COVID - 19
Between Reality and Disinformation
Mitrovica 2020
Between the 13th and the 20th of July 2020, NGO Aktiv carried out public opinion research in Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo. The goal of the research was to gauge views held by Serbs and members of other non-majority communities on the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they see the effectiveness of the government’s response (both local and central.) The research also sought to determine the level of trust held in various state institutions and media outlets and to analyze how respondents receive and interpret information regarding the pandemic.

In total, seven hundred (700) respondents participated in the survey, of whom 51% are resident in the north of Kosovo and 49% in regions situated south of the river Ibar.
COVID-19 was first reported in Kosovo on the 13th of March 2020. The government acted swiftly by enacting a series of measures that were designed to stop the spread of the virus. Despite what many considered to be an effective and responsible effort to tackle the pandemic, the Kosovo Government’s communication with non-majority communities was often ineffective, creating an environment in which local residents faced an informational vacuum, one that was often filled with rumour and speculation. This in turn fostered an atmosphere of confusion where communities received conflicting information concerning government measures (such as lockdown order and curfew) as well to the nature and scale of the virus’s spread.
In response to this situation, Aktiv created the Rapid Response Civic Group, comprised of twenty-two (22) field coordinators who monitor the situation in twenty (20) municipalities throughout Kosovo and report problems as they arise. As previously mentioned, an issue that emerged consistently was that of a lack of reliable and dependable information coming from public institutions who are at the ‘front lines’ of the battle against the pandemic. In order to achieve a more in-depth understanding of the nature and scale of this problem, Aktiv conducted public opinion (quantitative) research that would serve to shed more light on public perceptions of COVID-19 and the level and scope of disinformation. Additional motivation for this research stems from the knowledge of the nature of the forms of misinformation regarding COVID-19 that currently circulates on various social media platforms, which can range from conspiracy theories (i.e. the idea that 5G networks spread the virus) to the idea that the danger is poses is fabricated. The results received appear to confirm the hypothesis that disinformation is pervasive and has indeed had a significant impact on individual perceptions regarding the danger posed by COVID-19 and the necessity of various measures enacted by local and central governing institutions.
There is no widespread consensus as to how dangerous COVID-19 is. About 44% of all respondents said that they believe that COVID-19 is a life-threatening illness, while 20.60% said that they do not believe it to be so, 26% were unsure and around 9% said that they do not think that the virus exists at all;

Overall trust in the reliability of information is low, but the World Health Organisation (WHO) is the most trusted source of information when it comes to the pandemic. Respondents were asked the extent to which they trusted information coming from various sources/institutions on a scale from 1 to 5 (with one being ‘not at all’ and five being ‘completely.’) The WHO received the highest average score (2.77/5) and the Government of Kosovo the lowest (2.2/5.) The Government of Serbia had an average score of 2.57 and was trailed by local governments/municipalities with an average score of 2.45. None of the bodies named received an average higher than 3, indicating a very high level of scepticism towards official information.
Residents DO NOT believe the information that they receive from institutions regarding the death toll. In total 79% of respondents responded ‘no’ when asked if they think that the information coming from relevant institutions regarding the number of deaths from COVID-19 is reliable while only 21% percent said that they did.

In your opinion, is the information on the number of deaths from the coronavirus provided by the competent institutions accurate?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University/graduate studies</td>
<td>18,10%</td>
<td>81,90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>17,90%</td>
<td>82,10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>22,70%</td>
<td>77,30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>33,30%</td>
<td>66,70%</td>
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Scepticism is most widespread among those with higher education/university diplomas. In total 82% of respondents with university degrees said that they don’t believe information regarding the death toll.
Satisfaction with the media’s reporting on the pandemic is fairly low but respondents expressed the highest level of satisfaction with local media outlets, independent media in Belgrade (with national reach), online portals in the Serbian language and social media. Respondents were asked to rate the reporting of various media on a scale between 1 and 5 (with 1 being ‘very bad’ and 5 being ‘excellent.’) The above-mentioned media received an average score of just below three (3.) The lowest average scores (at just above 2) were received by local and national Albanian-language media outlets and ‘Serbian language online portals in Kosovo.’
Adherence to current measures recommended by the government to combat the pandemic is mixed with 54% of respondents saying that they ‘partially’ follow the measures/recommendations, 30.7% saying that they ‘completely’ adhere to them and 15.3% saying that they do not adhere to them at all.

Interestingly, those with university-level education are LESS likely to adhere to the measures than are those with a primary or secondary school education: only 26.40% of respondents with a university degree said that they ‘completely’ follow the measures while a much larger 41% of respondents with a primary-school education said the same.

Do you adhere to the current measures prescribed by the competent institutions, which are related to stopping the spread of the coronavirus?

- Yes, fully
- Partially
- I don’t adhere at all

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Yes, fully</th>
<th>Partially</th>
<th>I don’t adhere at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University/graduate studies</td>
<td>26.40%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>9.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>31.10%</td>
<td>48.10%</td>
<td>20.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>32.60%</td>
<td>48.70%</td>
<td>18.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>48.70%</td>
<td>10.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yes, fully | Partially | I don’t adhere at all

54,00% | 30,70% | 15,30%
As opposed to current efforts, a large majority of respondents adhered to the measures enacted from March-May of 2020. A total of 58.6% of respondents said that they 'completely' adhered to them, 32.30% said they 'partially' adhered to them and only 9.10% ignored them.

A tepid response to a potential vaccine. Only about 30% of respondents indicated a willingness to receive the vaccine (if/when it becomes available), compared to 54% of respondents who expressed reservations (34% said that they definitely would not, and 20% said that they probably wouldn’t but were unsure.) About 15% stated that they were not sure either way.
Suspicions abound regarding 5G networks. Only 38% of respondents said that they do not believe that there is a connection between the COVID-19 pandemic and 5G technology, while 24% said that they believe there’s a connection and 37% weren’t sure.

In your opinion, does the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic have anything to do with the 5G network?

- Yes: 38.1%
- No: 24.4%
- I don't know/I'm not sure: 37.4%
As previously mentioned, the informational vacuum created at least in part by institutions’ failure to communicate effectively with non-majority communities has created wide space for the spread of conspiracy theories and other forms of ‘fake news.’ In the current environment, this presents itself as a potential public health disaster. The fact that less than half of respondents would be willing to vaccinate themselves, that they have low trust in the media, and that a significant minority appears to believe that 5G networks spread the virus are symptomatic of wider institutional failings to inform the general public of the dangers of the virus using scientifically-grounded facts. Also worrying is that respondents seem to have a relatively high level of trust in information they receive via social media networks where there is little-to-no oversight in terms of quality control and/or fact checking. A result of this is a generalised lack of regard for government recommendations (i.e. mask wearing) and widespread scepticism towards official data and information.

Since quarantine and lockdown measures were relaxed in June of this year, COVID-19 has seen a resurgence, with case numbers vastly outnumbering those seen between March and May. The fact that only 30.7% of respondents claim to abide by measures recommended by public health authorities is alarming and reflective of an attitude of ambivalence among local communities that must be actively countered by institutions, civil society and the media. Should this not happen, the virus could continue to spread unabated, resulting in grave consequences for the population at large.

CONCLUSIONS
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A tri-lingual Android/IOS application that would contain verified and official information connected to COVID-19. This application would be updated regularly in accordance with the fluctuating situation. This should offer information regarding where to seek help in suspected cases, new safety measures, information on border crossings, as well as entry and exit procedures (for those planning on returning or leaving Kosovo.)

2. For public institutions to, as soon as is feasible, organize a comprehensive and continuous public information campaign through traditional and social media that will be developed based on common misconceptions about the COVID-19 virus. This campaign should directly address unverified rumours, and work to encourage citizens to respect and follow measures recommended by public health authorities. This group should include representatives of healthcare institutions operating in Kosovo Serb communities;

3. For civil-society organizations, media outlets and public institutions to form a joint working group that will monitor social media platforms and identify disinformation as it arises. This group would work in consort with institutions in order to develop an effective public information campaign. The working group should also include representatives of healthcare and other institutions working in Kosovo-Serb majority areas. This should be launched by the Government of Kosovo with an open call for participation;
For the Government of Kosovo to immediately step up its efforts to communicate with the Kosovo-Serb community, by providing swift translations of official instructions, press releases, and other public documents. Furthermore, it should work to liaise more closely and effectively with Serb-language media outlets in order to equalize access to information;

For all healthcare institutions in Kosovo (including those operating in Serb-majority communities) to work together to exchange information on the current health situation and to report rises or falls in the number of new cases. This should be facilitated by a semi-institutionalised mechanism led by the Ministry of Health that would facilitate information exchanges on a regular basis.

For public institutions operating in Kosovo-Serb community under the legal framework of the Republic of Serbia to improve the level of transparency at which they operate and to engage more closely and frequently with media in order to ensure that the public is fully and objectively informed of developments related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This should be officialised in the form of daily communication and information exchanges.
Rapid Response Civic Group

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