disaggregated by identity)	Did you/your organization receive information about COVID-19 mitigation measures for elections?
	Was the information that you received provided by CEC? If not, by whom?
	Did you receive sufficient information about COVID-19 mitigation measures?
	Did you/your organization's membership receive targeted information about COVID-19 mitigation measures, i.e. information that is pertinent to concerns of people in your identity group (such as persons with disabilities)?

**13. What proportion of the population believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive?**  
**a. Disaggregation: Sex, age, disability and population group**

**Disruption in the Rule of Law****14. Was the decision to delay the election made in a consultative manner? Was it communicated in an inclusive and comprehensive manner?****a. Method: Degree of consultation**

Degree of Consultation Scale:

INDICATOR	SCALE				
Decision to delay election	(1) Yes, consultation was active/formal and majority input incorporated	(2) Yes, consultation was active/formal and little to no input incorporated	(3) Informal/ad hoc consultation occurred and majority input incorporated	(4) Informal/ad hoc consultation occurred and little to no input incorporated	(5) No political party or civil society stakeholders were consulted
Consultation with Civil Society and Political Parties was actively and transparently sought					
There were formalized and transparent mechanisms for consultation with Civil Society and Political Parties					
Stakeholder input was incorporated into the decision and the justification for the final decision was communicated					

Indicator 14	
Stakeholder	Questions
EMB	Were stakeholders (e.g., political parties, civil society organizations) consulted in the decision to delay the election? If so, which stakeholders were consulted?
	If stakeholders were consulted, was there feedback taken into account?
	Were stakeholders consulted transparently? (e.g., public hearings or the virtual equivalent)
	How was the decision to postpone elections communicated to the public?
CSOs/Observers	Was your organization consulted or otherwise provided an opportunity to provide feedback on the decision to postpone the election?
	If feedback was provided, do you think that it was taken into consideration in the final decision?

Were the reasons for deciding to postpone the election (v. adopting mitigation measures or using alternative voting methods) and the timeline/process for rescheduling clearly communicated to the public?

**15. Is there flexibility in the law regarding methods of carrying out election processes, such as alternative voting methods?**

Indicator 15	
Stakeholder	Questions
N/A	What are the provisions within the legal framework to conduct alternative voting methods?
	What is the process to amend the legal framework to introduce alternative voting methods?

**16. Were any modifications to election laws or rules made in a consultative manner? Were they clearly communicated?**

**a. Method: Degree of consultation**

Degree of Consultation Scale:

INDICATOR	SCALE				
Modification to election laws/rules	(1) Yes, consultation was active/formal and majority input incorporated	(2) Yes, consultation was active/formal and little to no input incorporated	(3) Informal/ad hoc consultation occurred and majority input incorporated	(4) Informal/ad hoc consultation occurred and little to no input incorporated	(5) No political party or civil society stakeholders were consulted
Consultation with Civil Society and Political Parties was actively and transparently sought					
There were formalized and transparent mechanisms for consultation with Civil Society and Political Parties					
Stakeholder input was incorporated into the decision and the justification for the final decision was communicated					



Indicator 16	
Stakeholder	Questions
Parliament	Were stakeholders (e.g., political parties, civil society organizations) consulted when modifying the electoral code ahead of the election? If so, which stakeholders were consulted?
	Were stakeholders consulted transparently? (e.g., public hearings or the virtual equivalent)
EMB	Were stakeholders (e.g., political parties, civil society organizations) consulted when modifying election rules and procedures?
	If stakeholders were consulted, was there feedback taken into account in the modifications?
	Were stakeholders consulted transparently? (e.g., public hearings or the virtual equivalent)
	How were changes to the election rules and procedures communicated to stakeholders and the public? When were they communicated?
CSOs/Observers	Was your institution consulted or otherwise provided an opportunity to provide feedback on modifications to election rules and procedure?
	If feedback was provided, do you think that it was taken into consideration in the final modifications?
	Were the reasons for deciding to postpone the election (v. adopting mitigation measures or using alternative voting methods) and the timeline/process for rescheduling clearly communicated to the public?

**17. Did the EMB use its rule-making authority to develop rules or codes of conduct governing new COVID-19 processes?**

Indicator 17	
Stakeholder	Questions
EMB	Did the RIK have sufficient rule-making authority to develop all necessary COVID-19 related rules or codes of conduct?
	Did the RIK rely on legislation or regulations/rules from other government agencies to implement COVID-19 measures during the election?
Parliamentary Oversight Committee	Were there any gaps in RIK's COVID-19 regulations/rules for the election?

**Government Corruption in Crises**

- 18. Is there an oversight mechanism or mechanisms built into the emergency response? This mechanism might be a special/temporary oversight body or existing oversight institution(s) (e.g. SAIs, ACCs).**

Indicator 18 & 19	
Stakeholder	Questions
Anti-Corruption Agency	What is the ACA's role in overseeing the use of COVID-19 funds?
	Did the government seek out your advice in the design and implementation of COVID-19 relief programs (to prevent corruption?)
State Audit Institution	Do you have the mandate to audit the funds used for the COVID-19 economic relief programs? If so, are there any gaps in your mandate over COVID-19 funds?
	Did the government seek out your advice in the design and implementation of COVID-19 relief programs (to reduce waste or prevent corruption?)
	If you have the mandate to audit COVID-19 relief funds, will you be reporting your findings to parliament (or a specific parliamentary oversight committee)?
CSOs/Media	In your opinion, is there sufficient oversight over the implementation of COVID-19 relief funds to reduce waste or prevent corruption?
	Are there public reporting requirements on government spending under these programs?
	Was your organization consulted, or provided an opportunity to provide input, on the design of COVID-19 relief programs?

- 19. If yes to above, do these oversight mechanisms cover all COVID-19 funding, including, for example, spending at the local levels, multi-lateral donor funds, or relevant military spending?**

Indicator 18 & 19	
Stakeholder	Questions
Anti-Corruption Agency	What is the ACA's role in overseeing the use of COVID-19 funds?
	Did the government seek out your advice in the design and implementation of COVID-19 relief programs (to prevent corruption?)
State Audit Institution	Do you have the mandate to audit the funds used for the COVID-19 economic relief programs? If so, are there any gaps in your mandate over COVID-19 funds?
	Did the government seek out your advice in the design and implementation of COVID-19 relief programs (to reduce waste or prevent corruption?)
	If you have the mandate to audit COVID-19 relief funds, will you be reporting your findings to parliament (or a specific parliamentary oversight committee)?

<b>CSOs/Media</b>	In your opinion, is there sufficient oversight over the implementation of COVID-19 relief funds to reduce waste or prevent corruption?
	Are there public reporting requirements on government spending under these programs?
	Was your organization consulted, or provided an opportunity to provide input, on the design of COVID-19 relief programs?

**20. Have any financial reporting deadlines for political parties or campaigns been extended? (If yes, length of extension?)**

<b>Indicator 20</b>	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Questions</b>
<b>Anti-Corruption Agency</b>	Have any financial reporting deadlines for political parties or campaigns been extended? If so, for how long?
	Did the ACA have adequate resources/tools in place to monitor any increased online campaigning due to COVID-19?
	Is there an online system for financial reporting and public disclosure?
<b>Political Parties</b>	Have there been any changes or extensions to financial reporting? If so, have they been communicated clearly?
<b>CSOs/Media</b>	Have there been any changes or extensions to financial reporting? If so, have they been communicated clearly?
	Do you believe that there was sufficient monitoring of increased online campaign activities due to COVID-19?

**21. Are emergency measures unreasonably restricting civil society capacity for monitoring, oversight, and advocacy? (e.g. through restricting physical movement, denying access to information, shutting down internet access, restricting free speech...)**

<b>Indicator 21</b>	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Questions</b>
<b>CSOs/Media</b>	Has your organization been able to effectively monitor the use of COVID-19 funds or the implementation of COVID-19 relief programs?
	Has COVID-19 spending or program implementation been sufficiently transparent to enable civil society/media oversight?
	Have COVID-19 containment measures (e.g. through restricting physical movement, denying access to information, shutting down internet access, restricting free speech...) impacted civil society/media's capacity to monitor COVID-19 relief programs?

**22. Were social or economic relief measures/programs (or media attention derived from implementing them) improperly used to support or promote the ruling party or government, public officials, candidates, or political parties?**

<b>Indicator 22</b>	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Questions</b>
<b>Anti-Corruption Agency</b>	Is there any prohibition on branding of relief packages, personal protective equipment and medical assistance with candidate or political party images and slogans?
	Have economic or social relief measures/programs been used to support or promote the government/public officials, candidates, or political parties?
<b>EMB</b>	Is there any prohibition on branding of relief packages, personal protective equipment and medical assistance with candidate or political party images and slogans?
	Have economic or social relief measures/programs been used to support or promote the government/public officials, candidates, or political parties?
<b>CSOs/Media</b>	Have economic or social relief measures/programs been used to support or promote the government/public officials, candidates, or political parties?

## Annex 2: Serbia Post-Election Survey Findings



### Serbia Post-Election Survey

International Foundation for Electoral Systems



#### Survey Overview and Specifications



##### Sample design

- Sample size: 1,000 respondents (adults 18 years or older)
- The margin of error is  $\pm 3.10\%$
- Sample universe is Serbians aged 18 years and older
- Method of data collection: Telephone (80% of interviews) and online (20% of interviews)

##### Survey dates

- IFES contracted survey firm Ipsos Public Affairs to implement the survey
- Data collection took place 5-9 August 2020



## Sample Sizes for Key Demographic Groups



### Gender

- Female = 52%
- Male = 48%

### Age groups

- 18-24 = 10%
- 25-34 = 17%
- 35-44 = 18%
- 45-54 = 15%
- 55+ = 41%

### Education Level

- Elementary or no education = 25%
- Secondary education = 55%
- High or higher education = 20%

### Regional groups

- Vojvodina = 26%
- Beograd = 23%
- West = 11%
- Central = 18%
- East = 8%
- South East = 14%



## Participation in 2020 Parliamentary Elections

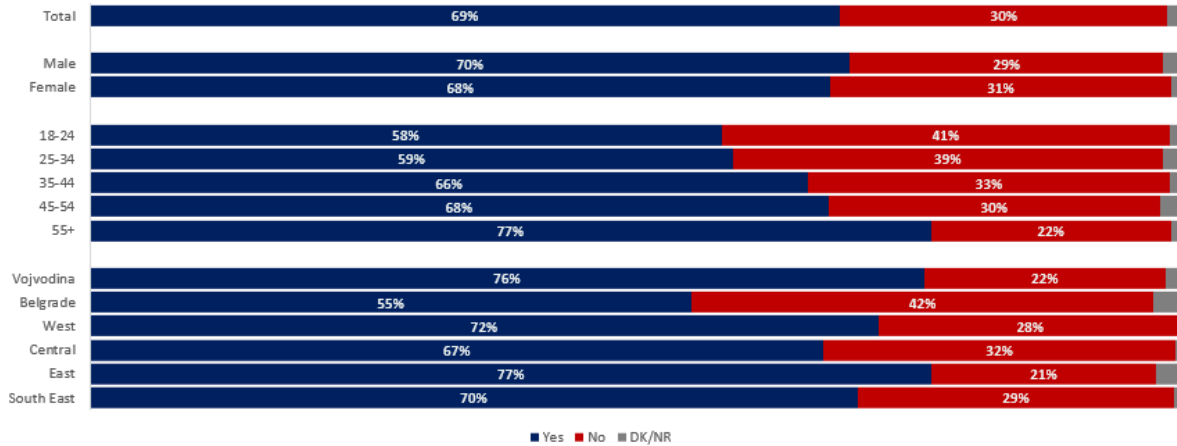


- Sixty-nine percent of respondents say they participated in the 2020 parliamentary elections, a finding nearly 20 percentage points higher than election turnout. This disparity may be due to both the fact that the survey was only fielded in Serbia and excluded Serbians abroad (where there is historically lower turnout rates) and in part due to social desirability bias.
- Among voters, a majority of 85% say they felt either very or somewhat safe voting given the COVID-19 situation. Most voters say that sanitizing liquid was made available for voters (82%), polling station officials ensured that a safe distance of at least 1 meter between voters was maintained (77%), all poll workers were wearing masks and gloves (73%), and that voters in line were offered a mask if they did not bring their own (71%).
- Voters largely express satisfaction with the Election Day experience. Eighty-seven percent say they are satisfied with the organization of the process inside the polling station, 76% are satisfied with the impartiality of polling staff, and 74% are satisfied with the competence of the polling staff.
- One area that should be noted for future elections, only 44% of voters saw the names of the candidates for the party list they voted for, suggesting this is an area voters may need more information. Younger voters (under 35) are more likely to have seen the names of candidates (58% of those ages 18-24, and 56% of those ages 25-34) as are those who are very interested in politics and government (62%).





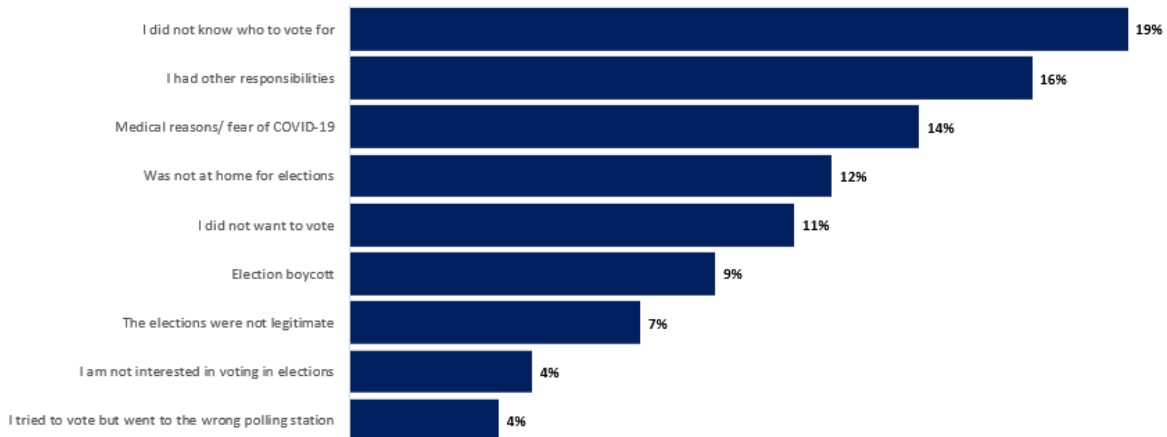
## Participation in 2020 Parliamentary Elections



*"Understanding that there are many reasons why people may not vote in elections, please tell me did you vote in the 2020 parliamentary elections in Serbia?" (n=1,000)*



## Reasons for Not Voting in 2020 Parliamentary Elections



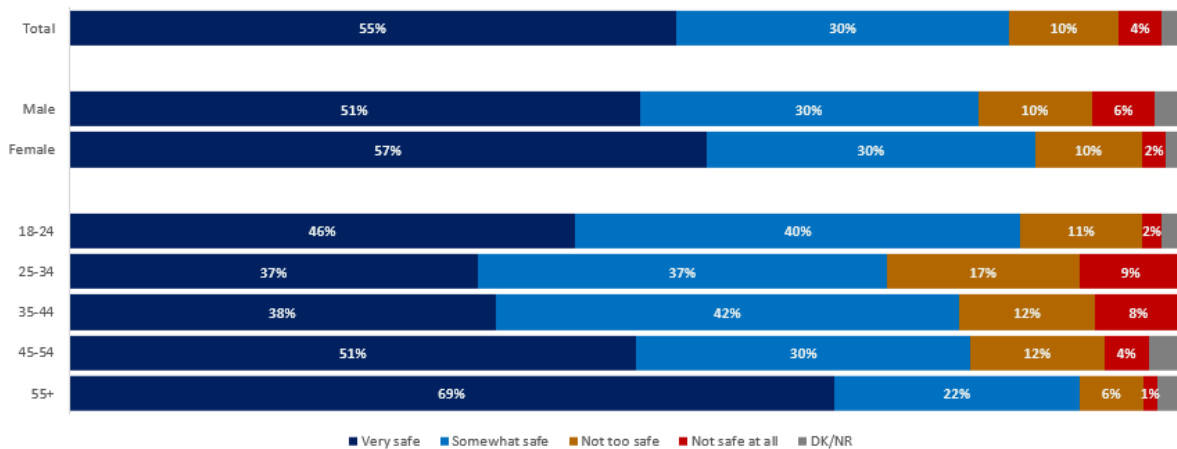
*"Why did you not participate in the 2020 parliamentary elections?" (n=300)*



## Perceptions of Safety when Voting in 2020 Elections



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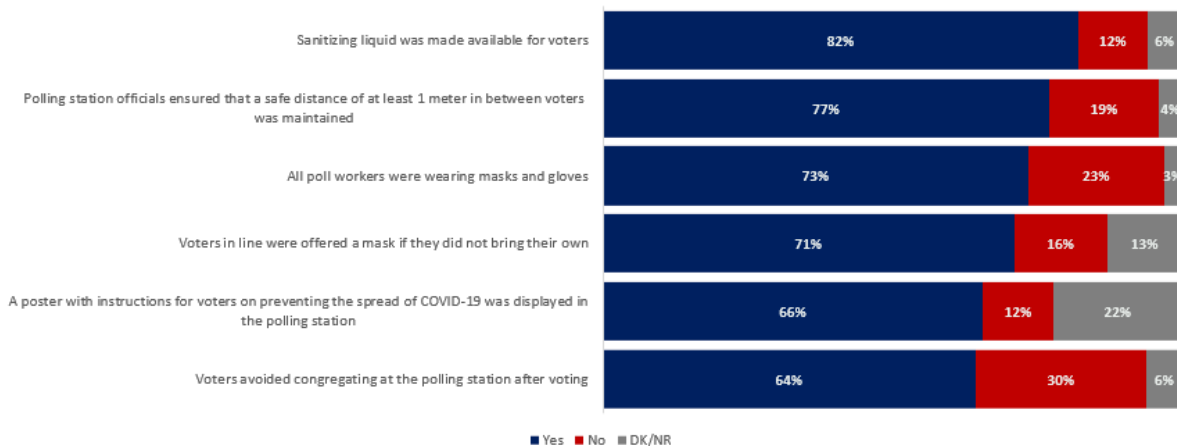
"Given the COVID-19 situation, how safe did you feel voting in the 2020 parliamentary elections?" (n=687)



## Safety Protocols at Polling Stations



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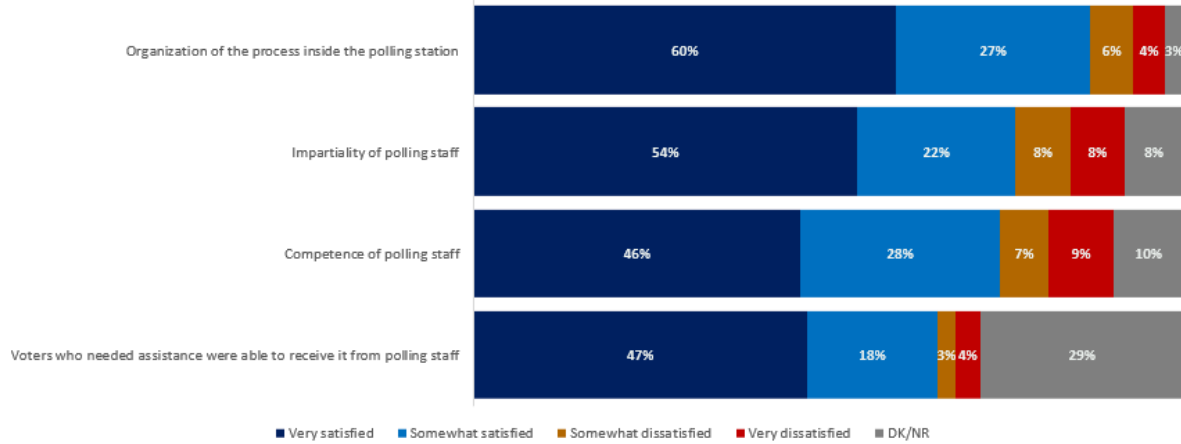
"For each one, please say YES if you experienced it or NO if you did not experience it personally on Election Day:" (n=687)



## Satisfaction with Polling Station and Staff



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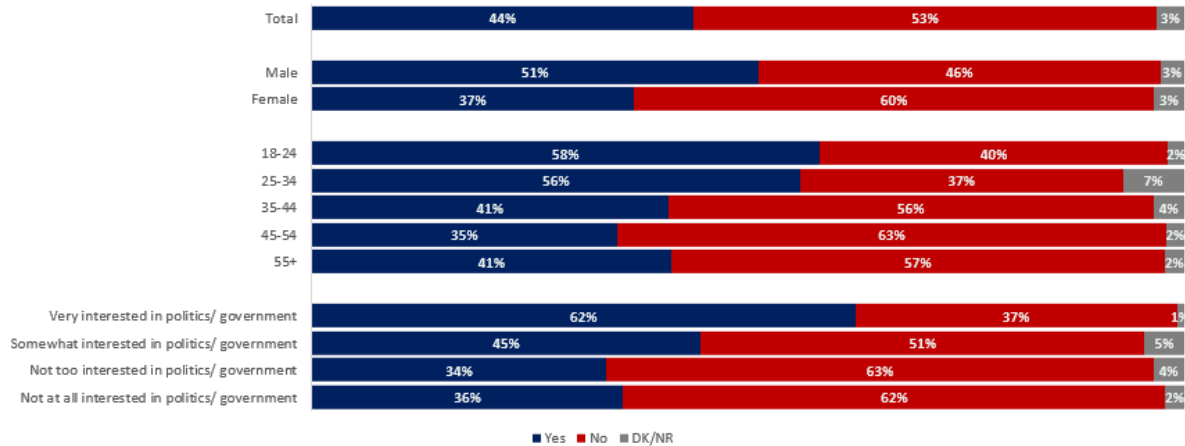
*"Now, please tell me if you were satisfied or dissatisfied with each of the following aspects of the elections at your polling station:" (n=687)*



## Awareness of Candidate Lists before Election



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*"Before you voted in the 2020 parliamentary election, did you see the names of the candidates of the party list you voted for?" (n=687)*



## Awareness and Perceptions of RIK's Efforts to Protect Voters from COVID-19



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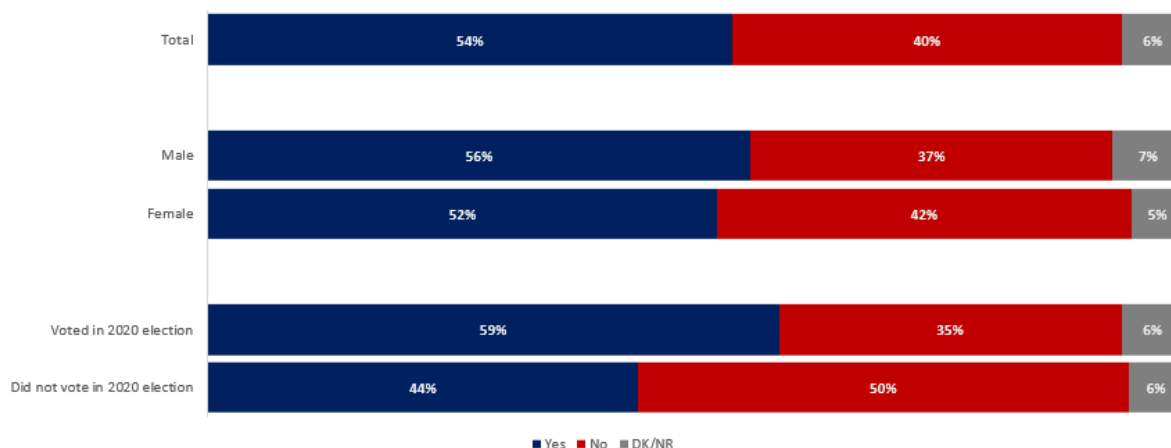
- Just over half of respondents (54%) say they saw or heard broadcast or published information from the RIK on steps being taken to protect voters from COVID-19 during the election. In most cases this information was seen through TV advertisements on elections and COVID-19 (86%), although other saw or heard it through posters at the polling station (16%), newspaper leaflets (15%), radio messages (10%), or through the internet (9%). This messaging was largely seen as useful, with 86% of recipients rating it as useful.
- Serbians are largely satisfied with the efforts of the Republic Electoral Commission (RIK) to protect voters from COVID-19 spread during the recent parliamentary elections. Forty-six percent are very satisfied and 23% are somewhat satisfied, while 8% say they are somewhat dissatisfied and 13% say they are very dissatisfied. Satisfaction among those who either saw or heard RIK messaging on protecting voters from COVID-19 is significantly higher (76%) than among those who did not see any of RIK's messaging efforts (61%).
- Satisfaction is slightly lower with the performance of the COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team, with 64% expressing satisfaction and 33% expressing dissatisfaction.



## Awareness of RIK Messaging on Protecting Voters



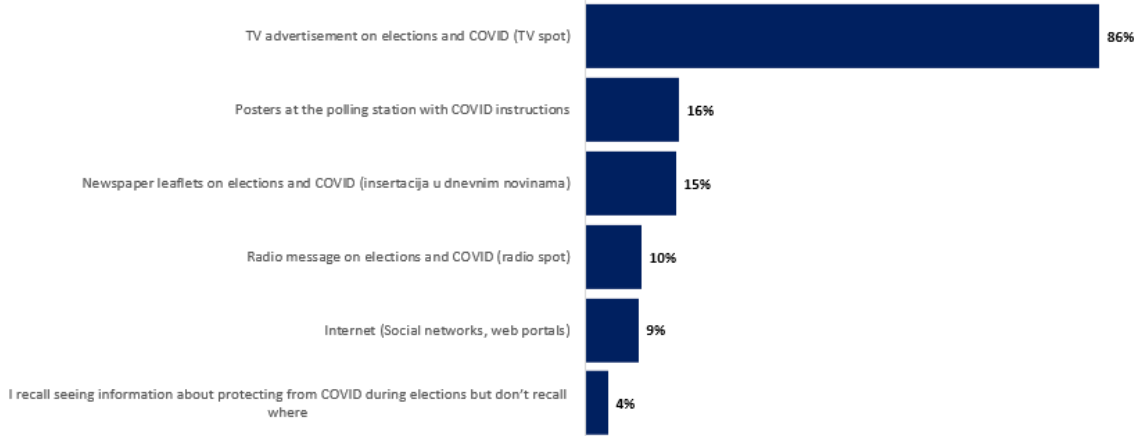
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"In the days before the parliamentary elections, did you see or hear any broadcast or published information or instructions from the RIK, informing you about steps being taken to protect voters from COVID-19 during the election?" (n=1,000)



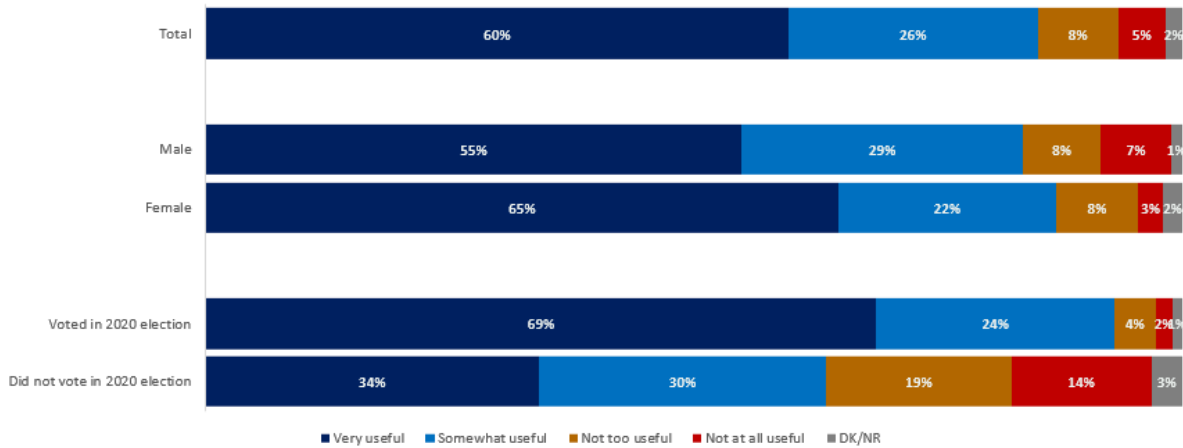
## Information Source for RIK Outreach



*"Through which of the following methods did you see or hear information regarding the measures from the Republic Electoral Commission about COVID-19 and elections??" (n=538)*



## Usefulness of COVID-19 Messages from RIK



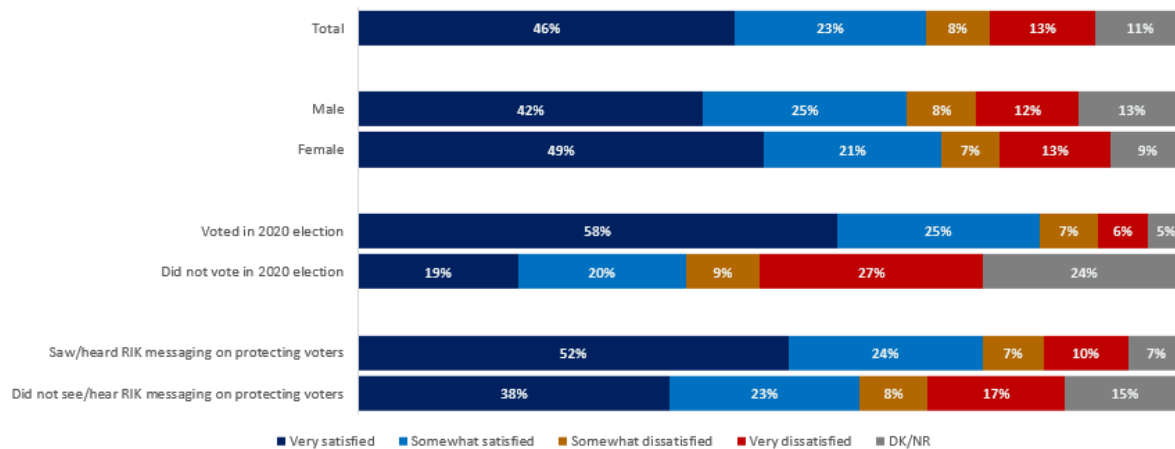
*"How useful was the information from the Republic Electoral Commission about steps being taken to protect voters during the election from COVID-19?" (n=538)*



## Satisfaction with RIK's Safety Measures for 2020 Elections



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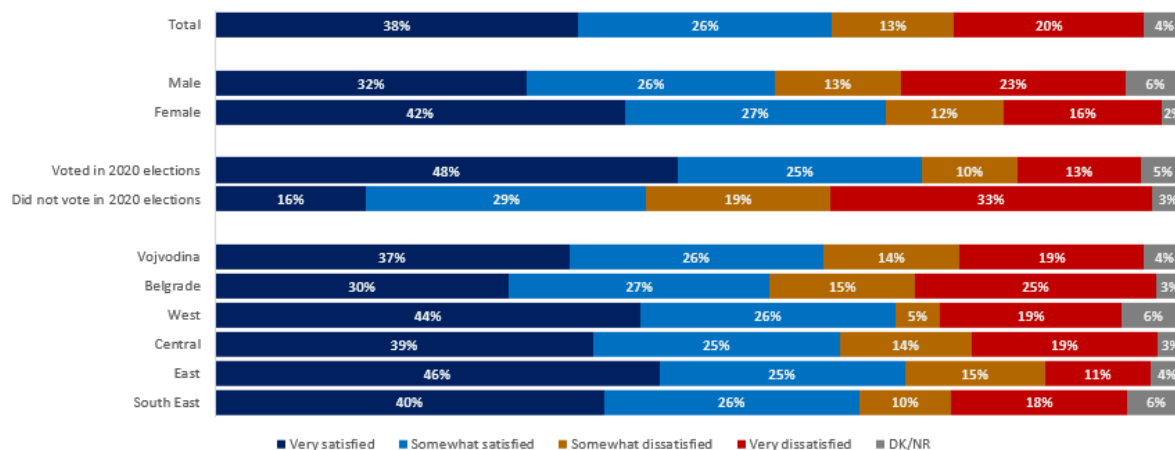
*"How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the measures implemented by the Republic Electoral Commission to protect voters from COVID-19 spread during recent parliamentary elections?" (n=1,000)*



## Satisfaction with COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team



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*"What is your level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction so far with the performance of the COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team?" (n=1,000)*





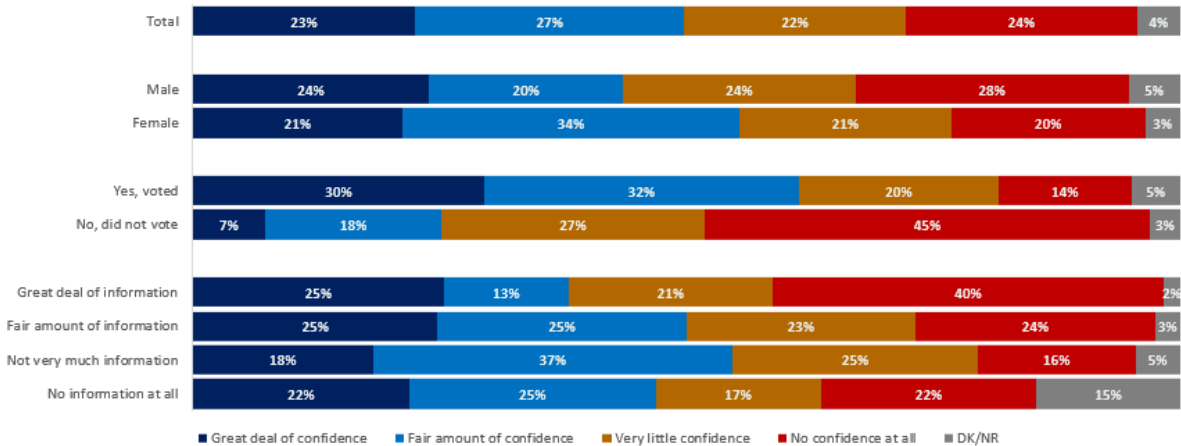
## Perceptions of RIK and Information on Elections



- Serbians are divided in their confidence in the RIK to organize legitimate elections in Serbia. Overall, 23% have a great deal of confidence, 27% have a fair amount of confidence, 22% have very little confidence, and 24% have no confidence at all. Confidence in RIK varies largely based on voting patterns, with those who voted (62%) being significantly more likely to express confidence in RIK than those who did not (25%), suggesting this may have played a role in whether or not someone decided to participate in the election.
- Despite the mixed perceptions of the RIK, Serbians express slightly more positive views on the conduct of the 2020 parliamentary elections. Overall 31% say that the elections were completely legitimate, 29% say there were some flaws, but they were generally legitimate, while 17% say there were major flaws that call into doubt the election's credibility, and 17% say they were not legitimate at all. Again, there is a vast disparity between those that voted and those that did not (71% of voters say elections were either completely or generally legitimate, compared to 39% of those who did not vote).
- While very few report being asked to vote for a candidate or being offered money or pressured to vote for a party list, 20% say that either their friends or relatives were either offered money or pressured in other ways to vote for a specific party list, suggesting this as an issue around the 2020 elections.



## Confidence in RIK



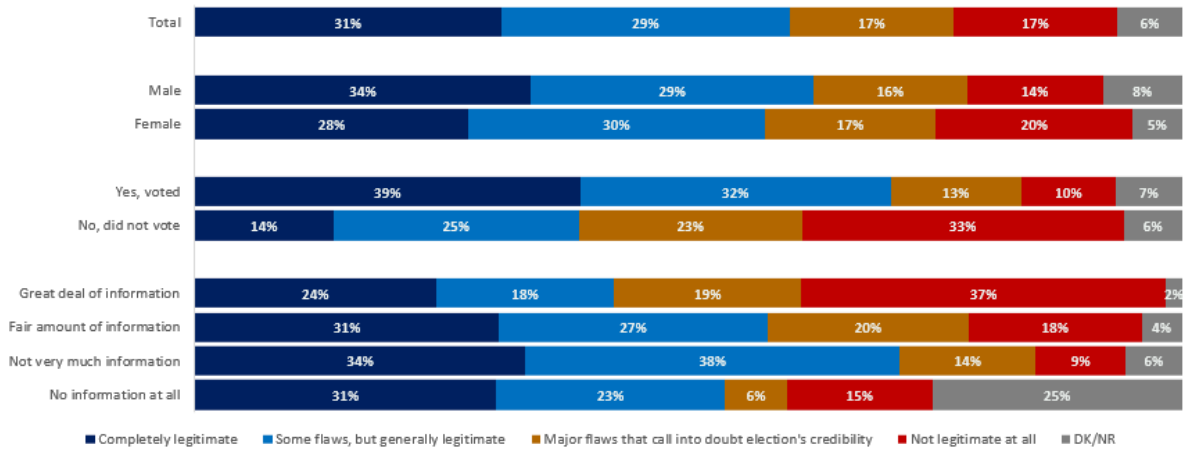
*"How much confidence do you have in the ability of the Republic Electoral Commission to organize legitimate elections in Serbia? Do you have...?" (n=1,000)*



## Perception of Elections in Serbia



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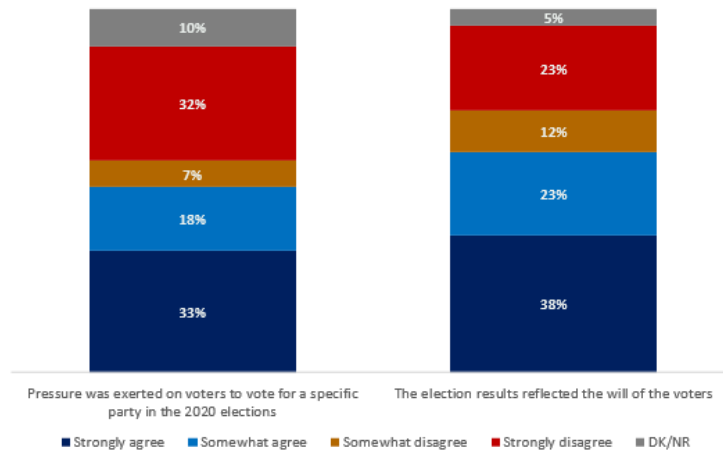
*"Do you think the recent elections in Serbia were completely legitimate, that they have some flaws but are generally legitimate, that they have significant flaws which casts doubts on the election process, or are they not legitimate at all?" (n=1,000)*



## Perceptions of Elections in Serbia



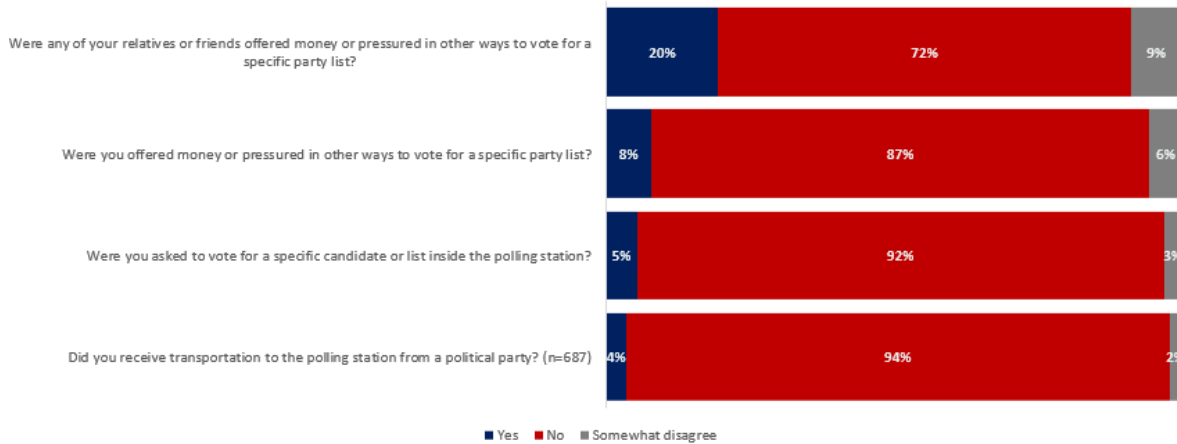
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*"Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about this year's parliamentary elections:" (n=1,000)*



## Experiences during the 2020 Elections



*"During the 2020 elections please tell me if you have experienced the following actions in the period leading up to or on Election day:" (n=1,000)*



## Information on Elections in Serbia



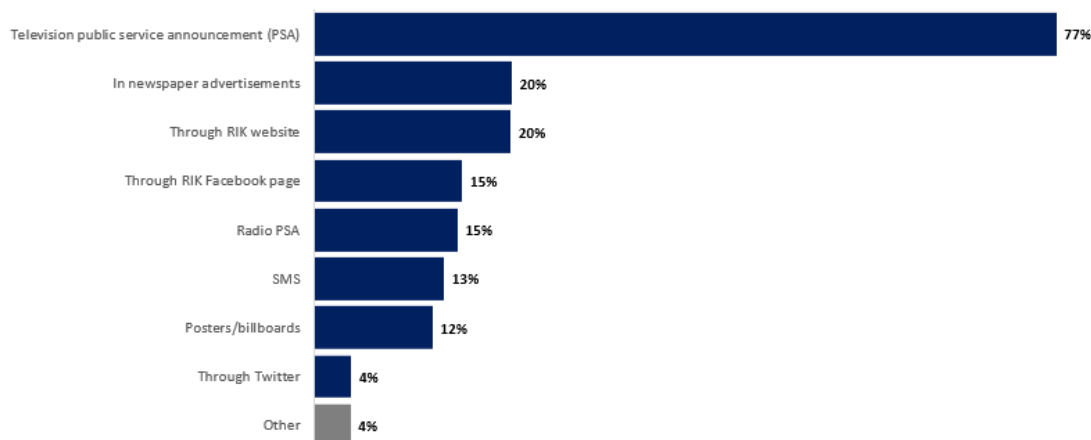
- Overwhelmingly, Serbians say the most effective way to learn about elections from the RIK is through television public service announcements (PSAs) (77%). Far fewer respondents say the most effective way is through newspaper advertisements (20%), through the RIK website (20%), through the RIK Facebook page (15%), through radio PSAs (15%), via SMS (13%), or through posters or billboards (12%).
- Knowledge around some electoral topics remains limited among Serbians, suggesting a need for some more information campaigns on these topics. Forty-three percent say they either completely or mostly understand how electoral results are translated into seats in Parliament, 43% how political campaigns are funded in Serbia, 26% how to file an electoral complaint, and 24% how electoral complaints are resolved.



## Best Sources to Learn About Elections in Serbia



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*"In future elections, which of the following methods do you think would be most effective for the Republic Electoral Commission to use in order to update voters like you on important information surrounding elections?" (n=1,000)*



## Best Sources to Learn About Elections in Serbia (by Age Group)



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<b>• 18-24</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Television PSA – 53%</li> <li>• RIK website – 29%</li> <li>• RIK Facebook – 25%</li> <li>• Newspaper ads – 24%</li> <li>• Radio – 21%</li> </ul>	<b>• 25-34</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Television PSA – 75%</li> <li>• RIK website – 29%</li> <li>• Newspaper ads – 24%</li> <li>• Poster/billboard – 23%</li> <li>• RIK Facebook – 22%</li> </ul>	<b>• 35-44</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Television PSA – 70%</li> <li>• RIK website – 27%</li> <li>• RIK Facebook – 23%</li> <li>• SMS – 23%</li> <li>• Newspaper ads – 16%</li> </ul>
<b>• 45-54</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Television PSA – 74%</li> <li>• RIK website – 22%</li> <li>• Radio – 16%</li> <li>• RIK Facebook – 15%</li> <li>• Newspaper ads – 14%</li> </ul>		<b>• 55+</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Television PSA – 88%</li> <li>• Newspaper ads – 23%</li> <li>• Radio – 12%</li> <li>• RIK website – 11%</li> <li>• Poster/billboard – 7%</li> </ul>

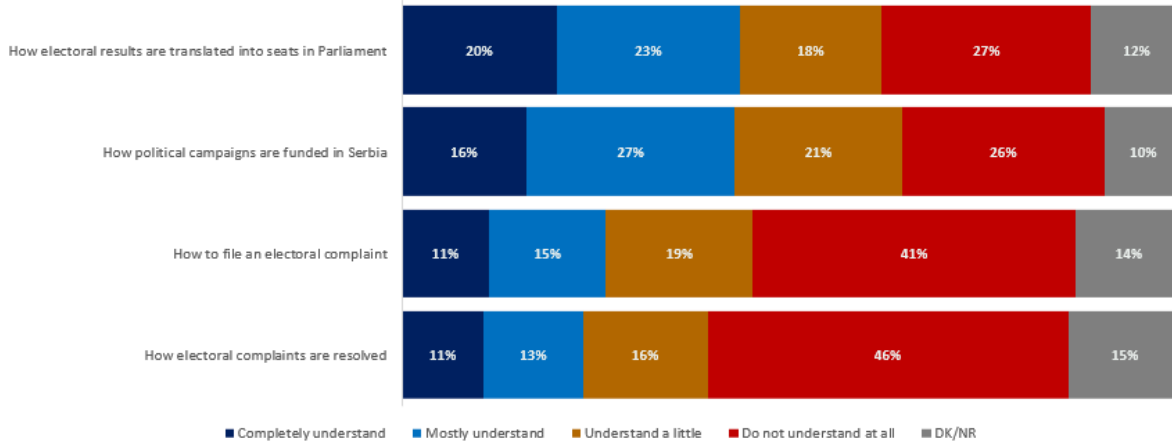
*"In future elections, which of the following methods do you think would be most effective for the Republic Electoral Commission to use in order to update voters like you on important information surrounding elections?" (n=1,000)*



## Knowledge of Electoral Processes



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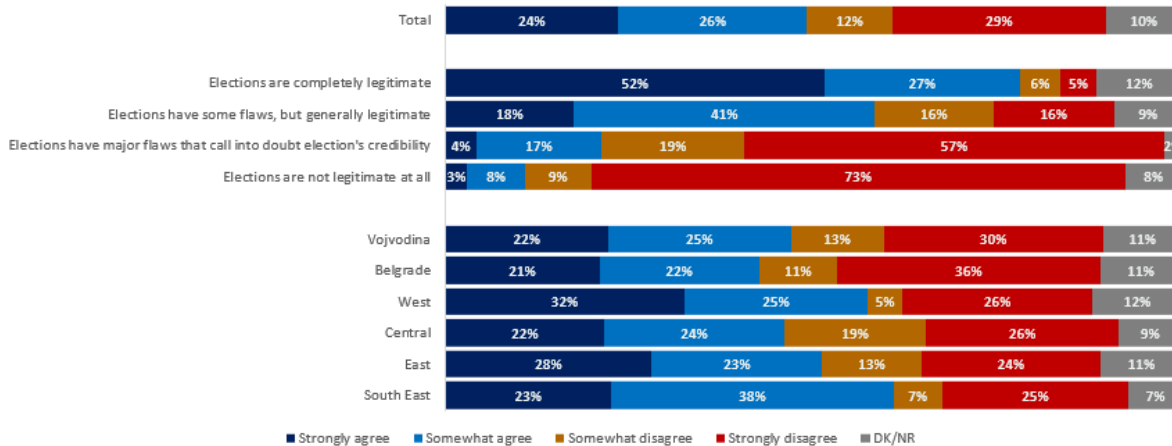
*"To what degree would you say you understand the following aspects of the electoral process in Serbia?" (n=1,000)*



## Attitudes towards Media Coverage of Elections



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*"To what degree do you either agree or disagree with the following statement: "Serbian media provided objective coverage of parties and candidates up for election in the 2020 parliamentary elections." (n=1,000)*



## Concerns over Misinformation in Serbia



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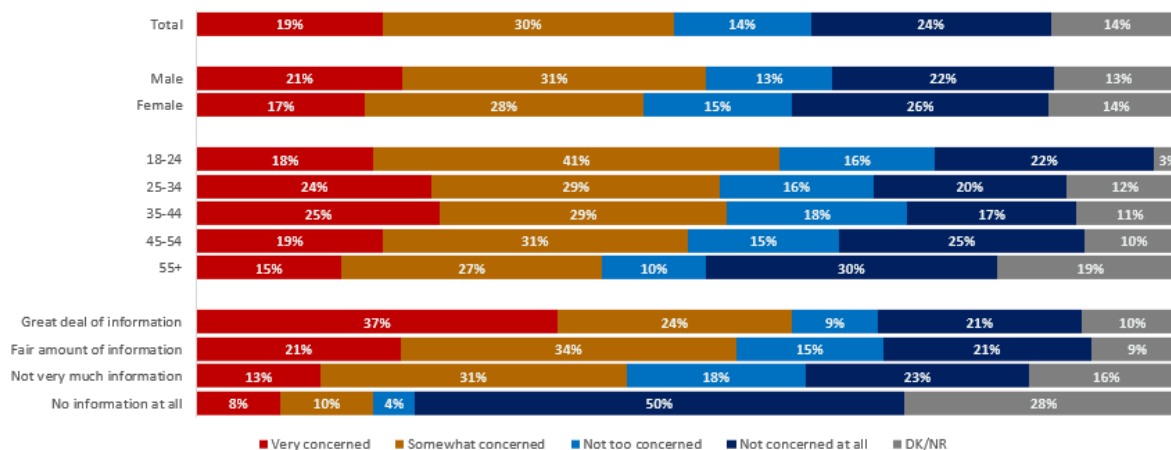
- There is some level of concern among Serbians that some of the news and information they received before the election was not accurate (49%). Concern over this trend increases with the level of information respondents say they have about politics and government, with 61% of those with a great deal of information expressing concern.
- A majority say they came across news or information about political parties and candidates that they believe was not accurate at least sometimes (67%) in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. These rates are even high among those who are concerned about the accuracy of the news or information received ahead of the elections and among those with more information about politics and government in Serbia.
- While respondents are largely confident that they can identify news and information intended to disinform citizens (74%), there is less confidence that others in the country can do the same (49%).
- Additionally, there is large amounts of concern over the role of foreign interference in elections in Serbia. Overall 37% say it plays a role to a great degree and 28% say to some degree. Only 20% say it either does not play too much of a role or none at all.



## Concerns over Accuracy of Election Information



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*"How concerned are you that some of the news and information you may have received before the election was not accurate?" (n=1,000)*

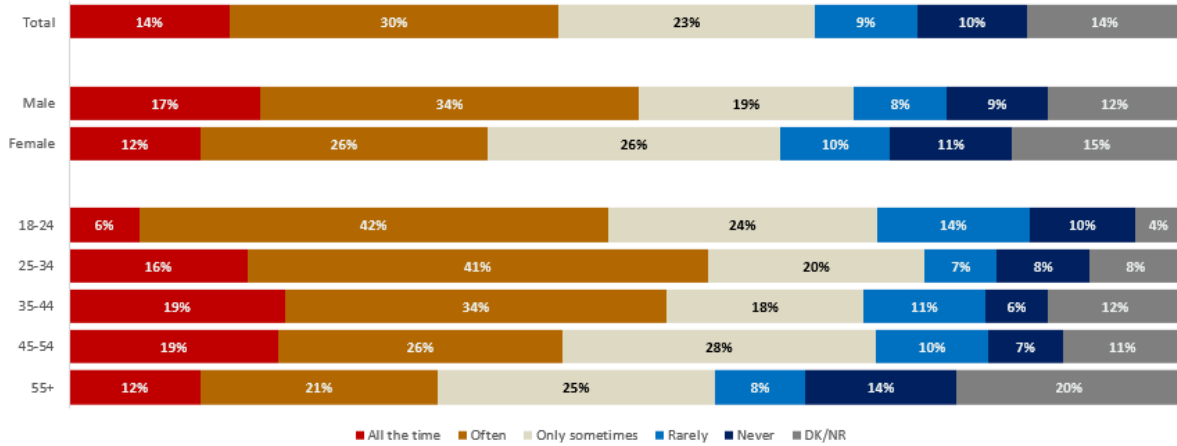




## Experience With Disinformation and Misinformation



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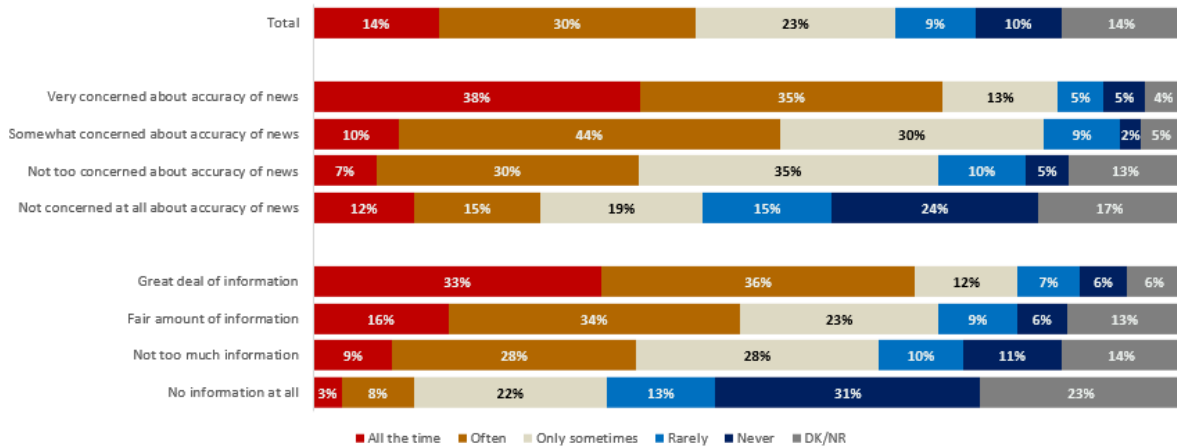
"In the period before the parliamentary elections, how often did you come across news or information about political parties and candidates that you believe was not accurate?" (n=1,000)



## Experience With Disinformation and Misinformation (by concerns over accurate reporting and information levels)



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Sustainable Democracy.



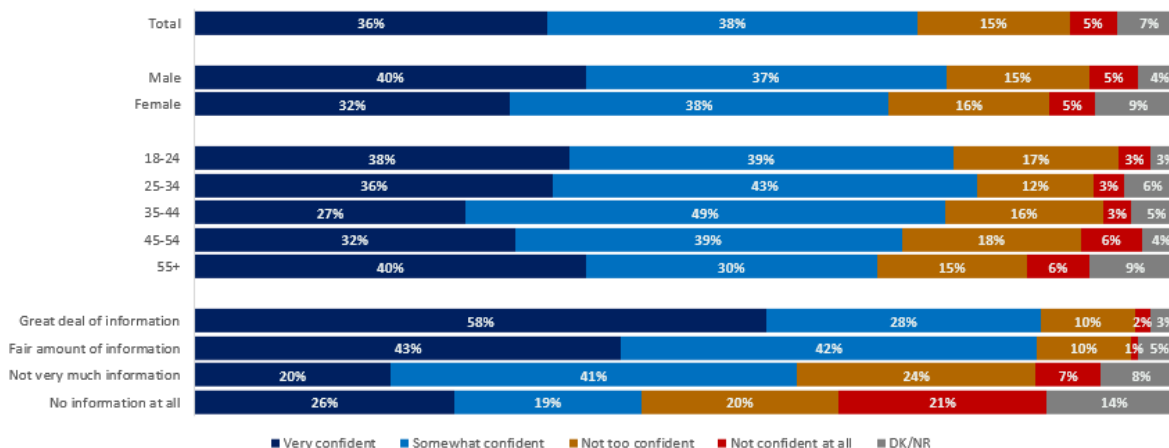
"In the period before the parliamentary elections, how often did you come across news or information about political parties and candidates that you believe was not accurate?" (n=1,000)



## Ability to Identify Disinformation



Global Expertise. Local Solutions.  
Sustainable Democracy.



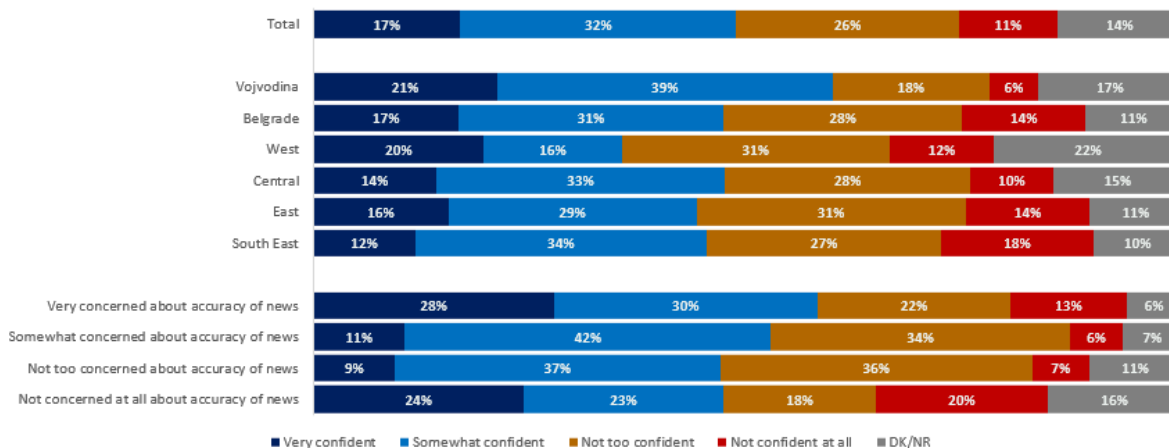
*"How confident are you that you can identify news and information intended to disinform citizens?" (n=1,000)*



## Ability of Others to Identify Disinformation



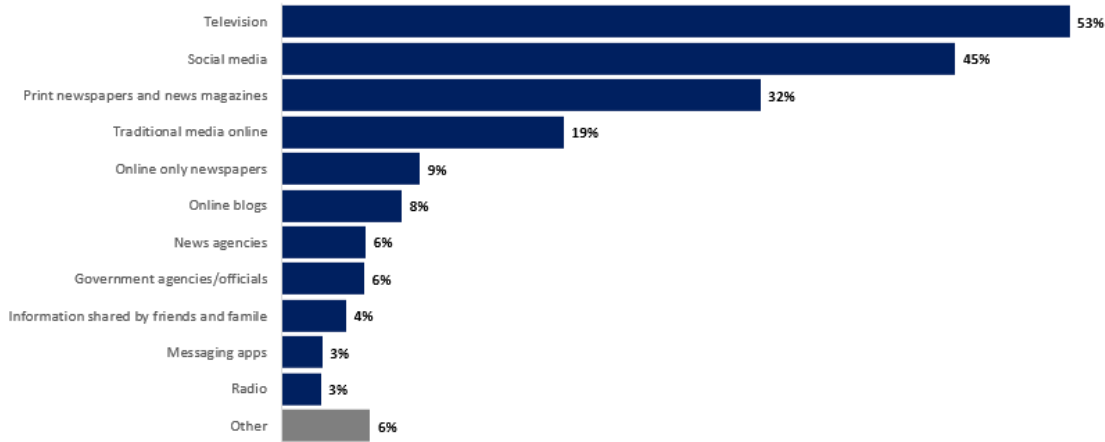
Global Expertise. Local Solutions.  
Sustainable Democracy.



*"How confident are you that your close acquaintances such as your family relatives, friends, neighbors or colleagues are able to identify news and information that is designed to disinform people about political parties and candidates in the elections?"*



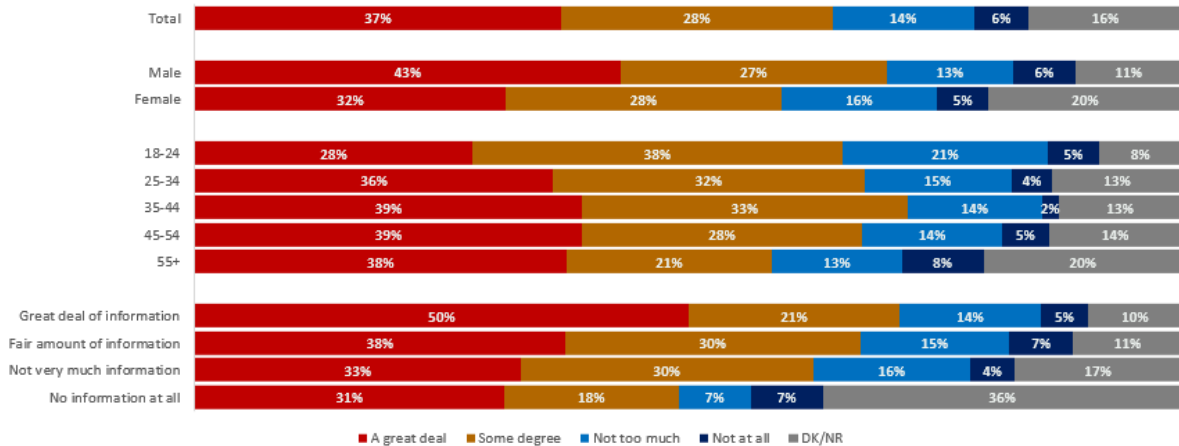
## Sources Most Likely to Disseminate Disinformation



"Which source of information in Serbia do you think disseminate the most disinformation?" (n=1,000)



## Perceptions of Foreign Interference in Elections in Serbia



"To what extent do you think foreign interference plays a role in elections in Serbia?" (n=1,000)



International Foundation  
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