

Using the Pandemic for Their Own Gain The Experiences of COVID in Serbia

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse les expériences des personnes âgées (65 ans et plus) de la pandémie de COVID-19 en Serbie. Au début de la pandémie, le gouvernement serbe a déclaré l'état d'urgence national qui incluait un couvre-feu strict interdisant aux personnes âgées de quitter leur domicile sous quelque prétexte que ce soit. Après 52 jours, l'état d'urgence a été levé, ce qui a entraîné un relâchement rapide des mesures de lutte contre le Coronavirus. Durant cette période, la Serbie a organisé des élections législatives entachées d'irrégularités. Le gouvernement a été accusé d'utiliser la pandémie à des fins politiques, notamment en manipulant le nombre de décès dus à la COVID-19. Les interlocuteurs de l'étude ont décrit leur expérience de ces mesures et ont raconté comment leur vie avait changé depuis les premiers jours de la pandémie et jusqu'en 2022. Tous les interlocuteurs ont choisi de formuler leurs expériences en critiquant le gouvernement et la manière dont il a mal géré la pandémie. Plutôt que de chercher des excuses à un gouvernement plus faible, la critique est basée sur les attentes des interlocuteurs d'un État capable de prendre soin de son peuple, et sur l'incapacité du gouvernement actuel à répondre à ces attentes. À travers l'expérience de la pandémie, l'étude examine les tensions entre le gouvernement et la population dans le contexte postsocialiste de la Serbie, et la façon dont ces tensions sont exacerbées en temps de crise.

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Using the Pandemic for Their Own Gain

The Experiences of COVID in Serbia

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the experiences of older adults (65 years of age and older) with the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Serbian government declared a national state of emergency, which included a strict curfew in which older adults were forbidden to leave their homes under any circumstances. After 52 days, the state of emergency was lifted, which was soon followed by a rapid loosening of coronavirus measures. During this time, Serbia held parliamentary elections that were rife with irregularities. The government was accused of using the pandemic for political gains, including fabricating the numbers of COVID-19 deaths. The interlocutors in the study mapped their experiences with these measures and recounted how their lives had changed since the early days of the pandemic and into 2022. All interlocutors chose to frame their experiences through their criticism of the government and how it mishandled the pandemic. Rather than making excuses for a weaker government, the criticism is based on interlocutors' expectations of a capable statecraft that can take care of its people, and the inability of the existing government to fulfill these expectations. Through the experiences of the pandemic, the study examines the tensions between the government and people in Serbia's post-socialist context, and how these tensions are heightened during the time of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19; Serbia; older adults; political anthropology; medical anthropology; Eastern Europe; post-socialism

Résumé: Cet article analyse les expériences des personnes âgées (65 ans et plus) de la pandémie de COVID-19 en Serbie. Au début de la pandémie, le gouvernement serbe a déclaré l'état d'urgence national qui incluait un couvre-feu strict interdisant aux personnes âgées de quitter leur domicile sous quelque prétexte que ce soit. Après 52 jours, l'état d'urgence a été levé, ce qui a entraîné

un relâchement rapide des mesures de lutte contre le Coronavirus. Durant cette période, la Serbie a organisé des élections législatives entachées d'irrégularités. Le gouvernement a été accusé d'utiliser la pandémie à des fins politiques, notamment en manipulant le nombre de décès dus à la COVID-19. Les interlocuteurs de l'étude ont décrit leur expérience de ces mesures et ont raconté comment leur vie avait changé depuis les premiers jours de la pandémie et jusqu'en 2022. Tous les interlocuteurs ont choisi de formuler leurs expériences en critiquant le gouvernement et la manière dont il a mal géré la pandémie. Plutôt que de chercher des excuses à un gouvernement plus faible, la critique est basée sur les attentes des interlocuteurs d'un État capable de prendre soin de son peuple, et sur l'incapacité du gouvernement actuel à répondre à ces attentes. À travers l'expérience de la pandémie, l'étude examine les tensions entre le gouvernement et la population dans le contexte postsocialiste de la Serbie, et la façon dont ces tensions sont exacerbées en temps de crise.

Mots-clés : COVID-19 ; Serbie ; personnes âgées ; anthropologie politique ; anthropologie médicale ; Europe de l'Est ; post-socialisme

Introduction

This paper focuses on the experiences of the coronavirus pandemic in Serbia, mainly among older adults. Old people are recognized as a group that is particularly vulnerable and at risk with respect to the COVID-19 virus, which brought with it specific challenges and experiences during the pandemic (Sadruddin and Inhorn 2020). I wished to examine how old people in Serbia lived through the pandemic in the 2020-2022 period, and how they remember the ongoing crisis. The study recounts the experiences of older adults through conversations with nine individuals (65 years and older) from the Serbian capital, Belgrade.¹ I am a citizen of Serbia living in Canada, and the interlocutors were people recruited through personal networks; in total, seven women and two men agreed to take part in this study. The relatively small number of participants was a result of circumstances: I am based in Canada, and conversations were conducted through video interviews and email communication. Due to these restrictions, I was able to recruit only older adults who agreed to share their experiences in this manner. The conversations took place throughout 2021, particularly in the period between September and November 2021. The interlocutors all live in Belgrade, and all are retired and receiving a pension, with one interlocutor supplementing their income with occasional work. At the time of the conversations, all of the interlocutors said

that they had been vaccinated and that they had not had a personal experience with the virus (none had contracted COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic).

I asked the interlocutors to recount their experience with the pandemic from its very onset and to comment on how things changed in their lives due to the pandemic. Early in our conversations, it became clear that the interlocutors wanted to approach the discussion of the pandemic almost exclusively through its politics and the government's response: the measures imposed and the way the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, (mis)handled the situation. This strong approach to politics at the expense of almost all other themes was present among all of the interlocutors, and most of the conversations and topics would go back to politics. The interlocutors, for the most part, tried to speak both for themselves and their group (older adults), and Serbian people as a whole. These narratives reveal wider attitudes towards the government, which are at the heart of the Serbian people's understanding of politics and society since the fall of socialism and the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. These circumstances have painted the COVID-19 experience for my interlocutors, who chose to frame their conversation about the pandemic almost exclusively through the lens of socio-political conditions. This is notable because it contextualizes the interlocutors' attitudes and experiences with COVID-19 as, more than anything else, proof of the socio-political situation and "perpetual chaos" in Serbia, as one interlocutor noted. In this sense, it is possible to link older adults' experiences with the pandemic to a wider socio-political situation in Serbia, and to examine the specificities of the COVID-19 reactions in Serbia.

Because of these factors, the paper will analyze older adults' experience with the pandemic through the lens of socio-political conditions, which reveal complex attitudes towards the state: on one hand, yearning for a strong state that can ensure order and provide for its citizens (Rajković 2017; Simić 2017), and on the other, criticism of the existing government for being manipulative, corrupt and serving its own interest—a government that fails to ensure order, help and stability to the people. These themes are ever-present in Serbian society, and while they were not caused by the pandemic, they were intensified through the COVID-19 crisis, often taking specific forms that the paper analyzes in more detail.

Background: Serbia's Older Adult Population

Serbia is a post-socialist country that has undergone numerous changes since the 1990s and the breakup of socialist Yugoslavia. The neoliberal changes gave

rise to high levels of unemployment, insecurities, and economic hardships, all of which are described as a consequence of the so-called “wild capitalism” (Chelcea and Druta, 2016; Upchurch and Marinković, 2011). The consequences of the transition are still palatable, particularly in terms of economic hardships and the country’s precarious political position as a non-EU member state. The socio-political and economic situation in today’s Serbia is characterized as unregulated and full of insecurities; citizens themselves describe their everyday realities as “chaotic” (Zivkovic 2011). The country belongs to what is theorized as “the Global East”: post-socialist countries that belong to the ambivalent “in-between” area of power relations, neither the Global North nor the Global South (Müller 2020). This is reflected in the country’s foreign relations, which came into play during the COVID-19 crisis. Serbian “COVID diplomacy” emphasized links with China and Russia, as well as the EU (Šantić and Antić 2020) in an intricate and complex “game” of acquiring foreign medical supplies and help in battling the coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, the decades since the fall of socialism and the breakup of Yugoslavia have been marked by a complex interplay between people (*narod*) and the government, in which the state is perceived by the Serbian public as unable to fulfill its role in the society: providing order, help and security to its citizens (Simić 2017). All this has resulted in an ever-present mistrust in the government and its institutions among the Serbian public, coupled with a strong yearning for stability and a strong, capable state that Serbian people typically relate to the socialist, Yugoslav, past (Jansen 2014; 2015).

All these circumstances and everyday insecurities disproportionately affect the most vulnerable members of the population, including older adults. Serbia is considered a demographically old nation (Devedžić et al. 2015; Sevo et al. 2015). According to the 2011 census, the median age in Serbia is 42.2 years, with 21.1% of the population being over 65 years of age (Republic Statistical Office 2022). The situation is somewhat better in Belgrade, where the percentage of the population over 65 is 16.38% (Republic Statistical Office 2022). Still, in the capital as well as the rest of Serbia, older adults make up a significant category, which opens questions about the existing infrastructure and available care, such as hospitals, geriatric centres, medical personnel, and long-term care facilities.

The existing situation is far from ideal. There is a lack of centres and resources focused on older adults, even in Belgrade, which makes it difficult for people to access necessary medical care and other related healthcare services (Babović et al. 2018; Sauer and Perišić 2014). The situation is no better in terms

of long-term care facilities; the number of privately-owned institutions is larger, but these are expensive and not accessible to many (Sauer and Perišić 2014). Furthermore, Serbia lacks healthcare providers, since the profession suffers from dwindling numbers due to extensive emigration to the EU and the rest of the world (Bieber et al. 2020). These facts, coupled with traditional expectations of children taking care of their elderly parents, mean that the burden of care falls disproportionately onto family members. In general, older adults and their families in Serbia, as well as in other post-socialist countries, know that they cannot expect much from the state or the institutions that are supposed to help them (Iossifova 2020).

Furthermore, many older adults are at significant risk of poverty and violence (often at the hands of their caregivers) (Babović et al. 2018), which renders this category of the population vulnerable and marginalized. On the other hand, it would be wrong to characterize older adults in Serbia as a group without agency or importance in the community. For example, this population often plays an active role in family life and provides assistance to younger family members in more ways than one. Older adults, particularly women, often provide childcare by caring for their grandchildren, a prevalent trend in the region (Iossifova 2020; Kovač 2020; Parlapani et al. 2020). This is a source of pride for many older adults, and a sign of their own usefulness and importance (Iossifova 2020; Kovač 2010). Also, in multi-generational households, older adults are typically the owners of the property on which the family lives. Finally, while pensions are often low, they are also a steady and secure source of income, allowing many older adults to help support their younger family members (Kovač 2010; Sevo et al. 2015). All of these can be seen as a source of pride for older adults, giving them a sense of actively contributing to the family dynamics, which is important in the circumstances of perpetual economic insecurities in today's Serbia.

Regardless of their role within their extended family and family dynamics, what is true for Serbian older adults as a group is that they are “forgotten by the state.” Health and welfare infrastructure is weak, and older adults face difficulties accessing care (Jankelic 2013). As a result, a portion of the older adult population lacks trust in the government. This disappointment is rooted in unfulfilled expectations present throughout the former socialist sphere. This is a generation that grew up and worked during socialism, where the state promised to help and care for its citizens (Iossifova 2020). While this promise was never fully realized, the situation quickly deteriorated with the fall of socialism and

the erosion of state welfare. There are “losers of the transition” in all age groups, but older adults are affected disproportionately. This is a population that has lived through numerous crises since the 1990s; consequently, people from this generation had to redefine their expectations about the state’s assistance and infrastructure (including medical) as they entered old age and retirement (Iossifova 2020).

While conflicting sentiments towards the government are present among older adults, it is not something restricted to this population alone. Serbian people of all ages tend to be very critical of the government and politicians (Rajković 2017; Simić 2017). This criticism is firmly rooted in the realities of post-socialism in the former Yugoslav sphere and is not necessarily shaped by the same logic as criticism against the state that Jansen (2014) labels as “libertarian criticism.” People in Serbia do not criticize the government because they feel that the state should not interfere in people’s lives, or because they prefer a weaker state intervention that allows people the freedom to do as they please. On the contrary, people in Serbia see strong statecraft as the only way to bring order and stability (Rajković 2017; Simić 2016). Such statecraft is capable of providing people with necessities, protection and the elusive “normal life” that people throughout former Yugoslavia yearn for (Jansen 2014; 2015). Such “normal life” is not an empty ideal; it is a direct reference to life in socialist Yugoslavia, which many citizens view as a model of good statecraft (Greenberg 2011; Jansen 2014). Unlike many other post-socialist countries, people in the former Yugoslavia tend to view the socialist times as an example of a good life, one that was irrevocably broken in the 1990s (Greenberg 2011; Jansen 2014; Simić 2016). This view is not necessarily rooted in nostalgia for socialism or even Yugoslavia itself; what people yearn for is the standard of life they enjoyed in that period (Jansen 2014). This sort of life included more than simple financial stability. It was also a time recognized for a strong statecraft that was capable of maintaining order (Simić 2017), something that is not possible in the circumstances of perpetual crisis—circumstances that are still present even decades after the fall of socialism (Simić 2016). These attitudes are present throughout the former Yugoslav sphere (Hodges 2018; Hromadžić 2015; Jansen 2015; Kojanić 2015; Kurtovic 2012; Kurtovic and Hromadžić 2017; Rajković 2017; Simić 2014) and manifest themselves as a yearning for statecraft that can bring back order and stability to the people.

This is the main lens through which people in Serbia—and, more broadly, former Yugoslavia—criticize the government. If they are critical of current

political elites and how the government is run, it is because they do not feel that the people in charge are fulfilling their duty of maintaining a strong, ordered government. On the contrary, the existing system is considered weak, rife with corruption and dishonesty, whereas a government should be strong, capable of maintaining order, and capable of ensuring that its citizens are protected.

All of these factors result in highly critical attitudes from people in Serbia towards the present political elites, a condition that was heightened by the coronavirus pandemic. During the pandemic, the state was strongly criticized for its lack of providing help and resources, as well as its inability to maintain order during the crisis. While people in Serbia, regardless of age, displayed a high level of mistrust towards the state (Bieber et al. 2020; Ristić et al. 2020), the case of older adults is significant in the context of the coronavirus pandemic: their age group has the highest risk of serious health consequences, and they were specifically targeted with the strictest lockdown measures. This experience is reflected in the way older adults contextualize the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as yet another crisis in their lifetime, and one that they often view through the lens of politics and the “failure of the system” to adequately care for its citizens. In the rest of this paper, I follow how older adults in Belgrade perceive COVID-19 measures at different points in time (May 2020 and late 2021), and how they contextualize their experience of the pandemic through the government response.

From the “Funniest Virus” to a National State of Emergency in Fifteen Days

The first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Serbia on 6 March 2020 (Stojanovic 2020). In the weeks prior to this, the Serbian public was informed of the ongoing health crisis in China and Italy. The initial reaction from the authorities was one of nonchalance. The danger was downplayed, even to the point of jokes. In a notable incident from 26 February, a leading member of the country’s medical task force against the pandemic, Dr. Nestorović, called Corona “the funniest virus in the world,” saying, “I cannot believe that the people who survived sanctions, bombing, all sorts of mistreatments, would get scared of the funniest virus in the history of the humankind” (Đurđević 2020). Nestorović also advised women to “go shopping in Italy,” highlighting his attitude about the virus. Serbian president Vučić was also present during the press conference and, as some of my interlocutors noted, “smirked behind Nestorović” in support of these claims. Later, when the threat of coronavirus became more apparent,

President Vučić insisted that nobody had said that it was “the funniest virus in the world,” a claim that was chosen as “Lie of the Year” in a survey organized by the website Istinomer (Rogač 2020; GlobalVoices 2020). In January and February 2020, COVID-19 was dismissed by the government and most of the people as “fearmongering.” The attitude was that of downplaying the seriousness of the situation, particularly in terms of other crises that Serbian people lived through over the years.

The comment about surviving various crises, wars, and economic hardships resonated with my interlocutors: “When you survive wars and everything that we’ve been through, you don’t look at a coronavirus and think, ‘Oh no, it’s the end of the world.’ We’ve had many ends of the world in our time, especially us the older generations” (Marija, 68, f).²

My interlocutors claim that they were not initially scared of the virus, and some admitted sharing the nonchalance expressed by the authorities and a large percentage of people around them. However, the situation changed rapidly in the following weeks. With the first cases of COVID-19 being recorded in Serbia in early March 2020, the country had to face the impending pandemic. The narrative quickly shifted, and the authorities soon emphasized the great danger posed by the virus (Lewis and Thedham 2020; Vankovska 2020). Serbia’s response was swift and strict. What followed was an introduction of a state of emergency and curfews, which disproportionately affected older adults. This was also the most memorable aspect of the pandemic for my interlocutors, who often divided their narratives of the pandemic into times “then” (the curfew) and “after.”

Then: The State of Emergency and Curfew - Being Locked Up

Covid measures were officially introduced on 15 March 2020, by declaring a state of emergency (Predsednik 2020; Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2020). Soon after, on 17 March, the government established a curfew, from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2020). Older adults (people over 65) were specifically targeted and were forbidden to leave the house under any circumstances. While declaring the state of emergency, the Serbian president spoke specifically of older adults. They were recognized as a generation responsible for building and protecting Serbia after the fall of Yugoslavia, and the strict curfew was presented as a measure to protect this important population (Vučić, 2020).

My interlocutors, while recognizing the dangers of the coronavirus, were not thankful for this consideration from the Serbian president:

Vučić loves grandmas and grandpas so much, that he forbade us to get out of our homes. (Vesna, 72, f)

What happened here is a clear case of ageism. Just because we are over 65, we were locked up, allegedly “for our sake.” Nobody asked us if we wanted it or not. I assure you that I didn’t want to. (Svetlana, 66, f)

This made you feel like you are insignificant, like anyone could dictate your life, just because you are old. And they even dared tell us it is for our own good! (Milica, 70, f)

The curfew was a defining characteristic of the early corona pandemic. In late March 2020 (Telegraf 2020), the measures stipulated that older adults would be allowed to leave the house to get groceries in the early hours of the morning (from 4 a.m. to 7 a.m.), at first only once per week, on Sundays. These measures were somewhat lessened in April when older adults were allowed to leave the house for half an hour three times per week after 6 p.m. to take a walk, but only within 600 metres from their homes (Blic 2020). In this period, older adults had difficulties obtaining enough necessities. For the most, help was offered by family members and, to a lesser extent, neighbours and friends (Amity 2020).

My interlocutors emphasize the curfew and the “humiliating measures against old people” as a defining aspect of the early pandemic. A study focusing on the experiences of older adult Serbian citizens in the 2020 lockdown reveals that people felt more affected by the curfew and the loss of the freedom of movement than by the threat of the coronavirus itself (Džamonja Ignjatović, Stanković and Klikovac 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic opened up new questions about isolation and sociality (Nguyen 2020). In the case of older adults in Serbia, the lockdown posed a serious challenge in terms of loneliness, even among those who did not live alone. Humiliation and helplessness were the most common answers that people over 65 gave about the total lockdown, particularly women (Pajvančić et al. 2020).

The strict curfew revealed the existing tensions between the government and older adults, particularly in terms of the way the president framed the lockdown as a measure intended to save the older population. Older adults highlight that the mandate had the opposite effect. They saw it as preventing them from performing everyday tasks, and it made them feel useless (for example, by losing their role as childcare providers). My interlocutors said

that they understood the health dangers, but that they were not given a choice in the matter, and that the curfew felt “more like an exercise in government power” than a rational decision made for health reasons. These opinions were highlighted by the fact that the curfew rules were poorly organized. As a result of strict measures, older adults had to rely on younger people to bring them groceries, which invalidated the point of the curfew.

The interlocutors framed their descriptions as a direct criticism of the way the government handled the curfew. Older adults were not necessarily opposed to strict measures per se: most of my interlocutors emphasized their understanding of the medical emergency. However, the measures were introduced by a government that they already mistrusted; a government that was seen as corrupt, dishonest, and unhelpful. Such a government is not strong and capable; it is not a government that can handle things and instill order. To be limited by such a government is seen as offensive, and the president’s words about “protecting older people” were interpreted as condescending, particularly when the state did not demonstrate its ability to help older citizens, even in pre-pandemic times.

Furthermore, there is a recognized risk that governments around the world could use COVID-19 measures to limit democracy, under the pretext of protecting citizens from the pandemic (Lewkowicz, Woźniak and Wrzesiński 2022). According to the Pandemic Backsliding Project, focused on analyzing democratic backsliding during the COVID-19 pandemic, Serbia is one of the countries with the highest risk of an erosion of democratic institutions (Edgell et al. 2020), with noted violations of the freedom of the press (Thomson and Ip 2020). The March-June 2020 report highlighted that “the pandemic backsliding is highest in El Salvador, Hungary, India, Philippines, Serbia, Sri Lanka, and Uganda” (Edgell et al. 2020, 1). A report from October 2020 (Kolvani et al. 2020), focuses on the official disinformation campaigns, including anti-scientific questioning of COVID-19 facts, as well as support for unsubstantiated treatments. The reports cite discriminatory employment of the pandemic measures, such as limitations on the role of the legislature and restrictions of media freedom (Edgell et al. 2002; Kolvani et al. 2020).

According to a survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (2020), human rights that were violated the most during the pandemic were the right to health, freedom of movement, and freedom of press. The same report cites that older adults were the most likely to express the opinion that no human rights were violated in this period (The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights

2020a). My interlocutors, on the contrary, openly criticized the measures, even when they did not express it through the violation of the human rights lens. On one hand, they agreed that freedom of movement was severely restricted in this period, which is in line with the reports on human rights by The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (2020b; 2021). The curfew limited Serbian citizens regardless of age, which my interlocutors emphasized. Indeed, numerous examples of police ill-treatment during the state of emergency have been reported (The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2021). This is particularly true for the cases in which the police harassed people for breaking the curfew.

At the same time, my interlocutors did not, for the most part, frame their concerns through the erosion of the democratic process. The main criticism of the government was very much shaped in the context of the state not being able to provide order and stability. The government was criticized for being weak and incompetent, and for using measures for their own political gain instead of protecting people. My interlocutors often talked about “people” as a whole, not just older adults, illustrating the way in which “the system” mishandled the pandemic. The only instance in which they singled themselves out as a specific group, was when speaking about the lockdown targeting older adults specifically. This strict curfew and the emergency measures proved to be the most memorable aspect of the coronavirus for my interlocutors, even one and a half years later, when they looked back at their experience of the pandemic.

After: Living in the Pandemic

A strict curfew proved disadvantageous not only to the economy but also hindered the upcoming parliamentary election campaign. After 52 days, the measures quickly dissolved, even when it was not advisable based on the present health situation (Milutinović 2021). The curfew was lifted on 6 May 2020, when the state of emergency was dismissed (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2020). The interlocutors described their experience after the lifting of the curfew as a rapid switch to the idea that “the worst was over”—a sentiment that was often repeated by the authorities. Older adults described the time after the lifting of the emergency measures as a point in which they “got used to living in the pandemic,” particularly since they were allowed to freely move outside of their homes again. This division of the time “before” and “after” the curfew was also emphasized by the government and the media it controls, often in terms of overcoming danger, and as a way to frame messages in terms of the temporality of the pandemic (Žikić, Stajić, and Pišev 2020). My interlocutors

did talk about the times “before” (the curfew and the state emergency) and “after” (once the curfew was lifted), as an attempt to contextualize their own experiences of the pandemic. However, the “new normal,” an expression often employed to describe the experiences of living through the pandemic (Kurnosov and Varfolomeeva 2020) was dismissed by my interlocutors, often jokingly, as a term that implies an existence of a state of normalcy, that “does not exist in Serbia.” In other words, “there is no ‘old normal’ in Serbia, let alone a new one.”

Nothing is ever normal here. There is always some chaos. This virus is just the newest one. (Zoran, 65, m)

I was happy to be able to get out again. But everything else remained disorganized. There is always some crisis in Serbia. (Marija, 68, f)

The lifting of the restrictions did not improve my interlocutors’ opinions of the government. On the contrary, while they were personally glad that they could move about freely again, they saw the change as yet another government manipulation. Many people in Serbia blamed the parliamentary elections for this rapid change of situation. The elections were initially scheduled for 26 April 2020 but were postponed because of the coronavirus (Reuters 2020). It is recognized that COVID-19 poses a challenge to the elections (Landman and Di Gennaro Splendore 2020), an important concern in the case of Serbia. The elections were held on 21 June 2020, with Vučić’s party winning, and the members of the opposition largely boycotting the elections (The Washington Post 2020). There were indications that the government used the pandemic for election campaign purposes (Todorović 2020). My interlocutors emphasized that Vučić used the coronavirus pandemic this way and that it was “obvious” what was happening.

Particularly concerning was the manipulation of coronavirus deaths and misreporting of coronavirus data around that time, in mid-2020. Right after the elections, on 22 June, a media report was published, claiming information from leaked government sources about the true number of COVID cases and deaths (Jovanovic 2020). According to the report, the numbers of COVID cases and deaths were forged to appear lower. In September 2020, Dr. Kon, a member of the Corona Crisis Team, admitted that the number of deaths by the end of June was three times higher than reported (Danas 2020).

This manipulation by the government was not surprising to my interlocutors, who said that it was on par with what they had learned to expect. They emphasize that “everyone knew” that the reported numbers were a lie,

and that the government tried to manipulate citizens throughout the pandemic. These lies and manipulations were an important reason for the little to no trust in the official information about the coronavirus. While false reports around the elections were often cited as a prime example of how the government lied to the people, interlocutors agree that “nothing” the government or the Crisis Team said was to be believed. These lies and manipulations are how my interlocutors remember the pandemic after the lifting of the curfew: as a painful illustration of how the officials abused a health crisis for their own gain. Furthermore, the government’s attitude, lies and conflicting information are blamed on vaccine hesitancy and the resistance some people showed to measures such as mask-wearing or social distancing in late 2021 and early 2022.

Conclusion: The Pandemic Seen Through Government Measures

The nine interlocutors, two men and seven women, older adults living in the Serbian capital, chose to frame their experience of the coronavirus pandemic mostly through the government measures and the way the authorities had approached the pandemic since early 2020. Rather than an unprecedented crisis, the pandemic was regarded as yet another example of hardships that they had to face in their lifetime, and as yet another example of the authorities manipulating the situation for political gain. This is in line with the Serbian people’s general mistrust of the government in the post-socialist years, which is similar to mistrust present throughout the former Yugoslav sphere (Jansen 2014; Rajković 2017; Simić 2017). The interlocutors chose to frame this experience as something universal for Serbian people, and not through hardships specific to the older adult population. With the exception of the severe lockdown and curfew measures in the early days of the pandemic, my interlocutors talked about their experiences as something common to Serbian people as a whole. My interlocutors switched back and forth between talking about their individual situations and the experience of “people.”

At the same time, the interlocutors in this study particularly emphasized early days of the pandemic, and the difficulties they faced as a demographic targeted with the strictest curfew, allegedly “for their own protection,” but without a clear explanation on how locking them up would protect them (The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2020b). In late 2021, when remembering their coronavirus pandemic experiences, my interlocutors divided the time into “before” and “after” the curfew, highlighting the experience of strict lockdown as the most memorable and significant aspect of the pandemic.

This was particularly done in the context of the government's response: claims that the lockdown was made for the benefit of older people, versus the sudden lifting of all measures when it was politically advantageous to do so. Through this, my interlocutors emphasized how the Serbian government tried to use the coronavirus pandemic for its own gain in two major ways: first, by exercising its power over its citizens by ordering them to stay inside, and second, by manipulating information to win the elections. This is in line with a trend noted in some other Central European and Eastern European countries, such as Hungary (Végh 2020). However, my interlocutors chose to contextualize these events not as a plea for weaker state control, but as the government's inability to be strong, honest, and orderly. This preference for a government that can provide strong statecraft, protect its people, and "take care of things" is a specific attitude notable throughout Former Yugoslavia (Rajković 2017; Simić 2016). Criticism of the government comes directly from the state's inability to reach this ideal. Politicians are seen as corrupt, incapable, and eager to serve their own interests instead of those of the people. Such a government is not seen as strong or trustworthy enough for people to follow its orders, such as lockdown measures. My interlocutors felt particularly vulnerable to government manipulation, which was the main aspect of the pandemic they wished to emphasize.

The interlocutors chose to frame their vulnerability through this experience, ignoring other factors, such as gender or age. The role of structural inequalities, particularly at the time of crisis, is important for understanding vulnerability (Singer and Rylko-Bauer 2020; Team and Manderson 2020). My interlocutors were uniform in many aspects: all are white people of Serbian ethnicity, and of a similar socio-economical background. One notable difference was gender, but none of the interlocutors mentioned this as an important factor, and I did not have enough male participants to compare. However, one notable difference that resulted in heightened vulnerability for some of my interlocutors was the lack of a strong support network. This support network, particularly in the form of younger family members, was cited as important for navigating the lockdown, both in the practical sense (help with buying groceries, for example), and as emotional support. Two of the interlocutors (Svetlana and Jovanka) described the difficulties created by the absence of younger relatives living nearby, and how it was resolved, at least somewhat, through the help of younger neighbours. The reliance on informal help from family members is an important aspect of care for older adults in the Balkans (Pitheckoff 2017), and a strong factor that can

put individuals in a vulnerable position if it is missing. One of the main reasons for the absence of younger family members is a high rate of emigration, which is in line with Pithechkoff's (2017) findings in Bulgaria. Older adults in Serbia know this, and some of my interlocutors chose to use this example in the discussion of the socio-political circumstances.

For the most part, the interlocutors sidelined the topics of illness and fear of the pandemic itself. While everyone reported being afraid, particularly in the early days of the pandemic and the state of the emergency, they also emphasized that “corona was not the main problem.” As one of them, Vesna, noted, “If I hadn’t had to worry about being locked up and humiliated, maybe I would have worried about the virus more.” Another interlocutor, Svetlana, jokingly “thanked” Vučić for the mistreatment of older adults and the entire Serbian people, because “his antics made you forget about the corona.” Through these reflections, my interlocutors chose to emphasize political situation as their main experience with the pandemic, both as older adults and as Serbian residents. They sidelined topics that deviated from those themes.

Interlocutors in this study do not make up a fully representative list of Serbian older adults. They are all residents of Belgrade, reported no dire financial difficulties, and none had a personal experience with contracting the virus. All these factors contribute to the experience of the coronavirus pandemic and the themes, thoughts, and ideas they share about this period. A study including a more varied group of Serbian older adults would be beneficial for exploring the issues of facing the disease, financial hardships, or the experience of living with the coronavirus pandemic outside of the urban centres. My interlocutors, while not always expressing their political sympathies openly, all criticized president Vučić and the present government. Despite known election irregularities (CRTA 2020), Vučić’s party enjoys a certain popularity among Serbian people, particularly the elderly (Ni 2019). However, I was unable to secure participation from other older adults more sympathetic to the ruling party. While it is possible that they refused to be a part of such a study because of their support for Vučić, I cannot be sure. The older adults who agreed to participate did not necessarily share political opinions and sympathies—the opposition to Vučić’s regime comes from diverse sides, both from the more cosmopolitan, pro-EU and pro-West side, and a nationalist, anti-EU and anti-West side. Criticisms of Vučić and his government’s COVID measures should not be equated with support for democracy or even anti-authoritarianism.

Through the analysis of older adults' experiences with COVID-19 in Serbia, the paper contributes to research on the statecraft and the pandemic, particularly in terms of the mistrust of the government, and how these factors shape people's experiences of the crisis. In the case of Serbia, this mistrust and experience are directly linked to the ex-Yugoslav socio-political conditions. Rather than a plea for weaker government, the source of criticism is rooted in citizens' expectations of a strong statecraft that can take care of its people. This is particularly evident in the case of older adults, who were targeted by COVID-19 measures most restrictively, supposedly "for their own good." The measures revealed the intended paternalistic attitude of "caring for the older population," but without fulfilling this promise. According to my interlocutors, the government revealed itself to be insincere, weak, and incompetent; a government that cares for itself and not its people, and as such, it is not to be trusted. Through the experiences of the pandemic, the study reveals tensions between the government and people in Serbia's post-socialist context, and how these tensions are heightened during the time of crisis.

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Notes

- 1 This study received ethics approval from the University of Alberta, Project Name "Covid-19 Measures in Serbia," study ID: Pro00100460, approved on 1 May 2020.
- 2 All names are pseudonyms. Quotes from interlocutors are translated from Serbian.

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