

# Covid Screenagers

**Socially distant, digitally close**

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Study of the impact of Covid-19 on  
youth in the Western Balkans

**Study report: Serbia**

November 2021





# Acknowledgements

Special thanks to all of the young people who took time to participate in ***Covid Screenagers: Socially Distant, Digitally Close*** study. and share their views, opinions, and experience. Above all, thanks to ninety bright-eyed, imaginative and promising young people across the six Western Balkan countries who helped us to shape this research.

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# Foreword

We are delighted to introduce **Covid Screenagers: Socially Distant, Digitally Close.**

The world has been a particularly unwelcoming and unfair place for younger generations in 2020-21, with the Covid-19 pandemic interrupting their development, education, employment, and social life at a scale never seen before. Young people in the six Western Balkan countries are not an exception. To protect the most vulnerable segments of societies across the Western Balkan region, we all asked young people to sacrifice their dreams and ambitions. We asked them to give up on gaining new knowledge and skills, advancing their careers, travelling abroad and meeting new cultures, experiencing the dating scene, and seeking lifelong partners. It made their lives sometimes physically painful, and most of all hurtful to the soul: and we need to listen. This collection of reports is the British Council's effort to listen, report young people's thoughts, challenges, concerns, and suggest a call for action.

This research shows the heavy toll that the pandemic has wrought on young people in the Western Balkans. It reports the magnitude of the pandemic's adverse impacts on the youth's access to and quality of education, livelihoods and employment, mental health, social relations, and their future outlook. Additionally, the research found that negative impacts were unevenly distributed across diverse and complex youth populations in the Western Balkans. Those segments of the youth population who had already been disadvantaged before the pandemic were hit even harder by it.

The research findings indicate the strong resilience of youth in the Western Balkan region. Their core personal network consisting of family, friends, and romantic partners has persevered throughout the pandemic, as a significant share of them reported that those relationships have improved. Moreover, most of them managed to adjust to an increasingly online world, and they used the internet not only to keep in touch with people but also to make new acquaintances. One of the young research participants noted that it might be that we were socially distant but digitally close.

A silver lining in the research is youth's attitudes towards the environment. The overwhelming majority of young people across the region said that the pandemic made them more aware of climate change challenges. Moreover, two-thirds of them reported starting to practise environmentally

friendly behaviour as a result of the pandemic; this is a great source of hope for the challenges to come.

All these findings are fascinating, and we hope they will be useful to stakeholders across the Western Balkans, the UK and beyond. The research is also vital for the British Council, and it will inform and guide our work for the years ahead.

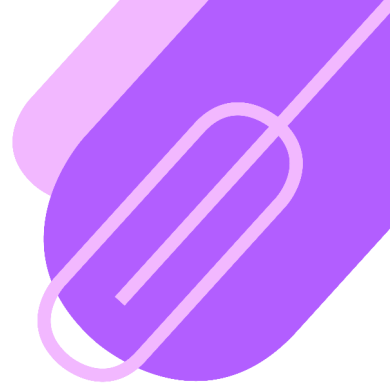
Our role is to build connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and the Western Balkans through arts and culture, education and the English language. A central objective for us is to design and run programmes that meet the needs and aspirations of young people, and support their personal, social and economic development, and promote open and inclusive societies. The British Council's work in the Western Balkan countries always starts with partnerships and results in mutually beneficial outcomes. This report helps us respond precisely to what we hear from those we want to connect with the most.

The report provides a snapshot of a distinct period of the Covid-19 pandemic through the eyes of young people. It is a testimony to the most extraordinary year most of us will ever live through. I would like to thank the research team, who worked hard to bring this report to you. Above all, I would like to thank ninety bright-eyed, imaginative and promising young people across the six Western Balkan countries who helped us shape this research.

I hope you enjoy this report as much as I have. What it teaches us will echo in our work and lives in the months and years to come.

**Milan Gnjidić**

**Head of Education, Society and Governance Contracts, Western Balkans**



# Report overview

The pandemic of Covid-19 has profoundly changed realities worldwide, but the ways it has affected various population groups are diverse. It is known that young people (aged 18-29) are in a fragile position in societies as this life stage is marked by multiple transitions in their course of life: from education to the labour market, from living with parents to independent living or starting their own family. Even in pre-Covid-19 social contexts, these transitions were coupled with a less favourable socio-economic position of young people (compared to older age groups), manifested through lower and unsecure or low paid employment.

In order to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced different aspects of life and the socioeconomic position of young people, the British Council conducted a study in six Western Balkan countries. This report is part of this study and presents key findings about the impacts of the pandemic on young people in Serbia. The report is structured as follows:

**The methodology and approach section** provides an overview of the study background, its purposes and the study development process. It describes the main quantitative and qualitative methods used in collecting and analysing data.

Section one, **Impacts on youth livelihoods and employment**, examines the magnitude of the pandemic's impact on the economic standing of young people. It starts by exploring the impacts on young people's income and ability to pay for basic expenses during the pandemic. It then examines adverse pandemics' consequences on job loss and labor market opportunities. Finally, it extends the analysis to changes in the "world of work."

Section two, **Impacts on education**, explores students' personal experience of education during the pandemic. It examines four broad thematic areas: access to education, quality of education, social aspects of educational experience, and skills needed for the post-Covid future.

Section three, **Impact on mental wellbeing and behaviours**, looks at mental health and wellbeing dimensions of the young people's experiences of the pandemic. It starts by examining changes in young people's behavioral patterns. It then looks at the pandemic's impacts on young people's feelings. This

is followed by reviewing young people's coping strategies for preserving mental wellbeing and utilizing professional mental health support during the pandemic.

Section four, **Young people's views on society and social relations** explores youth views on social issues of greatest importance to them during the pandemic. It starts with exploring young people's opinions of the pandemic's impact on their relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners. It then turns to their experience of discrimination and violence during the pandemic. It is followed by exploring young people's views on broader social issues and their social activism.

Section five, **Trust in and perceptions of media coverage during the crisis** examines young people's trust in media and their views about the media coverage of the pandemic. First, it looks at young people's Covid-19 information sources and confidence in specific media sources related to Covid-19 information. It then explores the assessment of media coverage of Covid-19 by young people.

Section six, **Young people's views on the government's response to the crisis** examine the extent to which young people have supported the government's handling of the crisis. It starts by looking at the support of three key policies: lockdown measures, public health guidelines (i.e., wearing masks), and mandatory immunization. It then explores the assessment of government measures from the standpoint of young people's needs, concerns, and interests during the pandemic.

Section seven, **Future outlook: hopes, concerns, and aspirations**, looks at the future. First, it covers youth's expectations on the impact of the pandemic on their long-term and short-term future. Then, it looks at the expected changes in their behavioral patterns/practices. Finally, it concludes with a list of government measures that young people think would benefit them the most to deal with the pandemic's negative impact.

# Methodology and approach

## Study background

**Covid Screenagers: Socially Distant, Digitally Close** is a study that amplifies the voices of 7,271 young people between the ages of 18 and 29 who have lived through the Covid-19 pandemic in six countries in the Western Balkan region (Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). The study tells the story of how the pandemic has had an adverse impact on so many aspects of young people's lives—their education, employment and livelihoods, mental well-being, family and partnership relations, broader social relations, and their future. It gives an account of their feelings, their concerns, but also their hopes and aspirations.

The study was conducted through a genuinely youth-inclusive and participatory approach involving young people in the early stages of the study design and later in the validation and analysis phases. It was also inclusive in the survey stage by conducting national representative surveys in all six Western Balkan countries, with diverse ethnic and socioeconomic segments of the young population.

## Purpose of the study

The British Council initiated this study based on our belief that it is essential to listen to and engage with young people, particularly in difficult times. The current pandemic is unprecedented in recent history, and young people have clearly been greatly affected by it in areas of education, employment, mobility, mental health, etc.

At the heart of this study is a commitment to exploring the youth voice and choice, with a view to achieving three main aims:

1. Understanding and examining the impact of the Covid-19 on young people's lives, with a focus on livelihoods and employment, education, health and mental health, social relations, trust in media and government, and their future outlook.
2. Amplifying youth voices by putting their views and ideas in the centre.
3. Supporting better youth policymaking during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period.

Covering the whole Western Balkan region, we aimed to develop a comparative approach that would show similarities among youth in the region. Moreover, we hope that the differences and disparities shown in the report will help governments, donors, and NGOs have a more nuanced and tailored approach to the young population, responding effectively to the needs of different subgroups in the post-pandemic period.

## Methodology

Our approach was iterative and multimethod, with the research taking place over three key phases:

### First phase: Participatory approach to study design

From the very beginning of this study, our idea was to make this research led by youth and for youth. With this in mind, we initiated an online call titled "Share your Covid story" and invited young people aged 18-29 to share video or written submissions by answering the following questions: 1) How has Covid-19 impacted your life? ; 2) How is Covid-19 going to shape your future? ; and 3) How do you see the world after Covid-19?. In total, 455 people responded to the call, out of which 248 answers were eligible. Among the respondents, 71 per cent were female and 29 per cent were male. The youngest respondent was 18 years old and the oldest was 29 years old. The distribution of respondents per country was as follows: Albania (35), BiH (16), Kosovo (25), Montenegro (98), North Macedonia (23), and Serbia (51). Respondents came from 76 different municipalities across the Western Balkans.

Upon submission, a group of researchers carried out an analysis of the qualitative data using grounded theory to identify the main topics of concern for young people. During this stage, we identified 15 young people per country among the respondents (in total 90), with the aim of working with them to design the survey questionnaire. In this regard, during November 2020, the topics of concern for young people identified by the qualitative analysis were discussed in gender-balanced focus groups with selected participants. Two focus groups in each country were conducted by three facilitators (12 focus groups in total). As a result of the great enthusiasm



## Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, Digitally close

### Serbia

and devotion of selected participants, a survey questionnaire was designed.

### Second phase: Quantitative survey

As a result of Phase 1, the recruited survey agency Deep Dive reviewed the designed survey questionnaire to ensure its accuracy and appropriateness to the specific national contexts of each Western Balkan country. Nationally representative surveys of young people aged 18-29 were conducted in all six Western Balkan countries. The sample collected across the Western Balkan countries was 7,271 persons, with approximately 1,200 interviews each in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, with a margin of error  $\pm 3,1$  per cent confidence interval level of 95 per cent (Table 1).

**Table 1: Achieved sample across the six Western Balkan countries**

Albania	1172
Bosnia & Herzegovina	1295
Kosovo	1261
Montenegro	1156
North Macedonia	1155
Serbia	1232
<b>Total sample</b>	<b>7271</b>

The survey represents the views of a diverse range of respondents, gender balanced, living across different geographies (urban and rural) and with varying levels of education and income. The methodology used for the collection of data was in-person Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI), whereby the interviewer used an electronic device to record the responses. Data collection took place between January 8 and February 15, 2021. Having in mind that data collection took place during the pandemic, special attention was given to the survey participants, in line with the national public health guidelines and the British Council best practices.

The sample was created using a standard 3-stage stratified sample (geographical region/settlement type/household). Households were selected by the random route technique starting from the given address and identifying household members aged 18 to 29 years old. In the case of two or more qualified respondents per household, the 'next birthday method' was applied.

One of the main aims of the research project was to understand the challenges experienced by young people who are particularly vulnerable and most at risk: to these ends, the study emphasizes harder-to-reach segments of the population. Where necessary, sample boosts were made to include these groups.

Hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups included in this survey were as follows:

- largest national minorities in each of the countries (up to the sample of a minimum of 100 respondents per ethnic group in each country)
- young people studying abroad (up to the sample of a minimum of 30 respondents in each country)
- young people with disabilities (up to the sample of a minimum of 30 respondents in each country)
- NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Since this group is large enough in all countries, there was no need for additional interviews in any of the countries.

### Third Phase: Qualitative analysis

The study adopted two qualitative approaches during this phase: focus group discussions with young people selected by the local partner Deep Dive and qualitative follow-ups with young people who participated in the survey design back in October 2020. These approaches allowed the study to have rigorous insight, verify and contextualize the findings from the quantitative phase, and gain a more in-depth understanding of the lives of youth during the pandemic. Both focus groups and qualitative follow-ups were conducted online due to the Covid-19 pandemic and moderated by highly trained moderators with skills in discussing sensitive topics with young people and facilitating group discussions, including in online environments.

Focus groups delivered by Deep Dive were conducted during March 2021. Local partners recruited six young people per country to participate in focus groups that lasted two hours. In total, six focus groups were organized with a total of 36 participants. To obtain insights into different segments of the youth population, the composition of focus groups varied across the countries. In BiH and Albania focus groups' participants were students of the final year of secondary education (high school or vocational school) between the ages of 18 and 20. In Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia, participants of focus groups were between the ages of 18 and 29, and they were all unemployed but looking for a job. Three participants lost their jobs during the pandemic, while the other three lost their jobs before the pandemic. Finally, in the Serbia focus group, participants were between the ages of 23-29 and were students expecting to graduate soon (BA or MA).

Qualitative follow-ups were organized during the first half of March. In total, four focus groups were conducted, each lasting one hour, with a combined total of 24 participants who took part in the survey design.



The background is a solid dark purple. In the top left corner, there is a small light purple circle and a white curved line. In the bottom left corner, there are several overlapping light purple and white geometric shapes, including circles and lines, creating a dynamic, abstract composition.

Screenagers

**SERBIA**

# To whom we spoke

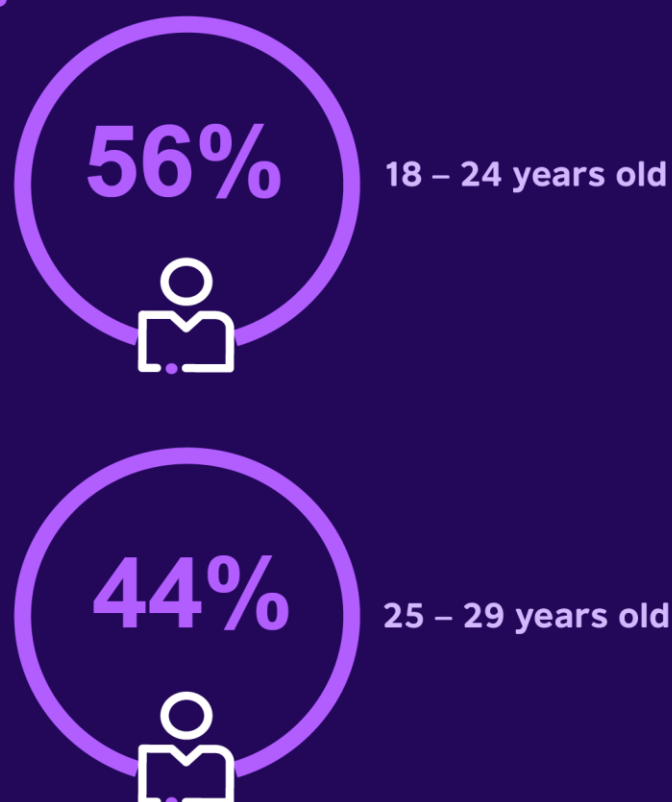


Main Sample:  
**1001**

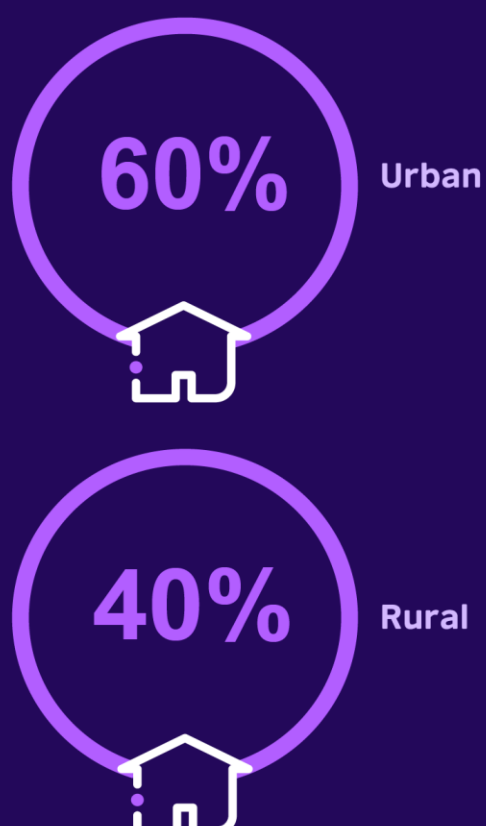
## Gender



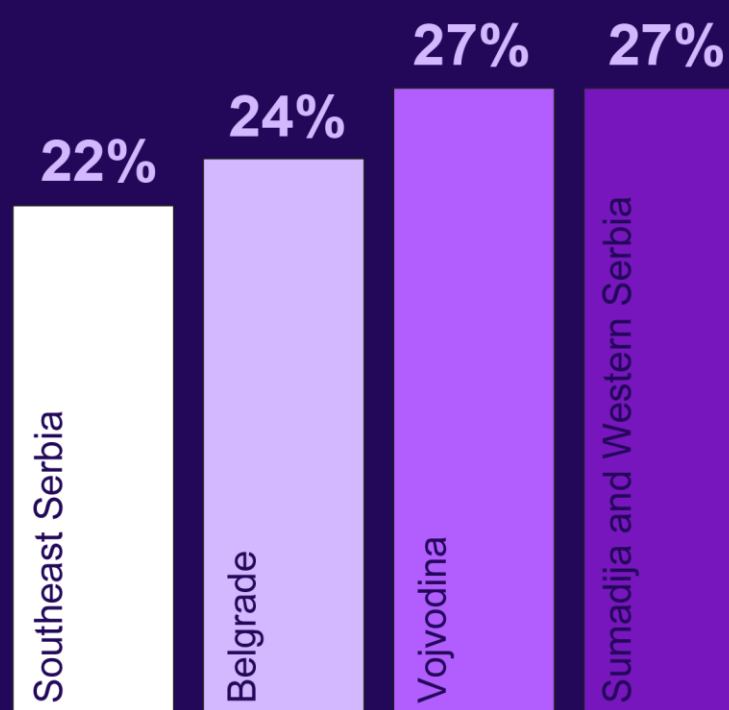
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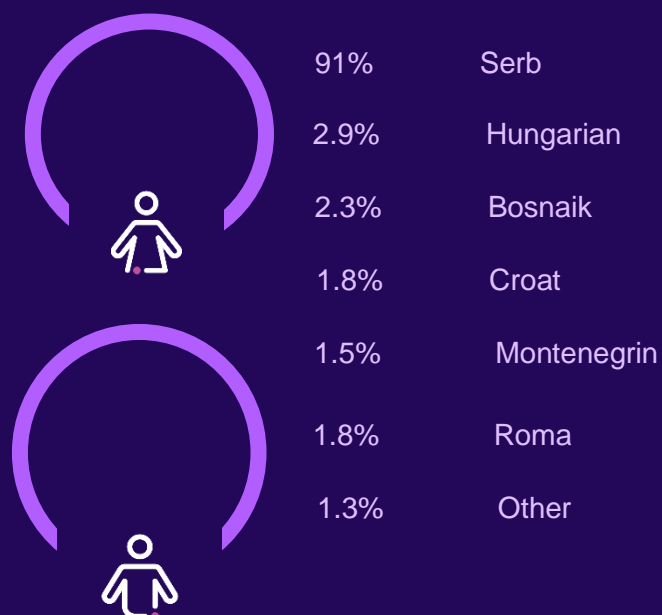
## Settlement type



## Region



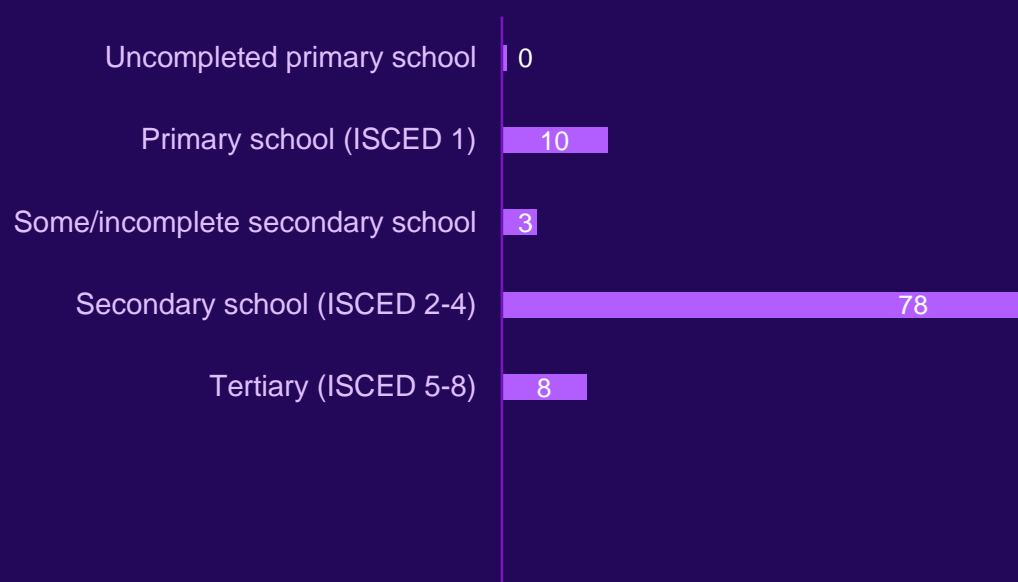
## Ethnicity



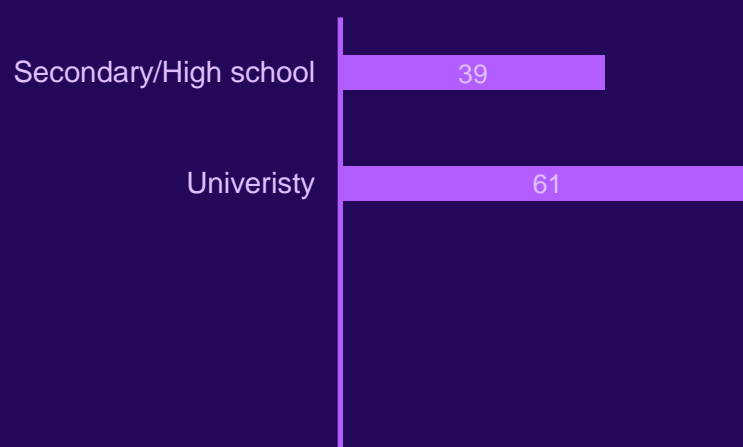
## Employment status



## Education



## Student status



## Boost Sample


Roma	86
Bosniaks	88
Youth study abroad	29
Youth with disabilities	35
NEETS	69



Total Sample

1232



A young woman with curly brown hair and round glasses is looking down at a laptop screen. She has her hand resting on her chin. The laptop screen is dark with several colorful stickers, including a green one with a white symbol and an orange one with a white symbol. The background is blurred.

“ Covid-19 has affected us both positively and negatively. Its positive effects include showing how quickly we can adapt to a new situation, to transfer business and jobs online, to look for new sources of income and financing. It was also negative, because we have started to distance ourselves even more, and with the use of social networks we are becoming even more lonely and sad. (Male, 27)

“ I think the society is deeply polarized due to the pandemic, as one group of people deny the existence of the virus, while some others are in a permanent panic and they suffer mentally. It is like we cannot agree even on basic facts about the virus. This frustrates me a lot... If I can follow the public health care measures to protect myself and my loved ones, I want other people to follow them, too. But, it is not the case. It seems to me like we do not share the burden equally. (Male, 24)



# YOUTH LIVELIHOODS AND EMPLOYMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC

**“The pandemic has had a major impact on youth livelihoods, as almost one in two young people in Serbia experienced economic hardship: either income decline or struggle to pay for at least one of the basic goods and services. It has caused pay cuts and job loss: one in five employed respondents declared pay cuts, and one in two unemployed respondents with previous work experience lost their job due to and/or during the pandemic. It further worsened the economic standing of already vulnerable segments of the youth population, such as Roma and NEET.**

**The pandemic has unevenly affected young people based on education, as a greater share of youth with lower levels of educational attainment suffered income decline and job loss than their more educated peers. Moreover, they were more likely to physically go to their workplace, exposing them more to the risk of contracting the virus.**

## Backdrop

The pandemic caught young people in Serbia in a fragile economic and labor market position compared to the rest of the population. The youth unemployment rate (aged 15-29) in 2019 was 21.5 per cent, twice as high as the unemployment rate of the working-age population (15-64).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the poverty and social inequality data obtained before the pandemic suggest that young people aged 18-24 were among the most exposed to poverty risk (25.6 per cent), next to the underaged people.<sup>2</sup> Although the Serbian economy shrank by 1.0 percent in 2020<sup>3</sup>, statistics suggest no major impact on youth unemployment. Even though it fluctuated throughout the last year, the youth unemployment rate dropped by 1 per cent (to 20.5 percent).<sup>4</sup> This might be attributed to a wide range of government measures totalling 5.8 billion EUR<sup>5</sup> introduced to mitigate the negative effects caused by the pandemic, including fiscal benefits, tax measures, financial support, and direct benefits<sup>6</sup>. These measures included a one-of-a-kind program (My First Salary) designed to reduce youth unemployment. However, youth unemployment at the end of the year was still twice as high compared to the working age population, suggesting that young people's fragile economic and labor market position would continue.

<sup>1</sup> D. Aleksić, M. Arandarenko, G. Ognjanov (2020). [Ex post analysis of the National Employment Strategy for the period 2011-2020](#).

<sup>2</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2020) [Poverty and Social Inequality, 2019](#).

<sup>3</sup> National Bank of Serbia (2021). [Macroeconomic Developments in Serbia](#).

<sup>4</sup> Eurostat (2021). [Youth unemployment rate by sex, age and country of birth](#).

<sup>5</sup> National Bank of Serbia (2021). [Macroeconomic Developments in Serbia](#)

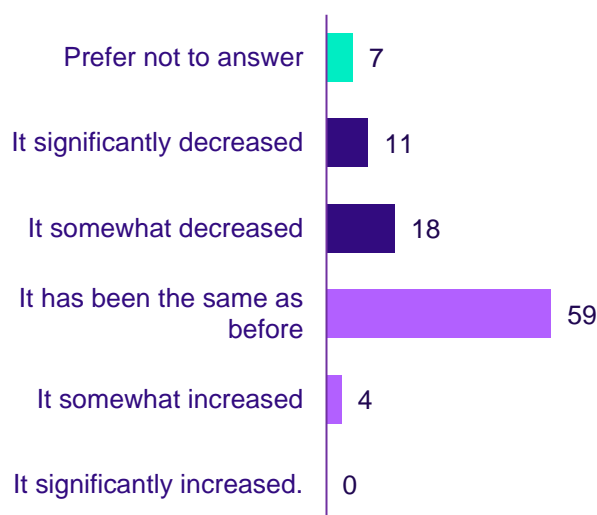
<sup>6</sup> China-CEE Institute (2020). [Serbia economy briefing: Economy of Serbia 2020 hit by COVID-19](#); Vol. 35, No. 2 (RS)

## Findings

**Covid-19 pandemic made youth in Serbia economically worse off, pushing vulnerable groups such as Roma and NEET further into poverty.** The figures show the heavy toll that the pandemic has wrought on youth livelihoods (**Figure 1a and 1b**). Almost one in two young people (46 per cent) experienced economic hardship: either the income<sup>7</sup> decline or struggled to pay for basic goods and services<sup>8</sup> (28 and 32 per cent respectively) or encountered both (14 per cent). Those who declared income increase are a real rarity and make up only 4 per cent. Employment status and education attainment significantly determined the income slump, and difficulties in making ends meet: those out of work and with less education were more likely to face with either one or both of the listed economic hardships than employed and higher educated youth. This gloomy picture is further painted by our focus group participants who said: “...my income has significantly reduced due to the measures that limited the work of bars” (Male, 23) or “...I face financial troubles due to reduced working hours., I have trouble to cover my basic needs.” (Female, 25)

**Figure 1a: Personal income during Covid-19**

How would you describe your personal income during Covid-19 pandemic? Unit: %

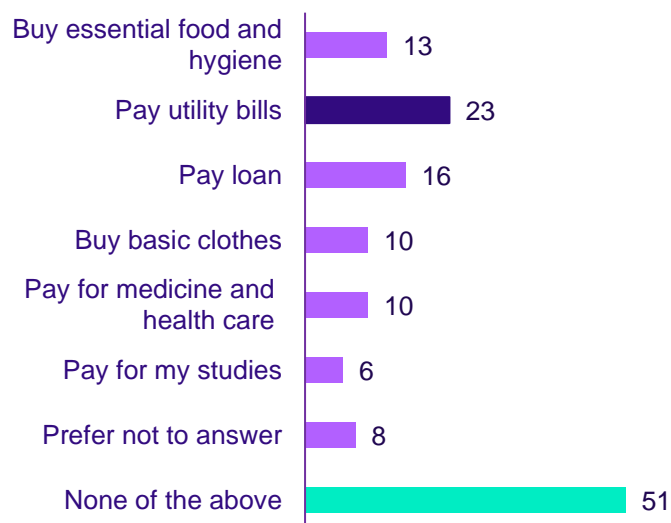


<sup>7</sup> The respondents were offered to declare one of the following income sources: salary; alimony; social security benefits; disability income; scholarship; pocket money; something else.

<sup>8</sup> Basic goods and services: utility bills, medicine and healthcare services, essential food and hygiene products, basic clothes, study.

**Figure 1b: Financial consequences of Covid-19**

As a result of Covid-19 pandemic, I and my family struggle to? Unit: %



The pandemic exacerbated the economic vulnerability of Roma and NEET, who reported income declines more frequently than the main sample (40 vs 28 per cent). Their declared average monthly income of 128 EUR (Roma) and 78 EUR (NEET) is below the at-risk of poverty threshold<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, they tended to struggle even more to make ends meet: 51 per cent of Roma and 62 per cent of NEET reported difficulties paying for basic services and goods.

### The Covid-19 pandemic caused pay cuts and job loss among youth in Serbia.

While for most of the employed youth the wages have remained at the same level as before the pandemic (63 per cent), one-fifth of them declared wage cuts (22 per cent). The pay cuts hit unevenly across different types of employment, and those with less secure jobs were hit the hardest. Seasonal workers, self-employed, and part-time employed were in this order most affected by pay cuts, while those with full-time employment were less likely to experience it.

Roughly one in two unemployed young people with previous work experience lost their job due to and during the pandemic (**Figure 2**). Namely, 33 per cent of them said they lost their job due to the pandemic, while 21 per cent of them said they became jobless during the pandemic, but not due to it. Those make up 23 per cent of the total number of unemployed respondents<sup>10</sup>, while other unemployed respondents had no previous work experience (58 per cent) or lost their jobs before the pandemic. Further, analysis of survey data shows that job loss due to and during the

<sup>9</sup> 19 381 RSD (approx. 164 EUR) a month on an average for a single person household in 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Total number of unemployed respondents is 202 (20 per cent).



## Covid Screenagers

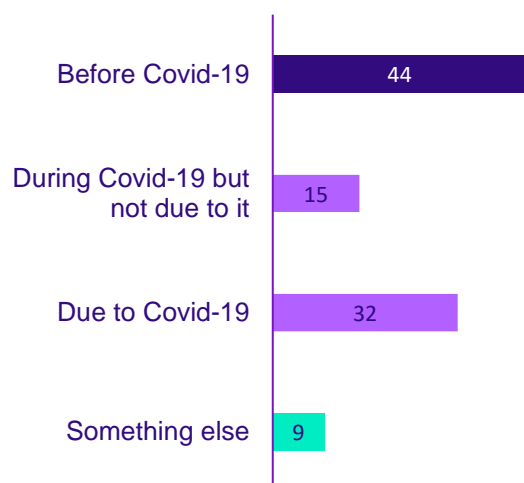
Socially distant, Digitally close  
Serbia

pandemic affected those with completed primary and secondary education considerably more (83 and 56 per cent respectively) than those with completed tertiary education (37 per cent). Additionally, job loss due to and during the pandemic hit urban youth harder than rural youth (58 vs 51 per cent), and young males harder than young females (60 vs 40 per cent).

When it comes to more specific reasons for losing jobs, an earlier study identified the following: suspension of business activities, expiration of fixed-term contracts with no renewal offered, traveling difficulties due to lockdown measures, or necessity to take care of children due to suspended schooling.<sup>11</sup> These reasons are also listed among our focus group participants, as one of them said: "...the project I worked on was cancelled due to the pandemic, and I lost the job," (Male, 23). The same study suggested that the largest share of job loss among youth (18-29) occurred in micro and small enterprises, among the self-employed, and those who worked in services, trade, industry, construction, and transportation sectors.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 2: Job loss during and due to Covid-19**

*You lost your job due to/during a Covid-19 pandemic or before a pandemic? Base: n=85; Unit: %*



### **A solid share of unemployed respondents with no job applications suggests a lack of employment opportunities and youth inactiveness in job searching.**

When asked how many times they had applied for a job during the previous 6 months, 35 per cent of respondents submitted no job applications at all, while others had applied for a job at least once.<sup>13</sup> This was more common among youth with completed primary and secondary education (64 and 34 per cent

respectively) than among university graduates (19 per cent). The share of those with no job application in rural areas was almost two times higher than that in urban areas (47 and 24 per cent respectively), which might be due to greater informality in agriculture sector. Furthermore, long-term unemployed<sup>14</sup> young people dominate in this group (76 per cent) since almost half of them have not applied for a job at all (47 per cent).

The drop in employment opportunities coupled with youth inactiveness in job searching could explain the figures above. The country's largest job portal recorded 14 per cent fewer job advertisements than in 2019<sup>15</sup>, as further mirrored by the focus group participant who stated: "Now the demand for my profession is significantly reduced... last year (2019) there were certainly five to ten job ads that I could apply for, and now there are only two" (Male 27). Furthermore, a pattern of greater inactiveness of youth with lower educational attainment observed in this research has also been noticed by the largest job portal, who reported an increased demand for candidates with completed secondary education and their inactiveness in job searching.<sup>16</sup>

### **Youth with lower education have been more exposed to the risk of contracting the virus at work than those with higher education.**

It is striking that 90 per cent of the employed youth kept going to the workplace all the time or most of the time (74 and 16 per cent respectively), while only 10 per cent worked remotely all or most of the time (5 per cent each). About nine in ten young people with completed primary and secondary education went to work all or most of the time, compared to eight in ten young people with higher education. This could imply that those with lower education, engaged in less qualified and less paid jobs (services, manufacturing, etc.), were more exposed to the risk of contracting the virus at work than those with higher education.

### **Work-related challenges during the pandemic were perceived differently by those who went to their workplace and those who worked from home (Figure 3).**

Compared to those who worked remotely all or most of the time, the employees who went to their workplace all or most of the time were more concerned about the mandatory wearing of masks (64 vs 43 per cent) and safety at work (contracting the virus; 52 vs 28 per cent). On the other hand, the employed respondents who worked from home all or most of the time reported more challenges related to access to the internet, lack of IT

<sup>11</sup> Women Support Center and SeConS (2020): [Uticaj pandemije korona virusa na populaciju mladih u Srbiji](#).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> 1-3 times (40 percent); 4-10 times (18 per cent).

<sup>14</sup> According to survey data, the majority of those unemployed with finished primary and secondary education can be considered as "long-term unemployed" (more than 12 months, 85 per cent and 82 per cent respectively). For a long time, this problem has been presented in World Bank reports "Labour market trends in the Western Balkan", and

explained by structural labor market deficiencies, such as skills mismatch, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Drop from 48.893 to 41.902. Infostud (2021). [Tokom pandemije čak 228.000 ljudi bilo u potrazi za zaposlenjem](#).

<sup>16</sup> 60 per cent of overall advertisements during 2020 was for people with completed secondary education, while only 25 per cent of candidates who searched for a job on their website had secondary education. Infostud (2019). [Tokom pandemije čak 228.000 ljudi bilo u potrazi za zaposlenjem](#).

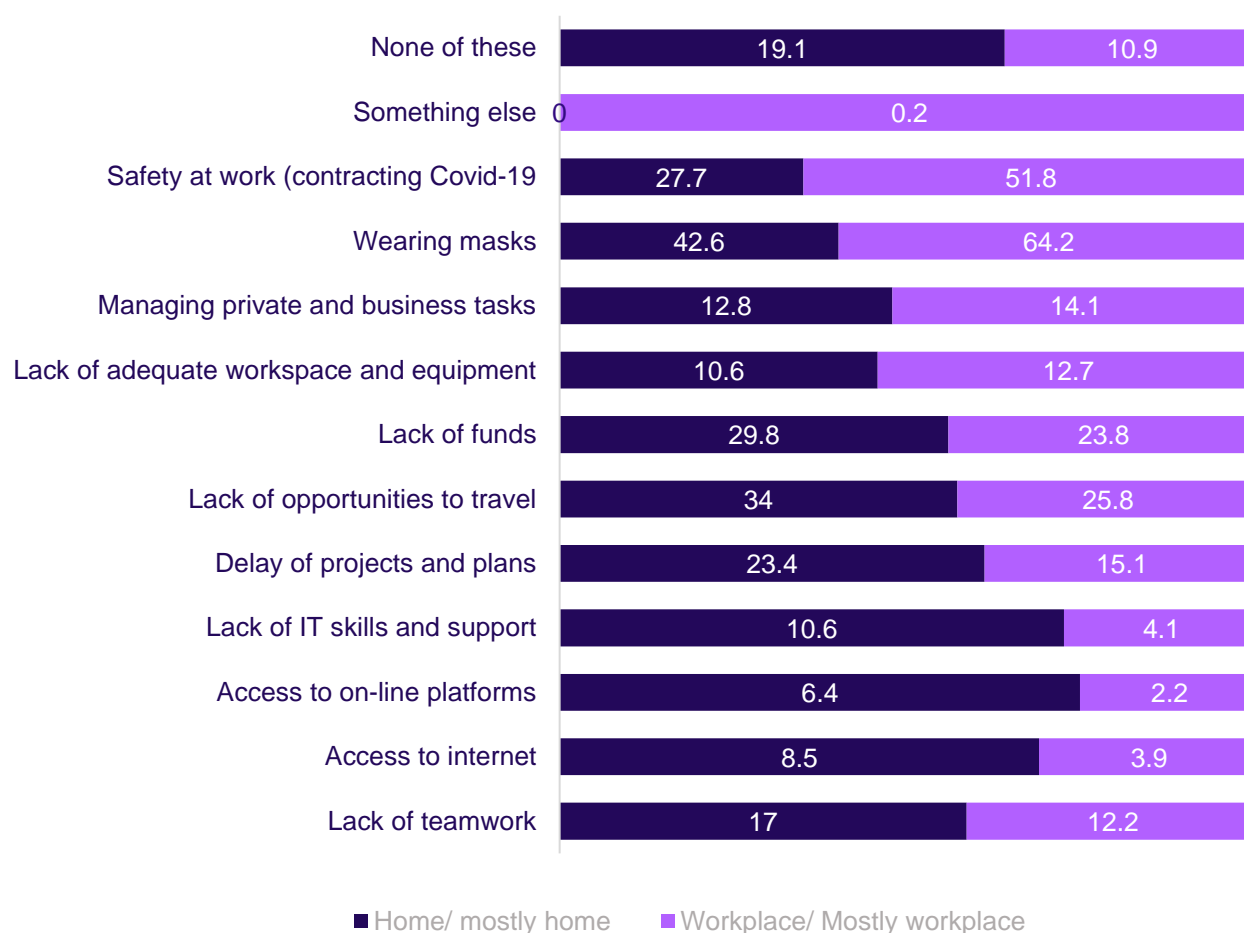
## Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, Digitally close  
Serbia

skills and support, delay of project and plans, and lack of funds. For those who experienced working from home, the most positive work-related changes were a lower risk of contracting the virus, flexible working hours, and better time management. However, this was not fully echoed by our focus group participants who said, *"We switched to working from home, and it is positive that I saved commuting time. On the other hand, there are no longer clear working hours, and many of my colleagues and I have stayed working online all day."* (Female, 26)

**Figure 3: Work-related challenges**

Have you faced any of the following work-related challenges during Covid19 pandemic? Base: employed, n=458. Unit: %



# IMPACTS ON EDUCATION

“ ***The pandemic adversely impacted the quality of, access to and social aspects of education. One in two students reported learning loss, while one in three students had issues accessing the internet and online learning platforms. Those who experienced issues with accessing the internet and online learning platforms were more likely to state that they learned less during the pandemic than students who had no such issues. Furthermore, distance learning made students feel alienated from their teachers and peers and lacked a sense of belonging to school/university.***

## Backdrop

One-third of survey respondents (32 per cent) who are still in education, have had a different educational experience than they used to have before the pandemic. To those attending secondary schools (13 per cent), educational content was delivered remotely through the national broadcaster from March 2020 until the end of the school year (June 2020), with additional online support from teachers. Since the start of the new school year (September 2020), they have had combined distance (national broadcaster) and face-to-face learning, with each class divided into two groups and class time reduced by 15 minutes. On the other hand, students at universities attended online and face-to-face lessons alternately depending on the epidemiological situation and the field of study. Some studies have already reported dissatisfaction with the provision of education services during the pandemic, and its negative impact on students' learning.<sup>17</sup>

## Findings

The majority of surveyed students think they learned less than they would have in regular circumstances, especially those with limited internet access. Apparently, distance learning with combined face-to-face teaching has not been beneficial to students' knowledge and skills, since a clear majority of them (56 per cent) think they learned less than they would have in regular circumstances (Figure 4). For some who feel they learned less during the pandemic, this might be explained by limited access to digital education. One in three students had issues accessing the internet and online learning platforms (29 per cent), and those were more likely to state they learned less during the pandemic than students who had no such issues. Furthermore, students who reported difficulties paying for their studies during the pandemic were more likely to report limited access to the internet and online platforms than students with no hurdle in financing their studies. This suggests that economically disadvantaged students were most likely disproportionately affected by the pandemic, both in terms of access to education and learning loss. Furthermore, the research finds that high school students more than university students reported that they learned less during the pandemic (62 and 53 per cent respectively) and faced the issue of limited access to the internet and online learning platforms (33 and 26 per cent respectively).

<sup>17</sup> Women Support Center and SeConS (2020). [Uticaj pandemije korona virusa na populaciju mladih u Srbiji](#).



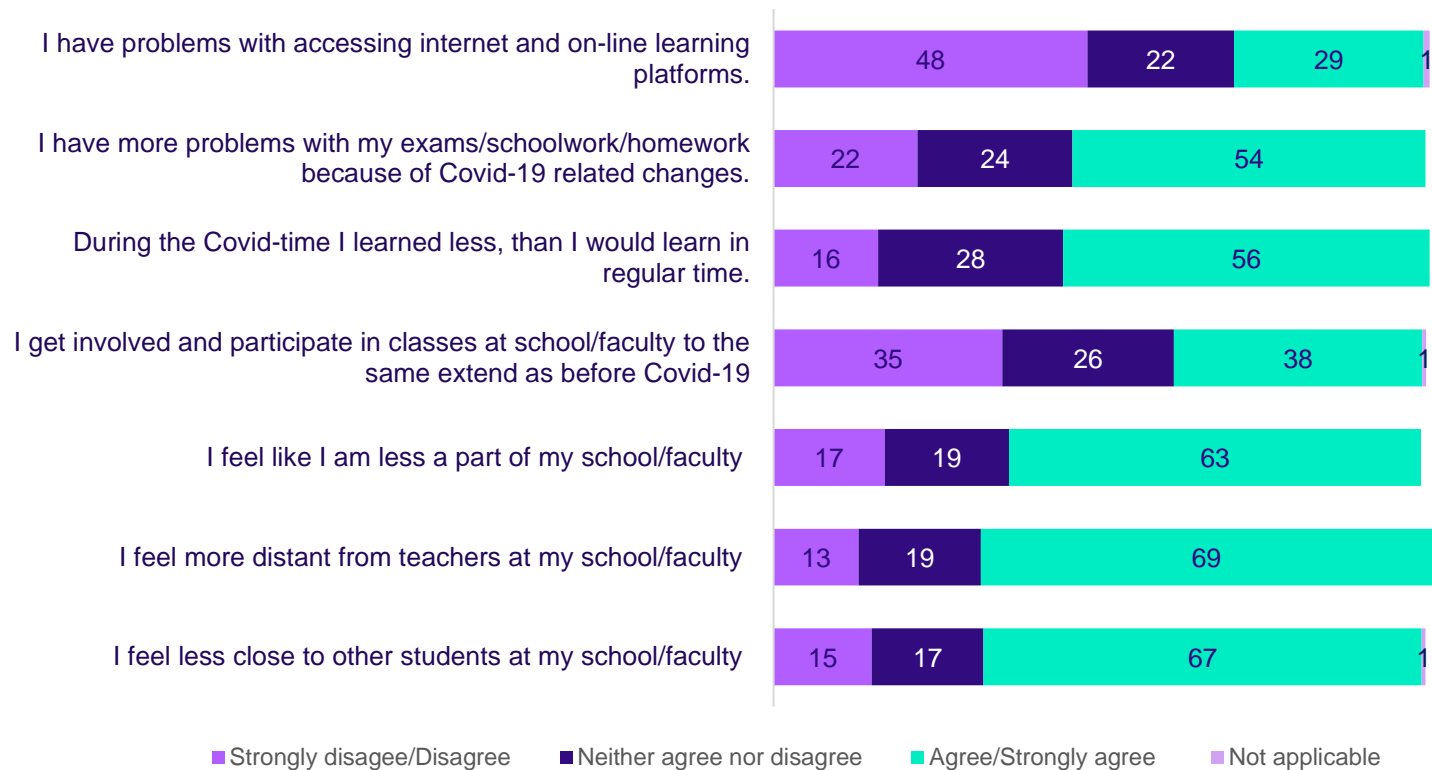
## Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, Digitally close

Serbia

**Figure 4: Education and Covid-19**

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Base: respondents who are in school/university at the moment n=321. Unit: %



The majority of students (54 per cent) stated that they had more trouble with exams and schoolwork than they used to have before the pandemic. The same time spent studying compared to the pre-pandemic period was reported by 40 per cent of surveyed students; almost the same share of them said it increased (38 per cent), and 20 per cent thought it decreased. Furthermore, two in three students said they felt more distant from teachers at their school/faculty due to Covid-19 related changes (69 per cent), with no significant difference between high school and university students. However, when asked to assess if they have been involved and participated in classes to the same extent as before the pandemic, high school students were more likely to negatively assess it than university students (44 vs 30 per cent). This difference indicates that the combined distance (national broadcaster) and face-to-face learning experienced by high school students offers less opportunity for interaction and involvement in classes than combined online learning (online teaching) and face-to-face learning that was organized for university students. However, as testified by a focus group participant, online teaching did not always take place at universities: “I remembered more content when we had classes in person. I would remember what the professors said...they would ask additional questions and I would learn more through that exchange. Now we

[watch] presentations or they send us materials, and it's not the same – it's less effective.” (Male, 21)

### The pandemic negatively influenced the social dimension of the students' educational experience.

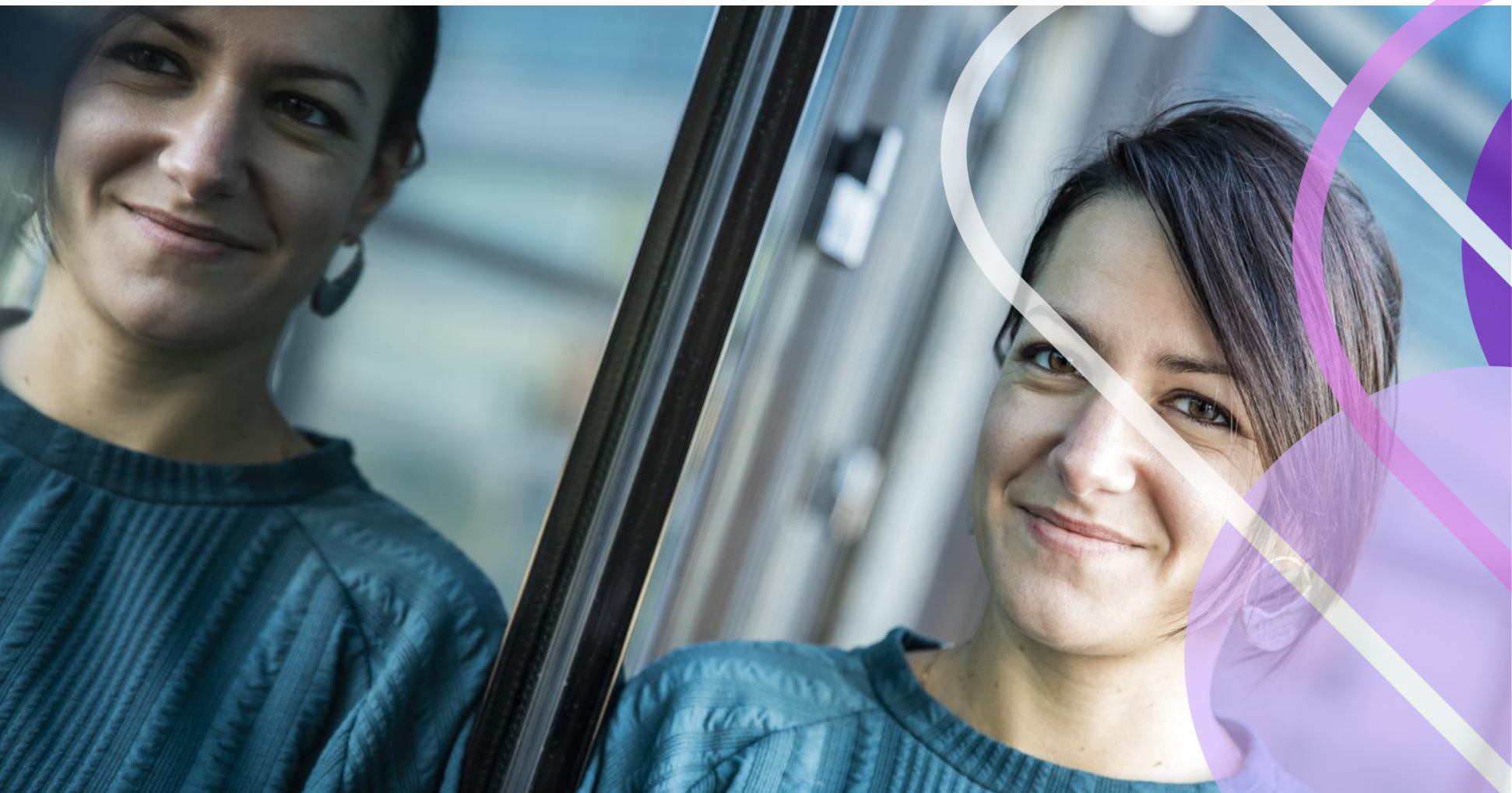
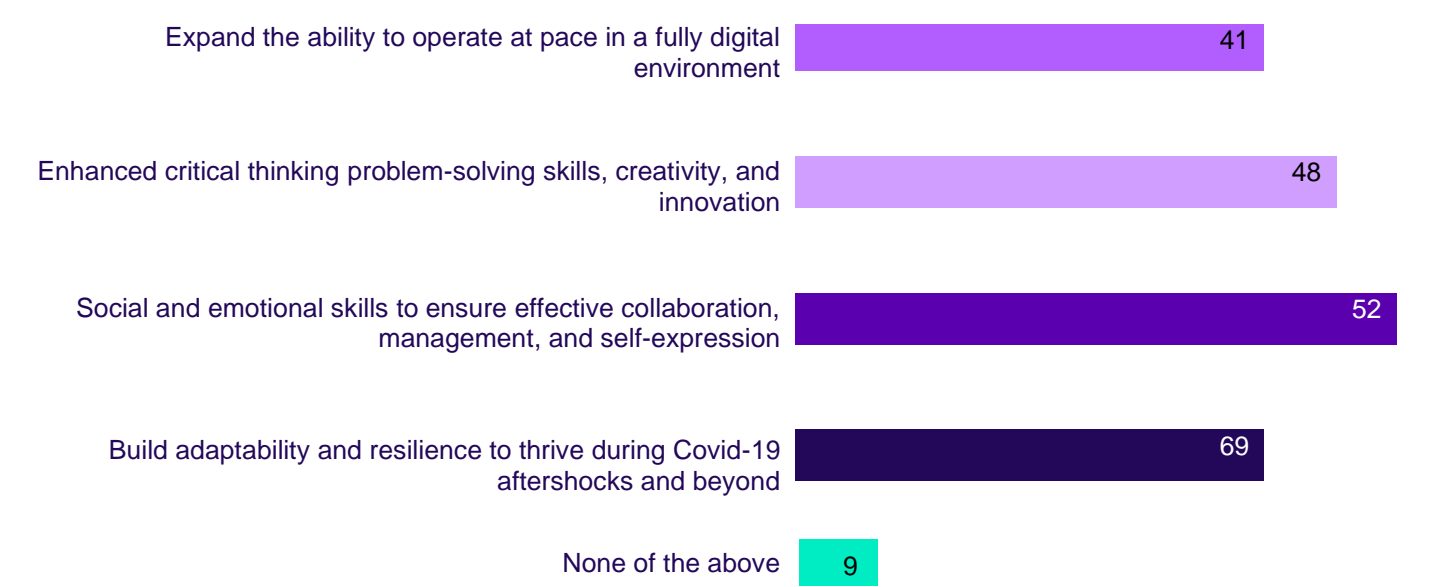
Students reported a high sense of alienation from their fellow students: two-thirds of them felt less close to other students. Moreover, nearly two-thirds said they felt less as a part of their school or their university due to the Covid-19 pandemic (63 per cent). Compared to high school students, university students were more likely to feel less close to other students (55 vs 71 per cent, respectively) and less a part of their school/university (57 vs 66, per cent respectively).

### Digital, cognitive, social, emotional, adaptability, and resilience skill sets are key for thriving in the future.

Most students reckon that the key skills needed to thrive in the future are social and emotional skills allowing for effective collaboration and management, followed by enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills, increased adaptability to building resilience in the post-Covid future, and the capacity to navigate an increasingly digitalized world (Figure 5). These findings were not fully matched by our focus group participants, who due to the perceived high labor market demand for professions related to IT and digital skills (developers, digital marketing, graphic design, etc.)

prioritized these skills over others. This was noted by a focus group participant: “*Digital skills are key for better education and for higher employment. Covid-19 proved it to us.*” (Female,19). Whatever the disagreement is, the gap between education and the labor market remains open, which is seen by many as the inability of the education system to prepare them for working life.

**Figure 5: Future skills**  
*What skills will you need the most to thrive in post Covid world. Please select top 2 priorities. Base: respondents who are in school/university at the moment; n=321. Unit: %*







“ I avoid the news, but they find me. I avoid the Covid-19 statistics, but it finds me. I avoid people and that is the hardest thing for me. (Male, 22)

“ The pandemic has made me feel confused and helpless. The flow of information about the virus has confused me the most, so I am not able anymore to decide if, with whom, when and where I could meet. I feel guiltily both if I meet or refuse to meet other people. (Female, 23)

“ Many of my friends and I stopped thinking about the future plans, because we are afraid we will not be able to pursue them due to the pandemic. (Female, 26)

“ The pandemic changed my daily routine. It significantly reduced my social contacts, and at the begining I rarely went outside. I remeber that period by endlessly waiting for a day to pass. Distance learning at my university was not implemented well and it significantly impaired the quality of my studies. (Female, 20)



# YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ABOUT IMPACTS ON BEHAVIOURS AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

**“ Young people have been hit with a triple whammy of curtailed education, diminished job prospects and reduced social contact with peers. Thus, their daily behaviour/habits changed significantly, as they spent more time on the internet, watching movies, and with family and less time with friends and doing sports. Furthermore, the pandemic has had an adverse impact on young people’s mental well-being, as they felt more worried, annoyed, hopeless, tired and lonelier compared to prepandemic period. The mental wellbeing of young females and youth with disabilities was particularly negatively affected. Despite the adverse impact on mental wellbeing, young people were reluctant to reach out for professional mental health support.**

## Backdrop

Before the pandemic, young people in Serbia were primarily occupied with socializing and entertainment in their free time.<sup>18</sup> The quarantine measures and lockdown occasionally introduced to contain the spread of the virus heavily disrupted their lifestyles and daily routines. During the observed period, they experienced weekend-long curfews back in March/April 2020, and some reported feeling panic when texted by the largest national mobile service provider about the dramatic situation in the country. Most of the time, they were not allowed to (legally) party in night clubs and had no or limited access to sports, culture, and leisure facilities. The pandemic also disrupted their plans about the future, forcing them to postpone key life events that often mark the transition to adulthood, such as living independently, getting married, or achieving financial independence. Some lost their loved ones and grieved. This disruption, along with increased uncertainty, fears, and worry for their own and their close ones’ health, posed a serious challenge to their mental well-being. Some previous studies have already evidenced the negative impact of the pandemic on youth mental health.<sup>19</sup> We further evidence it in this survey and go beyond previous findings by looking at how young people’s behaviour/habits changed and how they maintained their mental well-being.

<sup>18</sup> The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), (2019). [Youth Study Serbia 2018/2019](#)

<sup>19</sup> Women Support Center and SeConS (2020). [Uticaj pandemije korona virusa na populaciju mladih u Srbiji](#)

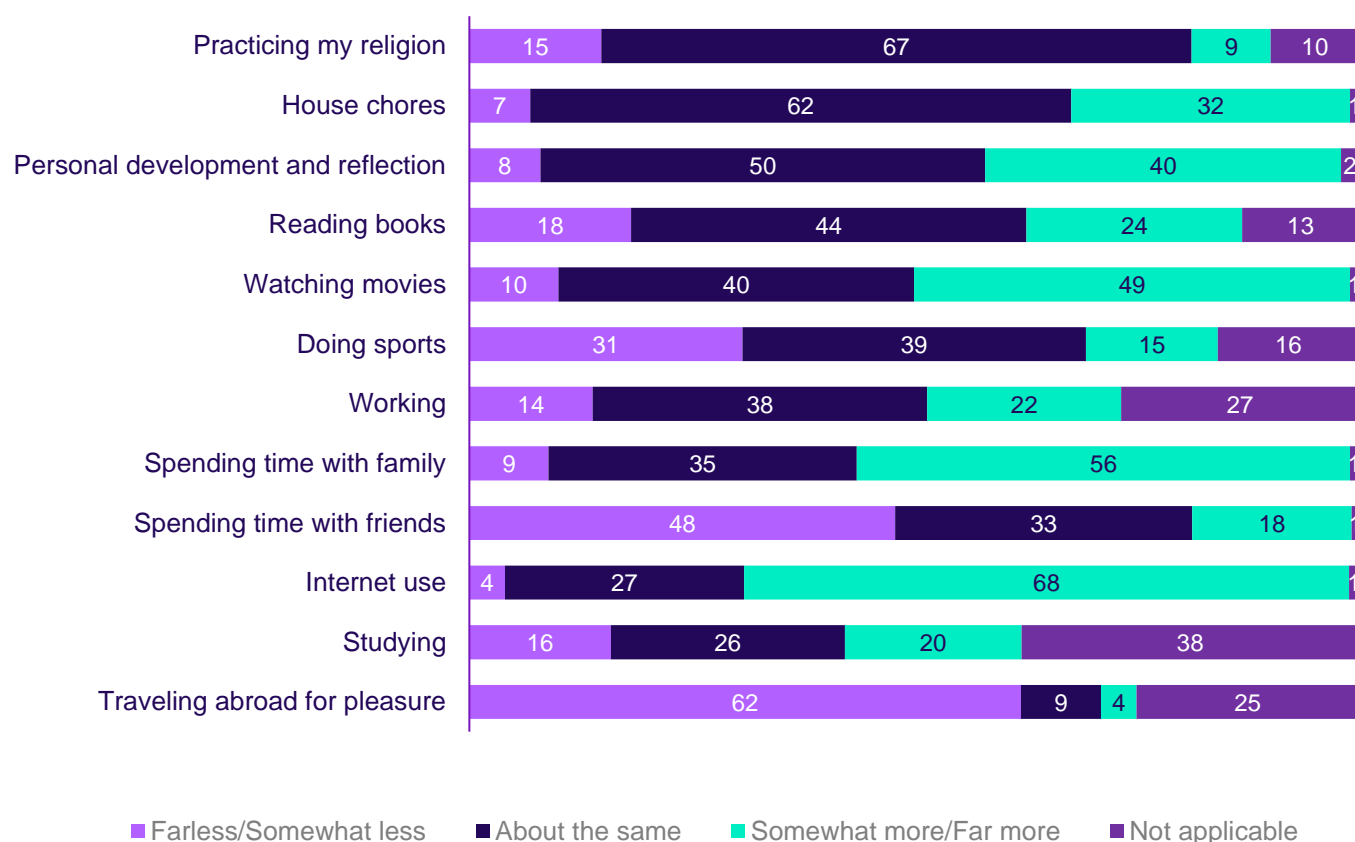
## Findings

**The pandemic significantly changed the daily behaviour/habits of youth, more so in urban than in rural areas** (49 vs 39 per cent). Practicing religion, doing house chores, and reading books are activities mostly done in the same amount as before the pandemic. The largest changes in daily behaviours/habits (increase/decrease) are recorded in the time spent with family or friends, internet use, time spent watching movies, personal development

and reflection, and doing sports (**Figure 6**). Two in three young people (68 per cent) spent somewhat more or far more time on the internet, while one in two spent more time with their family (56 per cent) and watching movies (49 per cent). On the other hand, 48 per cent and 57 per cent of them reported somewhat less and far less time spent with friends and doing sports, respectively. This was reinforced by our focus group participant who said: “...I am not able to practice activities that were part of my routine, such as regular exercising in the gym, and hanging out with friends.” (Male, 20)

**Figure 6: Impact of Covid-19 on behaviours/practices**

Compared with the time before Covid-19, how much time you spend in the following activities? Unit: %



To get a sense of the volume of increased time spent on the internet during the pandemic, it is helpful to refer to the findings of the recent youth study: “Practically everybody (15-29 age group) uses the Internet – four-fifths for three hours or more every day. The Internet is used mainly for communication and entertainment”<sup>20</sup>. To further illustrate the extent to which the internet has become deeply interwoven with the daily lives and social interactions of youth in Serbia, it is interesting to note that 36 percent of respondents stated that they met more new people online than face-to-face (41 per cent) during the pandemic. Students are leading on meeting new

people online since they reported it more frequently than other subgroups (45 per cent).

**The pandemic has had an adverse impact on young people’s mental well-being, particularly in young females and youth with disabilities.** The lack of freedom of movement has been hard for most of the surveyed youth (about 70 per cent), with education level positively correlated with this feeling. Around one-fifth of respondents reported no influence of the pandemic on their mental well-being compared with the time before it, while the remaining four-fifths of them reported either a positive or a negative impact. The levels of worry, annoyance, loneliness,

<sup>20</sup> The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) (2019). [Youth Study Serbia 2028/2019](#).

## Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, Digitally close

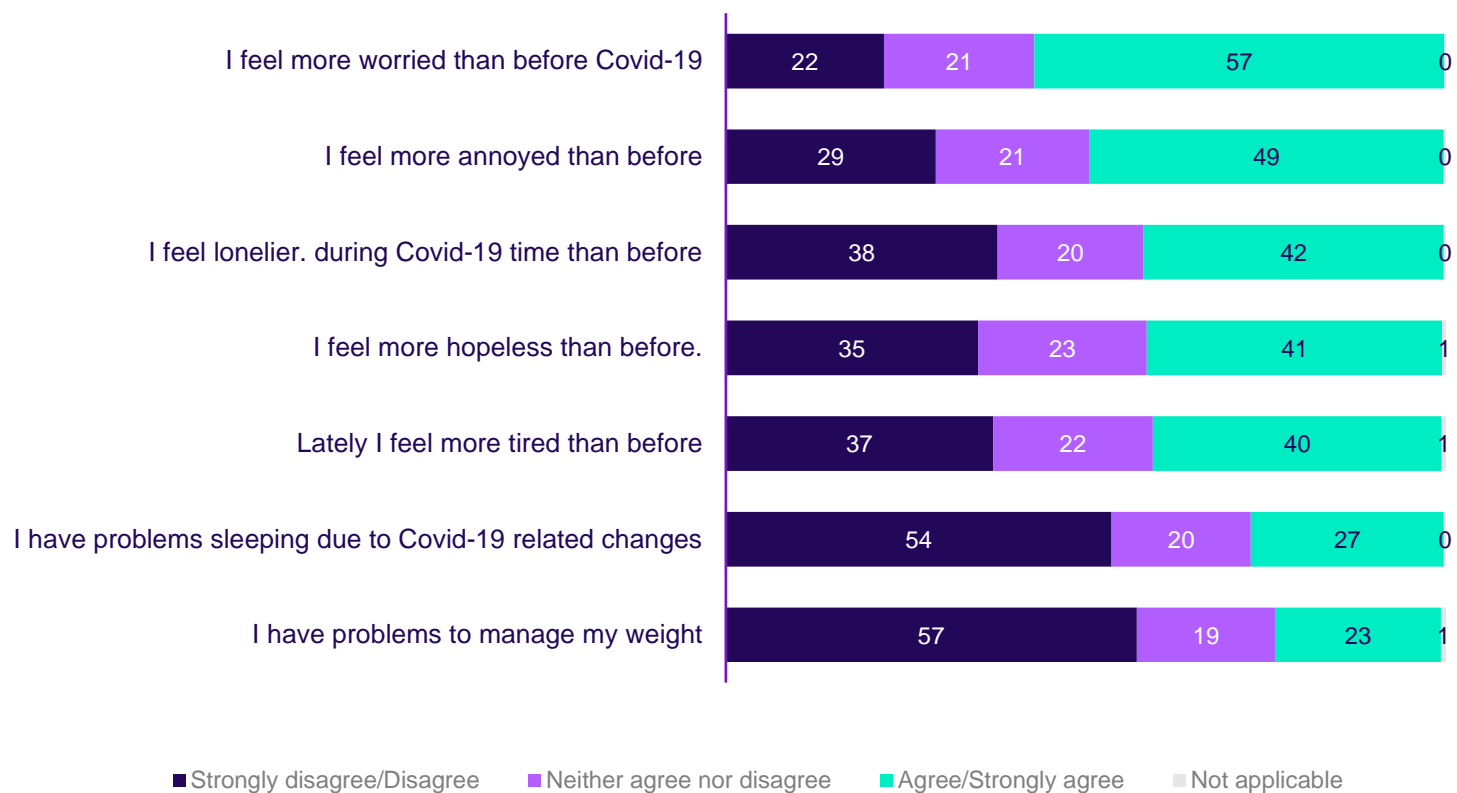
Serbia

hopelessness, and tiredness are reported to have increased (**Figure 7**). One in two young people felt more worried and annoyed compared to the pre-pandemic time (57 and 49 per cent respectively). A somewhat smaller share of them felt more hopeless

(41 per cent), tired (40 per cent), and lonelier (42 per cent). Almost one in three respondents reported having problems sleeping due to Covid-19 related changes.

**Figure 7: Impact of Covid-19 on mental wellbeing**

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Unit: %



### Women have been suffering mentally more than men: they felt more worried, hopeless, tired, lonelier and have developed problems sleeping.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, the older cohort felt more worried and hopeless than the younger cohort; those with higher education felt lonelier than those with lower education; and the employed felt tired more than the unemployed. The income slump experienced during the pandemic by some young people, made them feel more worried than people with unchanged and increased income. Further, it is alarming that youth with disabilities reported increased worry (74 per cent), annoyance (54 per cent), loneliness (51 per cent), hopelessness (60 per cent), tiredness (46 per cent), and sleeping problems (40 per cent) during the pandemic compared to the main sample.

**Despite the adverse impact on mental wellbeing, youth in Serbia are reluctant to reach out for professional mental support.** To cope with mental disturbance, strategies such as improving diet, doing more things for pleasure (watching movies, cooking, etc.), smoking cigarettes, seeking support from the family, and not reading the news, figure most prominently in this order (ranging from 29 per cent to 18 per cent). Further, the perception prevailed among

our focus group participants is that the newly acquired free time has been used wisely by some young people to maintain their mental well-being. As they commented, some young people focused more on their studies, devoted more time to reading, or started new activities like painting, jewelry-making, etc.

<sup>21</sup> Female/male comparison: worry (62 vs 52 per cent); annoyance (53 vs 45 per cent); loneliness (46 vs 37 per cent); hopelessness (47 vs

35 per cent); tiredness (44 vs 36 per cent); problems sleeping (31 vs 23 per cent).

## Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, Digitally close

Serbia

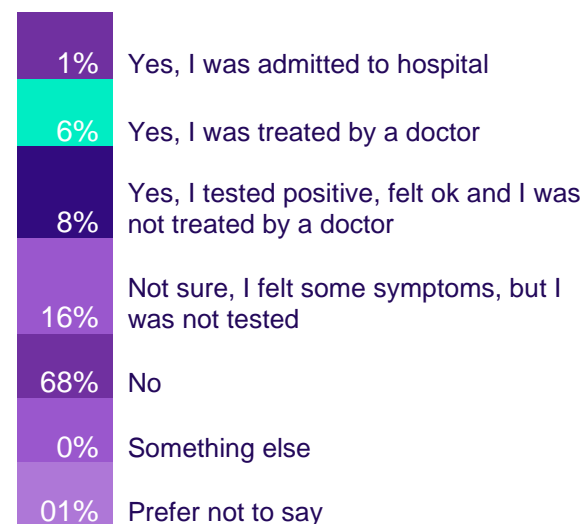
However, nearly one in five (18 per cent) young people said they needed some type of mental help/support or needed it more during the pandemic. The youth in urban areas expressed the need for mental health support more than their peers in rural areas (22 vs 13 per cent). Also, youth with disabilities expressed a strong need for such support (37 per cent). Despite the voiced need, only 6 per cent of the main sample and 28 per cent of youth with disabilities reached out for mental help during the pandemic. Those who used professional services mostly sought individual counselling with a psychologist, life coach, psychiatrist (private or public practice), or called a telephone support helpline. Additionally, 2 per cent of respondents reported using faith-based services and internet-based chat and support groups.

Asked about the reasons for reluctance to seek help, they listed: wish to work out the problem on their own, or with the help of family/friends (41 per cent), lack of funds to afford help (21 per cent), discomfort to admit to others that they have mental health issues (16 per cent), and lack of knowledge about where to get support. (16 per cent). This is echoed by focus group participants who were surprised with the low percentage of those who asked for support. One of them said: *"It surprises me that only 6 per cent of youth ask for professional mental health support. This can be about the stigma or access to mental health services."* (Female, 25)

**The youth had limited access to health services during the pandemic.** One in two young people who had been infected by the virus reported limited access to diagnostic health services (**Figure 8a and 8b**). Among them, Bosniaks and youth in Belgrade reported it significantly more (67 vs 51 per cent). Almost two in ten young people reported that they did not receive timely and efficient medical care once they were diagnosed with Covid-19, while in Central and West Serbia one in four young people faced this issue (26 per cent). Furthermore, one in three Covid-19 patients reported that they did not have enough space at home to isolate from other inmates/household members, with urban youth reporting this more frequently than those from rural settlements (40 vs 30 per cent). Youth with chronic medical conditions in particular suffered due to limited access to health services: a half of them (56 per cent, N=36) reported decreased access to medical care due to the pandemic.

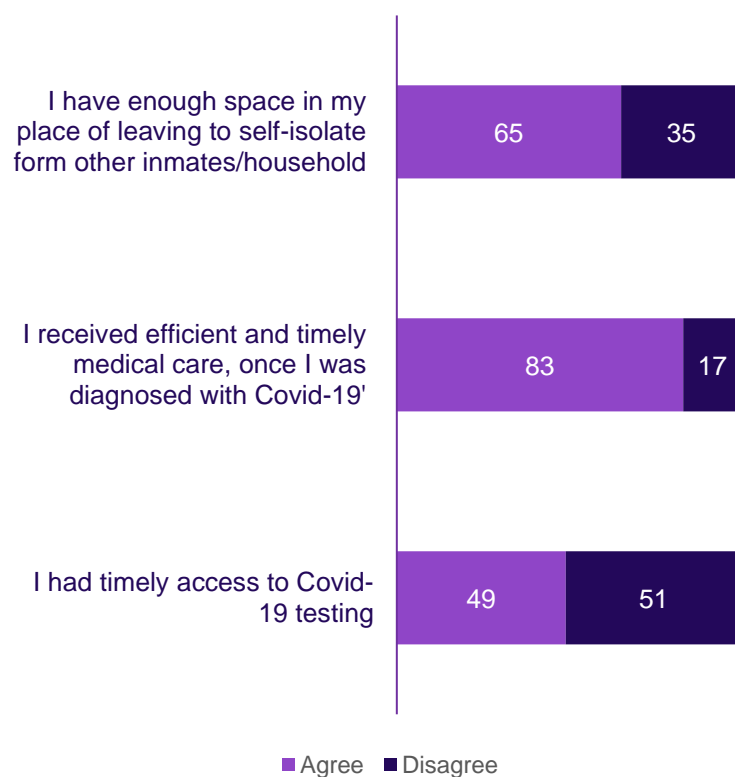
**Figure 8a: Covid-19 infection rate**

Have you had Covid-19? Unit: %



**Figure 8b: and access to health care services**

Please agree or disagree with the following statements? Unit: %





# YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ABOUT IMPACTS ON SOCIETY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

“ ***Young people predominantly think that the pandemic increased existing economic, political, ethnic, and generational divisions in the country, and made marginalized groups even more deprived than before the pandemic. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of respondents think that youth were stigmatized as irresponsible virus spreaders. However, the majority reported improved relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners, confirming that core personal networks are a key source of safety and stability in times of crisis.*** ”

## Backdrop

Young people in Serbia live in a diverse country with highly complex and multidimensional social divides regarding ethnicity, age, religion, socioeconomic status, rural and urban environments, political interests, etc. The pandemic and its related restrictive measures have demonstrated a high potential to erode social cohesion worldwide by fuelling existing and creating new divisions and injustices.

In addition to the pandemic, during 2020, young people have been exposed to a wide range of events

that could shape their experience of social cohesion. Some of them listened to or made noise at protests that took place in April/May across the country to express dissatisfaction with the government handling of the pandemic.<sup>22</sup> Others abstained, boycotted, or voted in the parliamentary election held in late June in a tense atmosphere.<sup>23</sup> They witnessed or took part in a wave of protests in July in Belgrade, Nis, Krusevac, and Novi Sad, prompted by an apparent announcement of a weekend-long curfew, where they witnessed or were victims of police brutality not seen since the 1990s.<sup>24</sup> Some students in Belgrade, amid the exam period in early July 2020, received expulsion orders from their dormitories due to the spike in coronavirus infections, which brought them to the streets to defend their right to education.<sup>25</sup> Some young people volunteered trying to help the most vulnerable, and some were waiting for others to help them. Young Roma found themselves in a much worse position than the majority during the pandemic, with limited access to basic infrastructure and utilities (safe drinking water, electricity, etc.) and with no stable income (needed to be able to afford protective equipment against the virus, for example).<sup>26</sup> Therefore, we approached young people to explore the extent to which they think the pandemic has brought people together or divided them and to amplify their voices about the perceived burning divisions and injustices in society.

<sup>22</sup> European Western Balkans (2020). [Citizens of Serbia protest against the Government by making noise from their homes.](#)

<sup>23</sup> Freedom House (2021). [Nations in Transition – Serbia.](#)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> N1 info (2020). [Belgrade students protest; Minister: Dormitories remain open.](#)

<sup>26</sup> UNHCR, SIPRU, SDC (2020). [Mapping of substandard Roma settlements according to risks and access to rights in the Republic of Serbia.](#)

### Findings

**The pandemic has positively influenced youth relationships with their close ones.** A positive development is that the pandemic has brought the family even closer to the heart of Serbian youth. A clear majority of respondents stated that their relationship with the family improved during the pandemic (55 per cent), while 10 percent disagreed.<sup>27</sup> Females were more likely than males to report improved relationships with the family, as well as those with lower rather than higher education. Relationships with friends remain the same for one-third of youth, with a further 43 per cent of them reporting it became better during the pandemic. Furthermore, 38 per cent of youth reported improved relationships with their romantic partner, especially those older than 24. This improvement in the relationships with the close ones was nicely summarized by our focus group participants, who said *“although we were physically separated, we were much closer”*. (Female, 23)

**Young people predominantly think they have been stigmatized as irresponsible Covid-19 spreaders.** Overwhelming majority of young people think they have been stigmatized as irresponsible spreaders of the virus (68 per cent), with youth in urban areas holding that opinion more strongly than youth in rural areas. This echoes the findings of recent reports that Serbian media reported on youth during the pandemic mostly in a negative context.<sup>28</sup> Most of the focus group participants agreed with this finding, and one of them said: *“When I walk down the street, I can see that people look at me as a potential spreader. This has been normalized in our society and perhaps the youth even got used to it”* (Male, 23). Moreover, one in four youth who were infected with the virus<sup>29</sup> felt uncomfortable about it in society: they felt unsupported (16 per cent), judged (7 per cent), stigmatized (3 per cent), and refrained from sharing this information with friends (5 per cent).

**Despite this increasing feeling of stigmatization, very few respondents reported experiences of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or age** (1 per cent). This suggests that the perceived stigmatization of youth as irresponsible Covid-19 spreaders was not seen among them as age-based discrimination. This might be due to their limited understanding of the concept of discrimination, which prevents them from recognizing and effectively reporting cases of discrimination.

### **A greater sense and experience of discrimination and violence is present among Roma youth.**

Roma youth reported discrimination more commonly than the main sample (9 vs 1 per cent). Some reported examples are quite disturbing:

*“...disparaging because I am a Roma. I am Roma and they think I have coronavirus because of their prejudices”* (Female, 23), or *“...they did not let me wait in the same line because I am a Roma woman”* (Female, 19). Further, the greatest number of gender-based violence cases is recorded among Roma women (8 per cent), compared to 1 per cent in the main sample. Again, young Roma who had the virus felt even more judged (11 per cent) and stigmatized (22 per cent) by others.

**Almost one in three young people think that discrimination towards specific groups increased during the pandemic.** In their view, discrimination has increased particularly towards the elderly (68 per cent), people with chronic diseases (47 per cent), and people with disabilities (33 per cent). Furthermore, over half of respondents (54 per cent) think that Covid-19 has made marginalized groups (Roma, people with disabilities) more deprived than before. This feeling is even more pronounced among surveyed Roma and people with disabilities (77 and 80 per cent respectively). In terms of violence, about one in ten youth stated they were a victim of or witnessed violence during the pandemic. Bosniaks and people with disabilities reported it more commonly than the main sample (16 and 26 per cent respectively).

**A vast majority of youth think that the pandemic increased existing economic, political, ethnic, and generational divisions in the country (Figure 9).** Two out of three young people (64 per cent) think that Covid-19 has widened the gap between the rich and the poor and made political divisions in society even deeper. The increased gap between the younger and the older generations has been noted by 55 per cent of respondents, while ethnic divisions are deeper and more visible for 61 per cent of survey participants. The perception of increased political, ethnic, and generational divisions is significantly determined by the level of education, with higher educated young people being more perceptive of these divisions. Comparing the regions, the lowest perception of the pandemic's impact on deepening existing divisions was measured among the youth in southeast Serbia, while the greatest impact was recorded among the youth in the Vojvodina and Belgrade regions.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), (2019). [Youth Study Serbia 2028/2019](#).

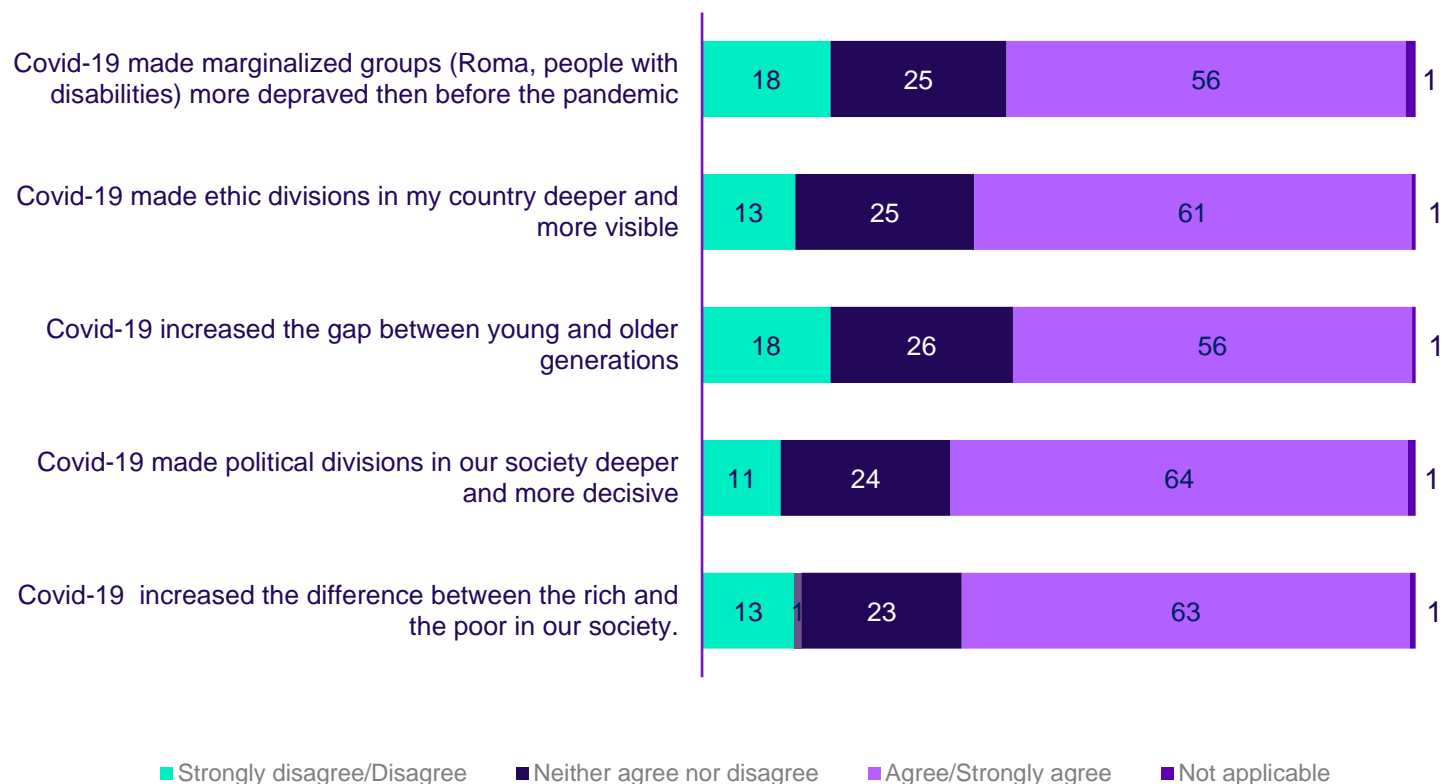
<sup>28</sup> Janjić. S, Janjić.I. (2020); [Youth in the Media Mirror 2020](#).

<sup>29</sup> 15% of surveyed youth reported they contracted the virus.

<sup>30</sup> **Economic divisions:** Southeast Serbia (58 per cent), Vojvodina (71 per cent), Belgrade (64 per cent); **political divisions:** Southeast Serbia (51 per cent), Vojvodina (68 per cent)

**Figure 9: Impact of Covid-19 on society**

Thinking of the period from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in March till present, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Unit: %



**Although they claim the solidarity has increased, they infrequently have practiced volunteering during the pandemic.** Despite a sense of increased solidarity among people (56 per cent), it appears that youth have faced difficulties in exercising it through volunteering. Only 4 per cent of the surveyed population volunteered during the Covid-19 crisis. Among the reasons for not volunteering, most of them reported a lack of interest and a lack of time. Only one in ten respondents would take a chance to volunteer in support of people impacted by Covid-19; a large majority were undecided, but one in four respondents said they would surely not do so. Our focus group participants were not surprised by this low interest in volunteering: “[Young people] were probably wary of all the risks they can bring upon themselves and others... [and] were most likely discouraged by adults, such as their parents, in this regard.” (Female, 19). As a consequence, in the words of one of them: “We should not blame the youth for not being more active, but we should encourage them to take an active role in helping people in need.” (Male, 21)

**The Covid-19 pandemic made youth in Serbia, especially those with higher education, feel more connected to the rest of the world.** Despite the significant lack of opportunities to travel abroad, as many as 56 per cent of youth feel they are more connected to the rest of the world due to global issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, 42 per cent of respondents think that Covid-19 positively influenced their opinion about foreigners, while 54 per cent want to meet more people from other countries after the crisis. It is worth noting that a higher level of education foresaw a greater sense of belonging to the rest of the world and a positive influence of the pandemic on opinions about foreigners. In regard to wanting to meet people from other countries after the pandemic, this was pronounced by the younger cohort more than the older cohort and by those from urban rather than rural settlements. These findings could signal a potential spark for positive changes in young people’s attitudes towards the world, but it is still to draw firm conclusions. It would be necessary to conduct more robust research on the pandemic’s long-term effects on youth openness towards the world in the years to come.

# TRUST IN AND PERCEPTIONS OF MEDIA COVERAGE DURING THE CRISIS

“ **Trust in media as a source of information about Covid-19 is very low among young people in Serbia, as they think media reporting on this topic was confusing, unclear, frightening and did not help them cope better with the pandemic. Friends, family, and people with lived Covid-19 experiences were trusted more as sources of information about Covid-19 than the media, scientists, politicians, and health experts.**

## Backdrop

Young people mostly get their information from either internet or TV (41 per cent)<sup>31</sup>. To keep themselves informed during the pandemic, young people mostly used web portals, social media, and TV (in this order).<sup>32</sup> As elsewhere, they were flooded with the widespread ‘infodemic’ and misinformation throughout the pandemic. Serbian media coverage was mainly sensationalist and focused on disseminating fake news and conspiracy theories, particularly at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>33</sup> As a result, 42.5 per cent of citizens subscribed to at least one conspiracy theory, with no significant impact of age on this number.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the research done during the state of emergency reported lower rates of anxiety in older

age groups than in younger age groups, probably because younger people spend more time on social media and other news outlets, since constant exposure to Covid 19 news has been associated with increased levels of distress.<sup>35</sup> With this background in mind, we reached out to young people across Serbia to learn more about their trust in media related to Covid 19, and examine the extent to which media reporting helped them cope with the crisis.

## Findings

**Friends, family, and people with lived Covid 19 experience are trusted more as a source of information than media, scientists, and health experts.** When asked to indicate the most trusted sources of information about Covid 19, young Serbs’ first and second choices are, by far, friends and family (53 per cent) and people with lived Covid-19 experience (48 per cent), while scientists and health experts are trusted a much less (17 per cent). Even lower ratings are given to traditional and online media (12 and 7 per cent respectively), politicians and the government (6 per cent), and international organizations such as the WHO (4 per cent). As much as this sounds surprising, it is consistent with previous research findings. A recent youth study reported that youth in Serbia have a great level of trust in other people, particularly in close family members and friends, and a very low level of confidence in political leaders.<sup>36</sup> This pattern of trust could also be applied in the present research study to help us understand the answers to these specific questions.

<sup>31</sup> The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), (2019); [Youth Study Serbia 2028/2019](#).

<sup>32</sup> FPN (2020); [Stavovi građana Republike Srbije o COVID-19](#).

<sup>33</sup> European Journalism Observatory (2020). [Serbia: Coronavirus and the media](#)

<sup>34</sup> BIEPAG (2020); [The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and Covid19 in the Balkans](#).

<sup>35</sup> Vujčić, I, et al. (2021). [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) Epidemic and Mental Health Status in the General Adult Population of Serbia: A Cross-Sectional Study](#). Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health.

<sup>36</sup> The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), (2019); [Youth Study Serbia 2028/2019](#).



## Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, Digitally close

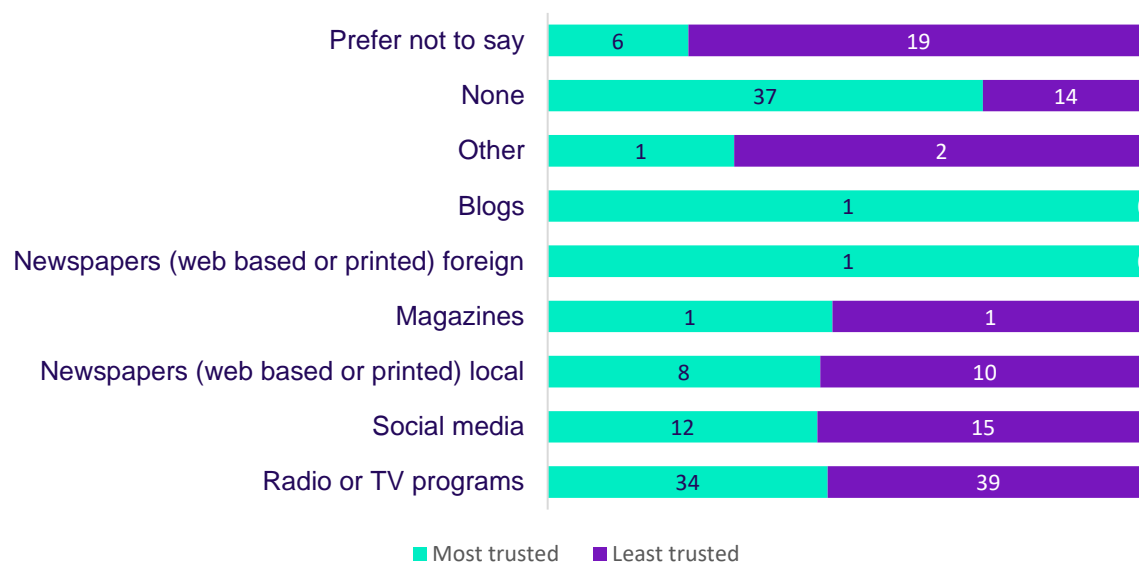
Serbia

**Media reporting on Covid-19 is untrusted among youth and did not help them cope better with the pandemic.** Trust in the media reporting on the pandemic is low: 42 per cent of young people do not trust any media, while 45 per cent trust some media and 13 per cent trust all media. The correlation between trust in the media and gender, education level, and place of residence has not been observed. However, the regional gap in media distrust is noticeable, with young people in Belgrade and Vojvodina being on the extreme ends of distrust in the media (51 vs 34 per cent). Among the media sources,

radio and TV (34 per cent), social media (12 per cent), and newspapers (online/print editions, 8 per cent) gained the greatest trust of young people (**Figure 10**). However, they are also perceived as the least trustworthy but in a slightly different order: TV (39 per cent), newspapers (15 per cent), and social media (8 per cent). It is worth noting that only social media scored positive net trust as a source of information about Covid-19. The demographic analysis shows that a greater share of younger than older cohort trusted social media (15 vs 8 per cent), while the latter trusted TV to a greater extent (38 vs 31 per cent).

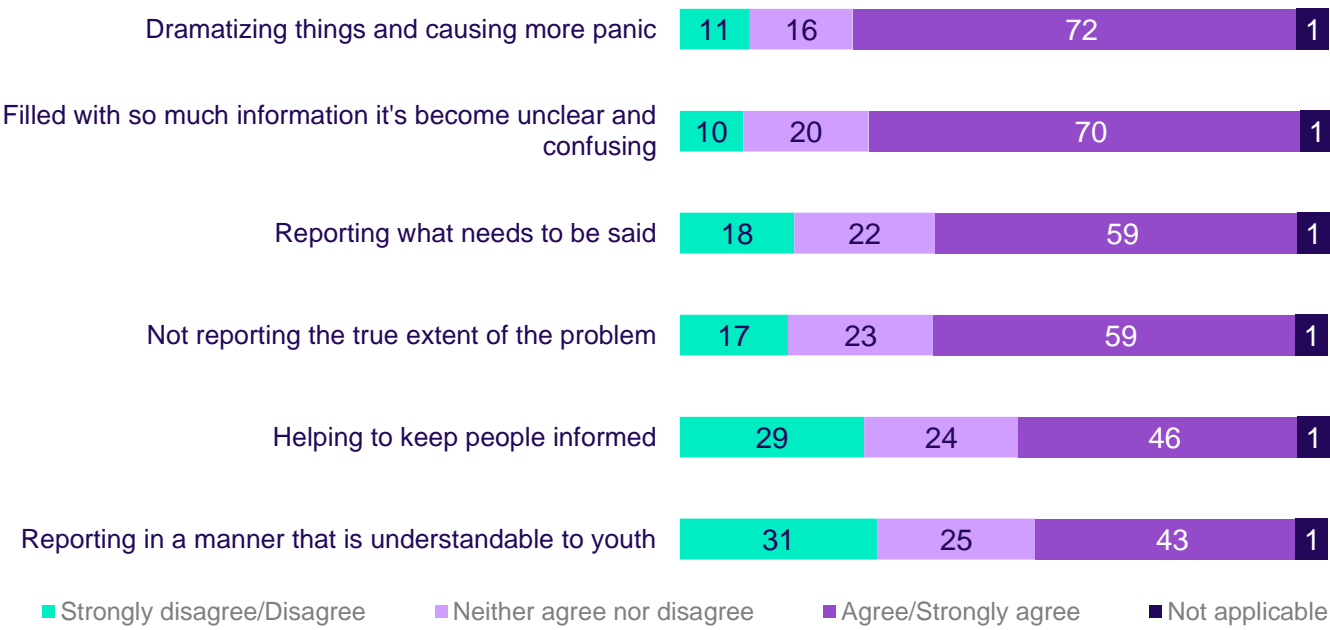
**Figure 10: Trust in media**

*What media sources do you trust the most/least to be well informed on Covid-19 matters? n=1001; Unit: %*



Against a backdrop of low trust in media, young people in Serbia strongly feel that, during the pandemic, media outlets have been filled with so much information that the message has become unclear and confusing (70 per cent). In their view, this has had the effect of making the situation seem more dramatic and causing more panic – a sentiment shared by 73 per cent of respondents. A clear majority (58 per cent) think that the media have not been reporting about the true extent of the problem, and one in three respondents think that media did not report in a manner understandable to the youth (Figure 11). In commenting on these results, our focus group participants stated that the contradictory information discussed in the media causes the situation in which “we (young people) do not know who to trust” or “...it (media) caused fear and increased anxiety.” (Male, 26) In suggesting a way forward, one participant said: “The media should understand that they are harmful to the youth. They should provide less information but ensure that those facts are truthful.” (Female, 23)

Figure 11: Assessment of media reporting  
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Unit: %



# YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

“ *While youth show more agreement than disagreement with the overall government approach to the management of the pandemic, they tend to think the government paid insufficient attention to their needs and concerns when handling the pandemic and inadequately helped them cope with the pandemic's negative impact.* ”

## Backdrop

The government response to the pandemic was very inconsistent over time, ranging from overly relaxed to highly restrictive. It started with underestimating the threat of the virus (late February) and was then swiftly replaced with the highly restrictive response focused on protecting peoples' health, implemented through the state of emergency and mandatory curfew (mid-March – beginning of May). Easing of the pandemic measures before the parliamentary election (late June) led to the infection surge in July and new restrictions. Autumn brought a new, less restrictive approach to the pandemic aiming at balancing health protection and the economy (November to December). Such inconsistency in the approach towards the pandemic has been criticized by some, and the criticism further extended to power abuse and the lack of the rule of law. The extraordinary power taken by the executive government branch at the expense of the parliament and violations of basic

freedoms and rights during the state of emergency have been documented extensively. Furthermore, there have been extensive reports of doubts about the veracity of public statistics related to the number of deaths<sup>37</sup> as well as the lack of transparency in the procurement of medical equipment. In addition, there were warnings that experts' advice was often compromised and manipulated by political elites in power<sup>38</sup> and that the measures were not evidence informed.<sup>39</sup> Against such a backdrop, we asked young people in Serbia what they think about the government approach to the pandemic and whether the government approach was youth-sensitive enough.

## Findings

**The overall government approach to the management of the pandemic has been more approved than disapproved by the youth.** More young people have supported the measures that limited the freedom of movement than opposed them (41 vs 37 per cent). A greater support towards the measures was expressed by females, older cohort (aged 25-29), and those with lower education. In terms of geography, the survey brought to the surface the regional differences in support of lockdown measures, with the highest disapproval rate recorded among youth in Vojvodina (53 per cent) and the highest approval rate recorded in Southeast Serbia (50 per cent). Most young people (66 per cent) reported that they have complied with rules and regulations such as social distancing and wearing masks, while only 11 per cent say they have not been very compliant. Young females more than males, and

<sup>37</sup> Balkan Insight (2020). [Serbia Under-Reported COVID-19 Deaths and Infections, Data Shows](#)

<sup>38</sup> EURACTIV (2020). [Group of Serbian doctors calls for dismissal of National COVID-19 Response Team](#)

<sup>39</sup> European Policy Centre (2020). [A Lack of Transparency: The Covid-19 Pandemic in Serbia](#)

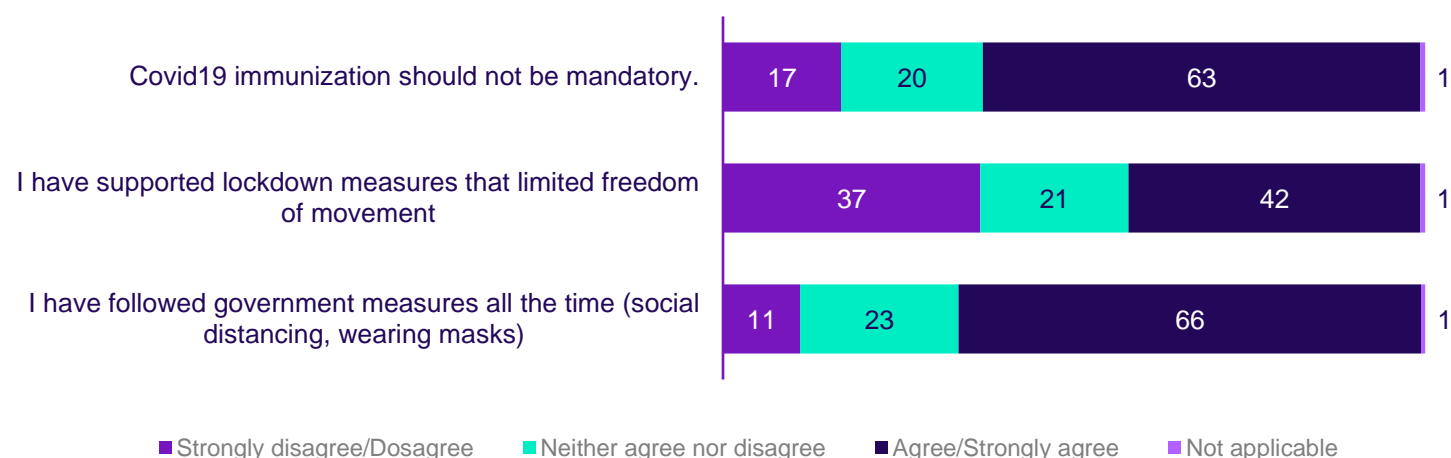
## Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, Digitally close  
Serbia

the older cohort (aged 24-29) more than the younger one was likely to comply with the measures. When it comes to mandatory immunization, there is a clear opposition to it: 63 versus 17 per cent, which is even more pronounced in urban than in rural areas (66 vs 57 per cent, **Figure 12**)

**Figure 12: Attitudes towards government's crisis response**

*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Unit: %*



Survey respondents were also asked to assess the government approach to pandemic management against the following four dimensions: government's Covid-19 related messaging, the scientific base of government decisions, the adequacy and proportionality of measures to the given circumstances, and the effectiveness of measures in stopping the spread of the virus throughout the time. 44 per cent assessed all four dimensions positively. Young females, rural youth, and the employed were most likely to positively assess the government's Covid-19-related messaging, the effectiveness of its measures, and the evidence base of its decisions. Furthermore, more employed than unemployed individuals tended to think that the government measures were adequate and proportional to the given circumstances. In terms of regional differences, the Belgrade region expressed the least approval of the government approach (ranging from 32 per cent to 37 per cent), in contrast to Central and West Serbia where the agreement with the approach was consistently over 50 per cent across all four dimensions (ranging from 50 to 54 per cent). Among ethnic minorities, it is worth emphasizing that Bosniak youth negatively assessed the effectiveness of government measures in stopping the spread of the virus (mean 2.95 on a scale from 1 to 5), which is of no surprise as the pandemic went out of control in the

region of Sandzak in July 2020 and caused a high death toll.

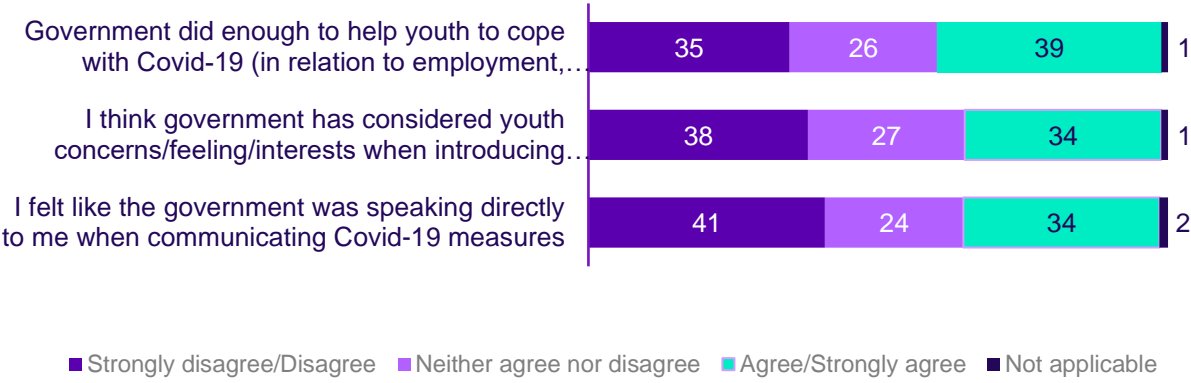
**Youth in Serbia feel overlooked by the government in its response to the pandemic, especially Bosniak youth and NEET.** The positive assessment of the overall government approach to the pandemic was not further expressed when the respondents were asked if the government approach was "youth-sensitive" enough. In contrast, a sense of neglect by the government prevailed (**Figure 13**). Young people felt like the government was not speaking directly to them when communicating Covid-19 measures (2.86 on a scale from 1 to 5); they felt like youth concerns/feeling/interests were not considered when introducing Covid-19 measures (mean 2.84); and they felt that not enough was done to help the youth cope with Covid-19 in relation to employment and learning (mean 2.97). It should be emphasized that Bosniak youth and NEET felt even more neglected by the government during the pandemic.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> I felt like the government was speaking directly to me when communicating Covid-19 measures: Bosniak (mean 2.63 on a scale from 1 to 5); NEET (mean 2.74); I think the government has considered youth concerns/feeling/interests when introducing Covid-19 measures Bosniak (mean 2.59); NEET (mean 2.79); The

government did enough to help youth to cope with Covid-19 (in relation to employment, learning, etc). Bosniak (mean 2.62); NEET (mean 2.8)



Figure 13: Government measures and youth  
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Unit: %



# FUTURE OUTLOOK: HOPES, CONCERNS, AND ASPIRATIONS

“**Young people tend to negatively assess the impact of the pandemic on their own long-term future. They expect more negative effects of the pandemic on their income, their entry into the labor market, and their career prospects over the next three years. To deal with these difficulties, they want a fairer society with equal opportunities for employment at its core. When asked which measures would benefit youth the most in dealing with the negative impacts of the pandemic, young people in Serbia prioritize decreasing corruption in the employment process over subsidized employment, financial assistance to young people in need, improved access to and quality of mental health services, and improved access to finance for business start-ups.**

Young people are not very optimistic about their own post-Covid future in the long term. A great share of youth expressed the hope that the pandemic could give us a moment to change the way things work for the better in Serbia (64 per cent). However, when asked how they see the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their own future, it seems that this hope has vanished. A much higher percentage of youth sees it as negative (45 per cent) rather than neutral (37 per cent) and positive (9 per cent). The unemployed, NEET and Roma are markedly more negative about their future in the post-Covid world (54 per cent). Furthermore, compared with their peers in

urban areas, youth in rural areas are more negative about their future (50 vs 42 per cent respectively). The level of optimism appears to drop dramatically compared to the pre-pandemic level, when 78 per cent of young people were convinced that their lives would be better in the next ten years.<sup>41</sup> Some of our focus group participants went even further by saying: “*The cramped life we are already in...Full of discomfort ...It (pandemic) will not shape the future, it will only stop it.*” (Female, 23)

**Youth anticipate a relatively bleak impact of the pandemic on their near future, which could further hamper their transition to adulthood.** Over the next three years, they anticipate a more negative impact of the pandemic on income (43 per cent), entering the labor market (41 per cent), their career prospects (40 per cent), and travel abroad (57 per cent). A less negative impact is anticipated in the area of health, including mental health (31 per cent), family planning (27 per cent), and housing plans (27 per cent). Young people are more positive than negative when it comes to the pandemic impact on their future knowledge and skills (32 per cent) and their relationship with others (34 per cent). The unemployed, NEET, and Roma seem to have less hope that their economic position will improve over the next three years. They are more negative about the pandemic impact on their career prospects, entering the labor market, and income.<sup>42</sup> In addition, Roma and youth with disabilities perceive a negative impact on their health, including mental health (54 per cent and 45 per cent respectively) more than the main sample (**Figure 14**).

<sup>41</sup> The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), (2019). [Youth Study Serbia 2028/2019](#).

<sup>42</sup> **Career prospects** (unemployed 54 per cent, Roma 55 per cent, NEET 63 per cent); **entering the labor market** (unemployed 48 per

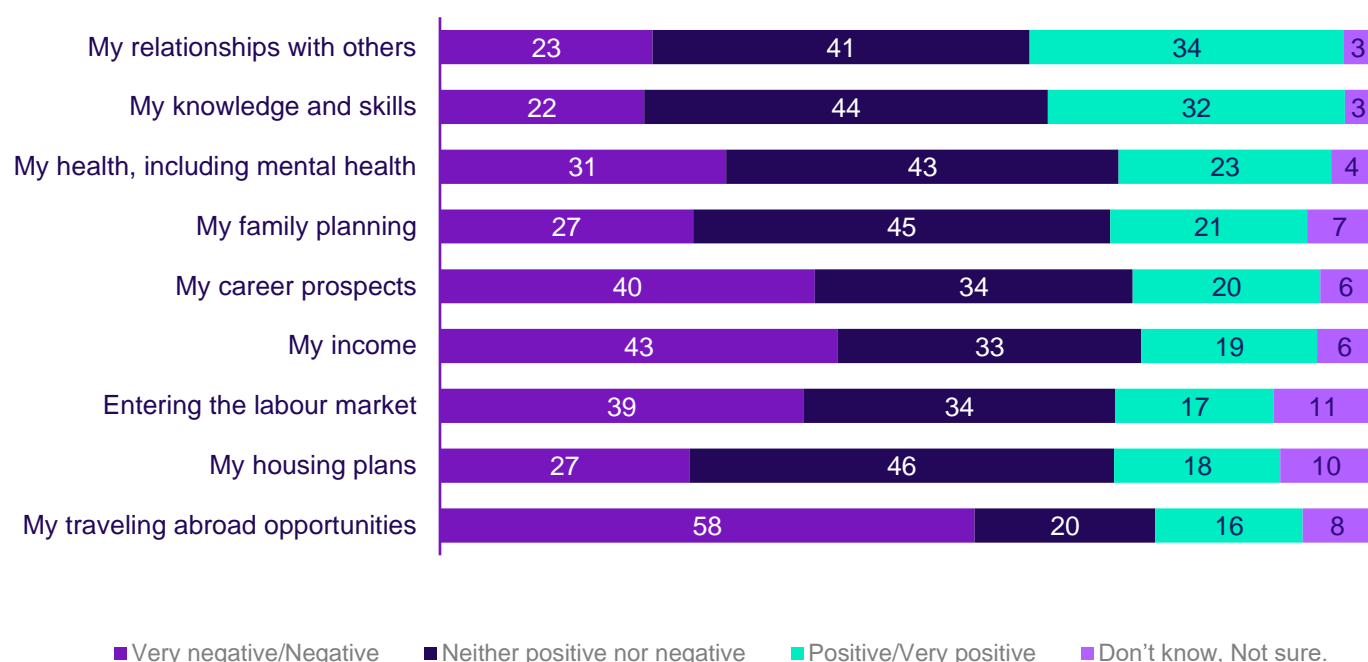
cent, Roma 57 per cent, NEET 61 per cent); **income** (unemployed 61 per cent, Roma 64 per cent, NEET 65 per cent).

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**Figure 14: Impact of Covid-19 over the next three years**

*When you think about impact of Covid 19 pandemic on your future over the next 3 years, what are your expectations of pandemic impact on your..? Unit: %*



**A large share of youth in Serbia want to leave the country for study or work once the pandemic is over.** One in four young people (26 per cent) want to study abroad, and almost one in two (42 per cent) wish to leave the country and work abroad as soon as the pandemic is over. Those aged 18-24, male, unemployed, and those living in urban areas were more likely to wish to leave the country for employment reasons. Among the vulnerable groups, Roma (50 per cent) and NEET (51 per cent) are very keen on working abroad. On the other hand, those with more stable employment did not express as much desire to work somewhere outside. Marital status turned out to be a factor in intention to emigrate, since married people want to leave the country far less than the unmarried ones.

When asked if the Covid 19 pandemic and the government's response to it made them even more eager to leave the country and live somewhere else, young people were polarized: 34 per cent of them both agreed and disagreed with the statement, while the rest were neutral. The wish to leave the country is not equally present among the youth in all parts of Serbia. Young people in the Belgrade region outnumbered other regions in their wish to emigrate for employment reasons, with nearly a half of them wishing to work abroad (49 per cent). Moreover, the pandemic and the government response to it made

them even more eager to emigrate (44 per cent). This feeling was not shared with youth in other parts of Serbia: roughly 40 per cent of them (ranging from 38 to 41 per cent) want to leave the country, while on average one in three wish it more due to the pandemic and the government response to it (ranging from 29 to 32 percent).

**Youth in Serbia expect a significant change in their future behaviour/practices as a result of the pandemic.** The future appears to be digital for most young people. The majority of them think they will use more digital services (64 per cent), online learning (46 per cent), and interact more with people online (54 per cent) than before the Covid 19 pandemic (**Figure 15**). In the opinion of 39 per cent of them, this could increase their alienation from other people. Those from the younger cohort (18-24) are on the frontline of the "digital future", since they showed more prospect than the older cohort to increase the usage of digital services (67 vs 61 per cent), online learning (53 vs 38 per cent), and online socialization (59 vs 52 per cent). Furthermore, young people expect less travel abroad (52 per cent) and more domestic travel (49 per cent). More home-based working in the future is anticipated by 39 per cent of respondents. Finally, two in three young people said they would be more responsible for their actions in the future because of the pandemic, which is a source of hope in the years to come.

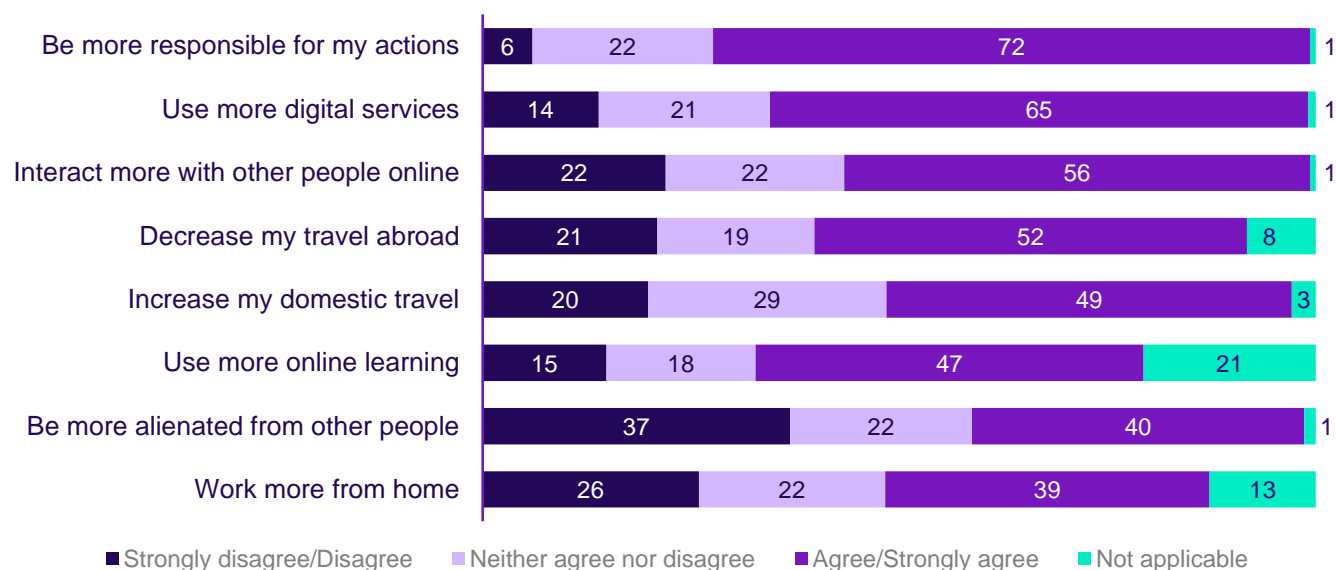


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**Figure 15: Impact of Covid-19 on future behaviours/practices**

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Covid 19 impact on your future behaviours/practices compared to period before Covid-19? In the future, due to the pandemic I will... Unit: %



**Fighting unemployment, particularly in the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic, should be the priority of government spending in the post-pandemic period.** Young people strongly feel (60 per cent) that fighting unemployment particularly in the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic should be central to government spending priorities. This is followed by improving healthcare services (59 per cent), increasing social benefits for those who were hit hard by the pandemic (54 per cent), improving the quality of education (44 per cent), and environmental protection to fight climate change (40 per cent). Bosniaks and NEET (71 per cent) would like to see investments in fighting unemployment caused by the pandemic more than the main sample, while Roma and people with disabilities are more interested in improving the quality of health services (70 and 71 per cent respectively). The younger cohort outnumbered the older one in prioritizing the improved quality of education on the government spending agenda.

**Less corruption in the employment process would benefit youth the most in facing the negative impact of the pandemic.** When asked which measures would benefit youth the most in dealing with the negative impacts of Covid 19, most young people (60 per cent) indicate less corruption in the employment process (**Figure 16**). It is followed by increased subsidies for companies giving youth a chance to enter the labor market (53 per cent), improved financial assistance to young people in need (50 per cent), improved access to and quality of

mental health services (42 per cent), and improved access to finance for business start-ups. These results confirm the findings of other studies that evidenced the widespread perception among youth that getting a job in Serbia is a very corrupt process, and furthermore, it is well socially established. Research done during the pandemic showed that "social connections" were the most efficient way of getting a job<sup>43</sup>. Another study done on young people in Serbia (aged 15-29) reported that for around three-quarters of them, using connections to find a job is justified at least sometimes; respondents also said that connections with people in power are significant or very significant in getting employment.<sup>44</sup>

The vulnerable segments of the youth population diverge from the main sample in terms of government youth assistance priority measures. The NEET and Bosniak minority outvoiced the main sample in the call for less corruption in the employment process (66 and 62 per cent respectively). Similarly to Roma, they would like to see improved financial assistance to young people in need; this was expressed more by these sub-groups than by the main sample.<sup>45</sup> However, they showed less interest in the improved provision of skills for employability (IT, language, and entrepreneurship skills) and access to finance for business start-ups.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, among the three subgroups, only NEET prioritized increased subsidies for companies giving youth a chance to enter the labor market more than the main sample (62 vs 53 per cent).

<sup>43</sup> Women Support Center and SeConS (2020): [Uticaj pandemije korona virusa na populaciju mladih u Srbiji](#).

<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), (2019). [Youth Study Serbia 2018/2019](#).

<sup>45</sup> Bosniak: 58 per cent, Roma: 59 per cent, NEET: 59 per cent, the sample average: 50 per cent.

<sup>46</sup> **Skills for employability:** Bosniak: 26 per cent, Roma: 20 per cent, NEET: 24 per cent, the main sample: 38 per cent; **Access to finance for business start-up:** Bosniak: 36 per cent, Roma: 30 per cent, NEET: 32 per cent, the main sample: 41 per cent.

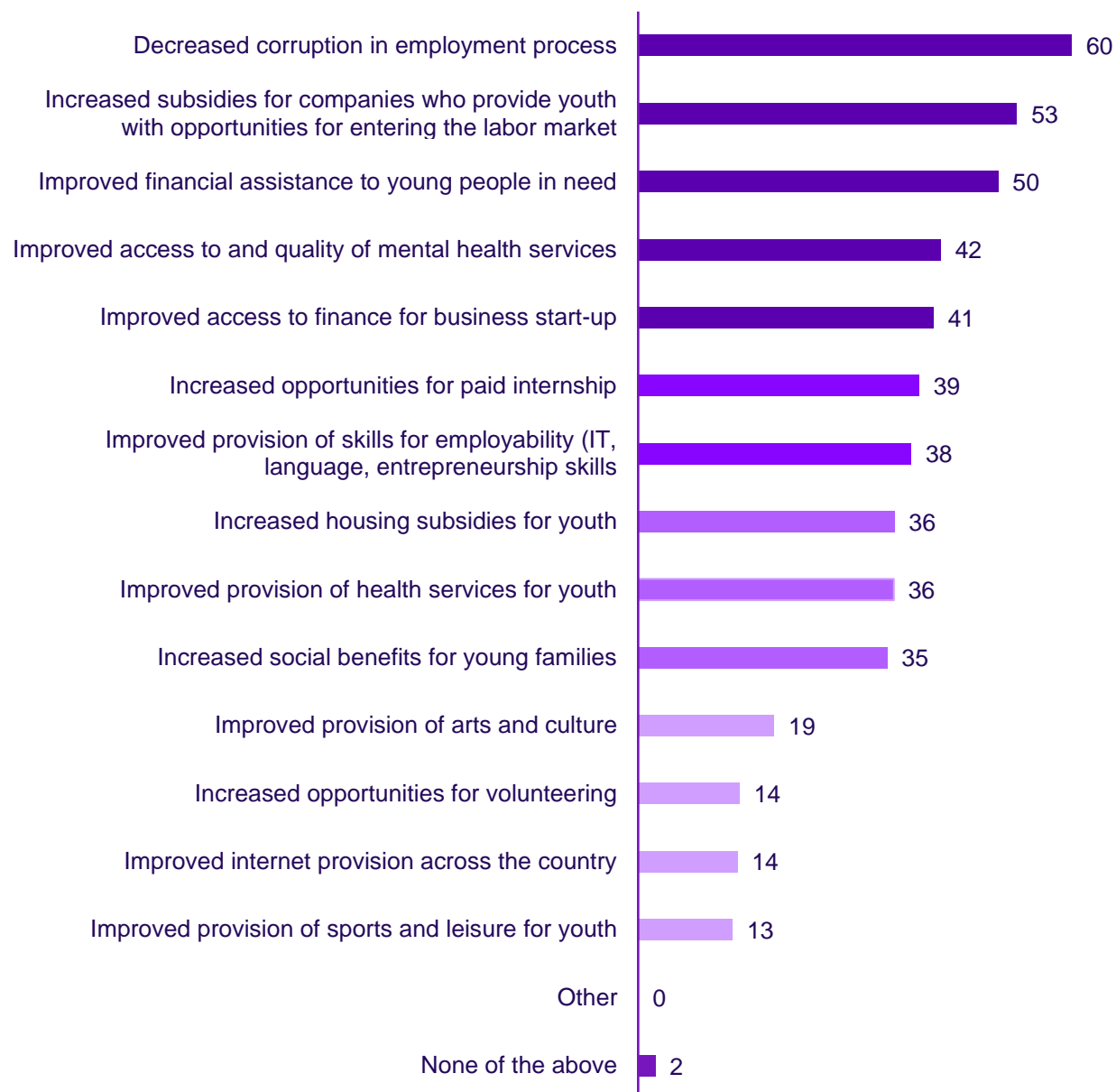
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**Figure 16: Youth-specific measures**

Which of the following measures would benefit youth the most in dealing with negative impacts of Covid 19? Please select top 5 priorities. Unit: %



# GREEN MATTERS

58%

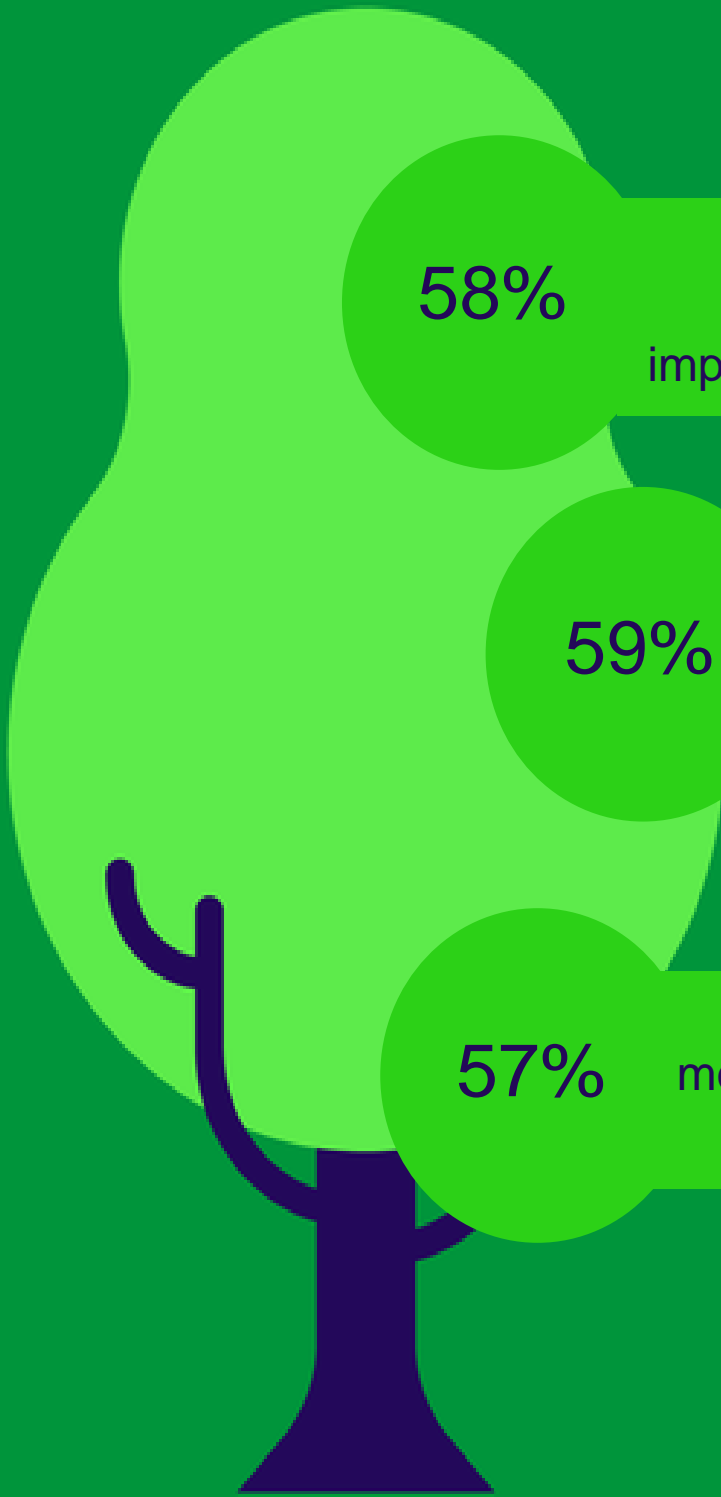
think that the Covid-19 outbreak  
has had a substantial positive  
impact on many aspects of the environment

59%

state that the Covid-19 outbreak  
increased their awareness  
about the importance of ecology

57%

started to act  
more responsible towards the environment  
during the Covid-19 pandemic





The background is a solid dark purple. In the top left corner, there is a small, solid light purple circle. A thick, light purple curved line starts from the top left and extends towards the center. On the left side, there are several overlapping circles and shapes in various shades of purple, from light to dark. A prominent light purple circle is partially visible on the left. Overlaid on these shapes are several white lines: a straight line, a curved line, and a more complex, looping white line that crosses itself. The text is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the image.

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