



Weekly Briefing

Serbia social briefing:
Serbia's societal 2020: A year in rewind
IIPE

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Abstract

The year 2020 was probably the most unique for the lifetime of our generation. It was Covid-19 pandemic that erupted in Europe to blame for it. As of February, it significantly changed our perceptions of how modern everyday life should be facilitated and has put us into a new modus operandi of how we work, learn, and consume public goods. No nation has remained immune to the Black Swan manifested in form of a global pandemic, which left numerous consequences towards all organizational aspects of modern societies. This analysis sheds light on some of the most notable societal moments occurring within the Serbian society throughout 2020. Apart from the Covid-19 pandemic, several major things also influenced Serbia's population, such as the increased air pollution, various political occurrences including elections and violent protests, education system crisis resilience, and some very sensitive issues such as the legislative process related to missing babies.

Air pollution

At the beginning of the year, extensive air pollution contaminated some of the biggest Serbian cities, with Belgrade taking the upfront lead. More than a week within January and February timeframe ranked Serbian capital as the world's most polluted city. Air pollution drew intense attention by the domestic public not only because of the public health reasons but due to Serbia's ongoing EU accession process which depicts negotiating Chapter 27 that relates to environmental policy. The EU highly contests and condemns domestic situation in an area of ecology. National authorities claimed the pollution increased due to a vast number of individual firebox places and chimneys located within the cities. The coming spring months have alleviated the situation, which, however, did not last for long, as in December, the air pollution for cities such as Belgrade, Valjevo, Niš, and Bor again registered an increase. This brought back overall anxiety of the population concerning the air quality within their cities. To make things even worse, the Serbian Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) has alleviated standards for measuring the air quality in November, by lowering down measurement criteria, which re-ignited societal displeasure.

Covid-19 and its impact

Political occurrences in general vastly influence Serbian society, ranking it among the most dynamic when it comes to turmoil and crises. With the latest Covid-19 crisis, Serbia experienced the third state of emergency within the time span of only two decades. This brought into agenda some controversies over whether these measures were proportionate. What evolved in Serbia's public, was the fear of concentration of unlimited executive power for the incumbent political actors. As a consequence of the imposed measures, the driving/walking circulation among the Serbian population has significantly fallen down – 66% for drivers and 75% for individual movements.

Even though Serbia did not register many cases *per capita* during the first two waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, national health authorities received extensive criticism over the crisis management. Internal political stage was significantly shaken in Serbia during 2020. July saw a series of violent protests across Belgrade's streets following the announced confinement as a concern of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. These protests were held in Serbia's other major cities, while they were supported by the vast Serbian diaspora and were held in parallel in Paris, Zurich, and even in Boston and London.

The protests initially sparked in Belgrade only two weeks after the elections were held, due to a claimed mismanagement of the Covid-19 crisis and against the current Government. However, as the protests evolved, list of the rationales for protesters was getting updated on a daily basis. Domestic think-tank BIRN has issued a report over the accuracy of statistics related to Covid-19 crisis, only one day after the elections were held, which further strengthened the public anger. Findings of BIRN stated that, between March 6 (when the zero-patient tested positive) and June 1, a total of 632 people who had tested positive for the Covid-19 died in Serbia, which is significantly discrepant from the officially announced data. For the same period, the health authorities claimed 244 deaths as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite having won an absolute majority of more than 60% by the leading Serbian Progressive Party, these protests were probably the most challenging and serious issue for the incumbent authorities, and questioned many electoral issues within the society. In addition, some other irregularities have been claimed by the opposition parties, such as the uneven representation within the Serbian media for all the political stakeholders in political process, while most oppositional parties have boycotted the elections. Earlier in February, Serbian President, Mr. Vučić announced that electoral threshold would be lowered from current 5% to 3%, which was confirmed with new Law on Serbian Members of parliament Election, adopted on May 10. Most of the stakeholders didn't find this as an improvement of electoral process or

increased fairness; rather, they believed this would increase chances for many “governmentally-directed” small political parties to enter the National Assembly.

The Missing Babies’ Law

Another sensitive issue that burdens Serbian society relates to several decades-long problem of babies’ missing soon after they were born. At the end of February, Serbian National Assembly passed the Missing Babies’ Law, which unfortunately did not resolve the process of truth hunting for the families who suffered due to their loss. Mysterious and quite frequent problem especially being exposed during the nineties was a huge burden for the Serbian society. Babies were missing soon after their birth, without a clear indication for cause of their claimed deaths. Families who are organized into several formal initiatives are trying for years to determine what happened to their children, but unfortunately, this resulted in insignificant success. The issue was even brought before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, whose verdict obliged Serbia to determine institutional ways of how the facts must be determined in similar cases. Besides, the Government was obliged to pay some modest compensation to the families.

The second wave of Covid-19 deepens the crisis

Summer brought more new issues to the agenda. A southwestern Serbian city of Novi Pazar became a major epidemic hotspot in June, which ignited locals who were blaming the central Government for bad conditions within the health system and overall mismanagement of the crisis, again. While Serbia had many other hotspots of the Corona virus transmission throughout the year, Novi Pazar was a quite specific case as its ethnic and religious structure is mixed, thus revived artificial divisions and unnecessary tensions among the domestic society, based solely on ethnicity and religion.

Educational system demonstrated significant crisis–resilience, being that schools were closed in Serbia, following the proclamation of the state of emergency on March 15. Though some experts were calling upon immediate closure of the complete educational system, Serbia’s national health authorities claimed that World Health Organization at that time did not recommend closure of schools and universities without strong evidence of virus transmission. And while universities facilitated examinational periods in June and in July with physical presence of the students and staff, primary and grammar schools were not open until the beginning of the new school year on September 1. With the situation worsening during October,

it was advised that senior grades attend teaching process electronically, while most of universities, including the University of Belgrade (which is attended by more than 100.000 students) decided that academic year will be facilitated completely remotely whenever possible, and respecting the type of studies.

On December 4, an entirely new Covid-19 Hospital was opened in Batajnica, a suburb of the Serbian capital. This, according to officials' claims, significantly reduced the pressure towards the health system, while another hospital is supposed to be soon finished and opened, by the end of the year. These issues came into agenda along with an enormous increase of Covid-19 positive tested cases, which in November and in December were ranging between 6.000 and 8.000 per day. However, the authorities are still quite reluctant to impose a new lockdown or to make the existing measures more strict, which was not accepted by the majority of stakeholders and public in Serbia.

Lastly, the labor conditions were also in focus during 2020. Serbian Government recommended to employers, who in conditions of emergency were not able to organize the work process, when sending employees on leave from work, in accordance with the law, to give preference of annual leave usage for their employees. In practice, numerous cases were declared to be unlawful when it comes to the labor rights and adherence of small enterprises towards their workers.

Conclusion

One could expect that the quarantined population would experience a "boring" year, but 2020 as far as Serbian society is concerned was all but a monotonous one. Elections, Covid-19 crisis, violent protests, records in air pollution, and other major societal issues, were only the top of the peak of problems Serbia and its Government have faced with. Without a clearly indicated stance towards the potential lockdown measures for the forthcoming holidays, Serbian society enters a New Year with deep anxiety over what might happen to a domestic economy and to overall societal dilemmas and problems' resolutions in situation of a consistent focus to Covid-19 fight.