

# HOW DO WE CATCH UP WITH THE 'NEW NORMAL'

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## The Challenges and Opportunities of the Pandemic

During the past year and continuing until today, everyone has been an eyewitness to the pandemic and its the circumstances that have gripped the world. During the pandemic, all social categories were at risk, from the employed to the unemployed, children to the elderly. No one escaped this period and everyone was in some way affected by the pandemic. Those with disabilities and illnesses were even more vulnerable.

We recognised numerous challenges as well such as the impossibility of meeting in-person and hardships with the new way of teaching and learning. We were faced with a period of quarantine, lack of accessibility to public institutions, and not being able to spend time with friends and family. As societies, we immediately adopted new rules: do not hug, keep physical distance, wear a mask, do not gather, and more. These became our new normal. These are just some of the challenges that we encountered and adaptations we made during the past year.

Young people, especially students, expressed being extremely angry in the moments when new restrictions were announced. They felt as if someone was “playing” with everyone, not only them as students, but with the entire population.<sup>1</sup> Students shared that it was uncertain how lectures would be held, and how exams would be held, or how students in dormitories would be accommodated.

Could we tell ourselves that the pandemic brought us something good or created some new opportunities? All over the world, societies have been focussing on making positive changes such as digitalisation, having time for rest, experiencing time for educational and professional personal growth, and more. We at the National Youth Council of Serbia have identified some key messages based on data from our publications, research, and experiences to speak in favor of that.



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## **The Deterioration of Trust**

If you ask young people in Serbia if they have trust in government institutions, the answer is usually no, including in the institution that is intended for youth.<sup>2</sup> It is recommended that institutions address young people better, diversify their messages, and include young people in their programmes, not only through promises but through specific programs and bodies in which young people can get represented.

The state of emergency as a result of COVID-19 was introduced in Serbia for almost two months (from April to June 2020). In that period, young people shared how that isolation affected them: 44.2 per cent gave a grade of 3 out of 5 in level of trust.<sup>3,4</sup> During the quarantine period, certain measures were adopted such as a curfew, closure of service facilities, and even a ban on movement. These measures have sparked a great debate in the media, on social networks, and amongst civil society organisations in the Republic of Serbia (e.g., whether they are unconstitutional). We asked young people how they assess the measures introduced during the state of emergency (restriction of movement and assembly): 39 per cent thought that they were too strict, while 41 per cent felt that they were appropriate. Just eight per cent felt that the moves did not go far enough.<sup>5</sup>

It is also necessary to look at the influence of the media on the narrative of the pandemic. Young people rated their trust in the media with a score of 1.95; a score of 1 indicated no trust with 5 being high trust.<sup>6</sup> This low score is likely due to the flood of fake news and information brought by the pandemic, which was difficult to determine if it was true. However, the youth media outlets, which are mostly followed by young people, reported on the pandemic in a truthful way. Youth media focused on prevention measures, drugs, vaccines, and countering various pseudo-scientific theories.<sup>7</sup>

Young people are mostly presented in the media in a bad light.<sup>8</sup> Youth are portrayed as criminals and the most irresponsible group when it comes to respecting epidemiological measures. Unfortunately, that image of young people in the media casts a shadow over all other topics that concern youth.

## The Response of Youth Civil Society in Serbia during the Pandemic

As a result of these challenges, the functioning of NGOs with a specific focus on youth-led and youth-serving organisations were faced with tough circumstances. The sector worried: will the activities be implemented? Will the project indicators be accomplished?

Instead of the traditional offline work environment, work was very quickly transferred to work from home. Project activities were transferred to an online environment and the process of adjusting the activities and programmes to the online format then followed. The challenges were to find new tools, digital platforms, and programmes that would enable the maintenance of activities for numerous participants with the same level of quality as before. One of the biggest problems was to figure out how to maintain the motivation of participants (mostly youth) who participated in long-term and repetitive activities such as taking part in workshops, mentoring programmes and seminars.

The National Youth Council of Serbia recognised that we could use an exchange of experiences, tools used to implement activities, and new interactive and dynamic ways that involve participants instead of using lecturers or facilitators who were just a picture and sound on the screen.

Adjusting the functioning of organisations was difficult. They were not sure how to realise their activities or how the realisation of projects could occur. The priority was navigating the complexities of communication with participants in ongoing activities that had to be canceled, followed by communication with donors and reflection about how and what to do next.

In addition to new online activities, new offline activities were added that mostly focused on volunteering and helping fellow citizens during quarantine. Our national regulations meant that we needed to organize crisis headquarters in cities and municipalities. Each of the crisis headquarters had their teams of volunteers who provided support to citizens who needed it. Young people became the most valuable and the most sacrificial volunteers.

When it came to organising volunteering and citizen support, it was mostly organised by civil society organizations.<sup>9</sup> Volunteers were provided with protective equipment by the organisers. The provision of protective equipment was rated 3.77 out of 5 by the youth volunteers. This shows us that while the safety of young people was in focus, there was room for improvement as the provision of protective equipment rating should have been scored a 5.



## Conclusions

If our community is what empowers the youth and makes young people thrive, then our society has to build safe places to begin the journey of self-growth and preparation for the future roles of our ambitious young people. For that purpose, we need a society with a minimal presence of fake news, with strong trust in public institutions, and values and rights such as freedom of speech, open-mindedness and independent media.

*This spotlight chapter is part of the State of Youth Civil Society global, youth-led publication.*



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<sup>1</sup> Stojanović, B. (2020) *Život mladih u Srbiji: Uticaj KOVID-19 pandemije*, Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije  
Available at: <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Zivot-mladih-u-Srbiji-uticaj-kovid-19-pandemije.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Stojanović, B. and Ivković, A. (2021) *Alternative report on the position and needs of youth in the Republic of Serbia – 2021, National Youth Council of Serbia*. Available at: <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Alternative-report-on-the-position-and-needs-of-youth-in-the-Republic-of-Serbia-%E2%80%93-2021-2.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Grades are given from 1-5 where the grades had the following meaning: 1 - Very negative, 2 - Negative, 3 - So-so, 4 - Positive and 5 - Very Positive.

<sup>4</sup> Stojanović, B. and Ivković, A. (2021) *Alternative report on the position and needs of youth in the Republic of Serbia – 2021, National Youth Council of Serbia*. Available at: <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Alternative-report-on-the-position-and-needs-of-youth-in-the-Republic-of-Serbia-%E2%80%93-2021-2.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Janjić, S. and Janjić, I. (2021) *Mladi u medijskom ogledalu 2020*, Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije  
Available at: <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Mladi-u-medijskom-ogledalu-2020-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Stojanović, B. (2020) *Život mladih u Srbiji: Uticaj KOVID-19 pandemije*, Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije  
Available at: <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Zivot-mladih-u-Srbiji-uticaj-kovid-19-pandemije.pdf>