

The Attitudes of Serbian Public Toward the Army and Defence

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Introductory remarks

On the basis of a project and questionnaire developed by the Centre for Civil-Military Relations, a Belgrade NGO, the Centre for Politicological Research and Public Opinion of the Belgrade Institute of Social Sciences, in the period from March 3 until 10, 2001, conducted a survey using its standard representative sample of 1680 Serbian citizens. The survey was carried out in 105 local communities on the territory of Serbia excluding Kosovo and Metohija, picked at random.

The Institute used a stratified three-tier quota sample. On level one, the proportions of the region were defined. For instance, the sub-sample for Vojvodina included the regions of Bačka, Banat and Srem. On level two, municipalities were picked at random, and the probability of their choice depended on the size of their population. Level three was used to select local communities applying the same principle but this time on the municipalities concerned, again on the basis of cumulative frequencies. The quota criteria included the stratum (urban and other settlements), sex, age and education of respondents, based on the 1991 census, as corrected by demographic projections.

The sample is fairly representative of the adult population of Serbia with respect to sex (50% male and female each), age groups (21% under the age of 30, 19% between 30 and 39, 18% between 40 and 49, 17% between 50 and 59 and 25% over 60), shares of urban population (57%) and nationalities (Serbs 81%, Hungarians 7%, Yugoslavs 3%, Muslims 2%, Roma 2%, Croats 1%, Montenegrins 1% and 4% others), education (41% with or without elementary school, 45% with worker qualifications or 4-year secondary schools and 14% of higher-school and university graduates).

The possible error with the kind of sample used in this survey is up to 3% for dichotomous variables.

The questionnaire, among other things, included questions related to the security and defence of the country, the role of the army in the political system, Yugoslav Army (YA) organisation and its approach to defence integrations in the region and Europe, human rights in the YA and a number of others. Views on issues related to the internal life of the YA and the respect for human rights in the service were provided by a sub-sample of respondents who served their term in the army or were commanding officers in it. The sub-sample comprised 698 respondents, which is quite sufficient to draw reliable conclusions.

The survey findings also allow us to draw conclusions on certain matters of the defence and the army the public had no previous opportunity to judge for a number of reasons including e.g. the extraordinary circumstances prevailing in the country over the past ten years and the special position the army has traditionally enjoyed in this society. The recent about turn requires appropriate changes in this respect, in order to enable the public to state its views on as large as possible number of questions related to the security and defence as well as on the army which is supposed to provide that.

1. Whether to change our defence policy

After all negative experiences from the confrontation with the whole world and failed attempts to solve contemporary political and Serbian national problems by military force, it is well justified to ask the citizens of Serbia whether anything should be changed in our policy of defence.

Table 1

After the electoral victory of the DOS, the position of the FRY in Europe and in the world has substantially changed.

Do you think that in accordance with that our defence policy should be changed or not?

	Number	Percent
1. Yes	856	51,4
2. No	355	21,3
3. Does not know	455	27,3
Total	1666	100,0

As the Table 1 shows, the absolute majority (51,4%) of the Serbian public opinion deems that the policy of defence of the country should be changed. The result demonstrates the willingness of the majority of the public in Serbia to give support to the reforms in the area of defense.

The age of the respondents has exerted regular and noticeable influence on their responses. The older the respondents the more prone they are to support the status quo in this respect. While 58,1% of the respondents younger than 30 deem that the defence policy should be changed, the corresponding percent of the older than 60 is 38,9%.

2. In which direction to change the policy of defense

By the next question the respondents were asked in which direction to undertake the necessary changes. The respondents were offered the most probable options and had to decide among them.

Table 2

Which of the following best expresses your opinion about the need for the changes of our defence policy?

	Number	Percent
1. It is necessary to strengthen military-political alliance with Russia and rely on its aid in defence of the FRY	47	5,5
2. It is necessary to integrate gradually into broader European defence integrations, and first of all into Partnership for Peace	643	74,9
3. It is necessary to prepare for joining NATO	106	12,4
4. Something else	8	0,9
5. Does not know	54	6,3
Total	858	100,0

Substantial majority of the respondents (74,9%) who assessed that the changes in the defence policy should be undertaken considers that they should take direction toward a gradual inclusion into European defensive integrations, and first of all into PfP. The percentage (12,4%) of those who consider it necessary to prepare for joining NATO is not negligible. Other options attracted much fewer respondents. It is interesting that very few respondents chose the option of strengthening the alliance with Russia – traditional friend and ally of the Serb people. It would not be advisable to draw conclusions on the basis of one public opinion poll, but probably some members of the public became disillusioned by the Russian inability to prevent the NATO intervention in 1999.

The age of the respondents shows influence on their answers – somewhat lesser than with the previous question. While 3,8% of the youngest respondents plead for strengthening alliance with Russia, corresponding percentage for the oldest amounts to 12,9%. In favor of European integrations and PfP membership 76,0% of the youngest opt, and 63,2% of the oldest respondents. That response is the most frequently chosen by the respondents in the age of 40 to 49 years (85,7%). The option preparation for the NATO membership is the most frequently chosen by the respondents of the age up to 29 (14,9%) and from 30 to 39 years (16,0%).

In another poll of the public opinion in Serbia, on the same sample, carried out at the beginning of June 2001, the citizens were asked a similar question. Due to somewhat different wording of the question the answers slightly varied, but ‘Eurocentric’ orientation prevailed.

Table 2a

What is your attitude toward future policy of defence of the FRY?	Percent
1. Keep independent position like until now and rely primarily on own forces	20
2. Strengthen alliance with Russia and rely on its aid in the field of defence	5
3. Start joining European defence alliances (PfP, NATO)	43
4. Disarmament and neutrality of the country	10
5. Does not know, can not appraise, no answer	22

Among the alternative offered options relating to the planning of the defence policy of the country pleading for accession to European defensive alliances – PfP and even NATO (43%) prevailed. The difference with the previous question was obviously caused by the fact that NATO was included together with PfP.

One fifth of the citizens were not able to choose some of the options. All in all, it could be said that the nation is divided in this respect. In relation to the answers obtained on a similar question posed in the autumn 2000, there are small but indicative differences. Though the attitude toward the inclusion into European alliances was the same, the percentage of those who opted for independence was a little higher (25%), and also the percentage of those who opted for the alliance with Russia (8%)¹.

The common denominator for both polls is that, in spite of the years long anti-western propaganda and the NATO armed intervention in 1999, the majority of citizens consider that the solution of the problems of the state's defence should be sought in a kind of European security integration.

3. How to develop the Army of Yugoslavia

In connection with the need for further transformation of the Army of Yugoslavia, the respondents were asked to assess that question.

Table 3

Having in mind new political conditions in our country, in the region and in Europe, how should, to your opinion, the Army of Yugoslavia (AY) be developed further?	Number	Percent
1. Keep the Army on the present level of strength and size, and modernize it in accordance with the possibilities of the society	497	29,8
2. Downsize the Army and modernize it in accordance with the possibilities of the society	950	57,0
3. Create separate republican armies under a joint command	24	1,4
4. Abolish the AY because the need for it has ceased	27	1,6
5. Something else	18	1,1
6. Does not know	152	9,1
Total	1668	100,0

The public of Serbia is aware of all limitations with which the country is faced and has a realistic view on the prospects of the army and defence. The absolute majority of the respondents (57,0%) opt for reduction in size of the army and its modernization in accordance with the economic possibilities of the society. The percentage of the respondents who would like to have a strong and sizeable army is not negligible – 29,8 %, which is fully in line with Serbian traditions and stereotypes.

The influence of the age of respondents on their answers

Table 3a

Having in mind new political conditions in our country, in the region and in Europe, how should, to your opinion, the Army of Yugoslavia (AY) be	18-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	50-59 years	60 and more	Average

developed further?

1. Keep the Army on the present level of strength and size, and modernize it in accordance with the possibilities of the society	24.4	22.9	27.3	33.3	38.9	29.7
2. Downsize the Army and modernize it in accordance with the possibilities of the society	62.5	64.9	64.0	59.4	42.5	57.1
3. Create separate republican armies under a joint command	2.0	1.6	2.4	1.4	0.2	1.4
4. Abolish the AY because the need for it has ceased	3.6	1.6	0.7	0.4	1.4	1.6
5. Something else	1.1	1.9	0.7	0.7	1.0	1.1
6. Does not know	6.4	7.2	5.1	8.7	15.9	9.1

The age of the respondents exerts regular and noticeable influence on their answers (Table 3a) That the army should be kept in its present strength and size think 24,4% of the youngest respondents (18-29 years), and 38,9% of the oldest respondents (over 60). And the other way round, that the army should be downsized and modernized think 62,5% of the youngest, and only 42,5 % of the oldest respondents. The differences are logical and can be easily explained, therefore the opinions of the younger generations should be born in mind in determining the future development of the Yugoslav system of defence.

4. Whether to reduce the length of compulsory military service

At the time of the poll there had been a lot of discussion in the public about the possibility of reduction of the length of compulsory military service. That is why the following question was asked.

Table 4

Should the length of compulsory military service in the FRY, to your opinion, be immediately reduced?	Number	Percent
1. Yes	1013	61,7
2. No	414	25,2
3. Does not know	216	13,1
Total	1643	100,0

As it could be expected, the majority of the respondents (61,7%) pleaded for reduction of the length of compulsory military service. The age of the respondents exerted influence on results: for reduction of the length of military service voted 71,3% of the youngest, and 52,5 % of the oldest respondents, with a noticeable trend of decline of the percentage from the younger toward the older.

It is worth noting here that the establishment reacted positively to the initiatives of the NGO and to the attitudes of the broader public and cut down the duration of the compulsory military service from 12 to 9 months. The decision, taken in the form of a law, or better to say a Parliament's amendment to the to the existing law, came into force at the end of 2001.

5. Opinions about professional army

In most European states the conscription is being abandoned and professional paid armies are being introduced instead. Whether the Serbian public considers that the conditions have ripened for that change?

Table 5

Some European states abolish compulsory military service and introduce professional (paid) armies. What of the following would you suggest for Yugoslavia to do in that respect?	Number	Percent
1. Keep compulsory military service, because it is our tradition	342	20,5
2. Keep general compulsory military service, and only for some specialties engage professional (paid) soldiers after they complete their military service	709	42,5
3. Abolish general compulsory military service and introduce completely professional (paid) army	466	27,9
4. Something else	10	0,6
5. Does not know	142	8,5
Total	1669	100,0

In relation to the professional army Serbian public opinion takes a realistic standing. The majority of respondents (42,5%) consider that the military obligation should be kept, and engage professional soldiers only for some specialist duties. It is indicative that more than one quarter (27,9%) of the respondents opts for complete abolishment of compulsory military service.

The age of respondents has exerted considerable influence on their answers to this question: while only 9,2% of the youngest respondents support keeping general military obligation, for the same answer opt 33,9% of the respondents older than 60 years. A similar trend, of course in an opposite direction, has come out in the answers to the question number 2 (48,0% of the youngest and 36,5% of oldest respondents). The answer to the question number 3 (abolishment of compulsory military service): the percent of those who support abolishment of compulsory military service goes down from 36,6% among the youngest to 13,9% among the oldest respondents.

It is clear that the young generation in considerably greater percentage than the older

respondents support abolishment of compulsory military service. There is no doubt that the trend of abolishment of compulsory military service and introduction of professional armies prevailing in Europe will gain more and more support in the Serbian public opinion in the future. Politicians and decision makers will have to take into account this fact when shaping further development of the army.

6. Is the FRY capable of sustaining a professional army

Of course, the previous question would have no sense unless the country had sufficient economic resources to sustain and support a professional army. The following question examines public opinion on that subject.

Table 6

What do you think, whether now or in the near future the citizens and the economy of the FRY could economically sustain a professional army?	Number	Percent
1. Yes	382	23,0
2. No	826	49,8
3 Does not know	452	27,2
Total	1660	100,0

Realistically assessing the existing economic capacities of the society, the majority of the respondents (49,8%) opted for the answer that in the near future the citizens and the economy of the country would not be able to sustain a professional army.

The age of the respondents did not exert greater influence on their answers. There is a moderate tendency that the younger respondents in somewhat greater percent (26,9%) consider that the citizens and the economy can sustain a professional army than the older ones (17,4%). Probably the younger respondents in answering to this question to some extent projected their wishes for reduction or abolishment of the compulsory military service.

7. The greatest security threats to the FRY

In order to have any opinion on further transformation of the Army of Yugoslavia it is necessary to have at least rough idea about international position of the country that is about the security threats that could endanger it. That issue was examined by the following question.

Table 7

Which are today, to your opinion, the greatest dangers to the security of the FRY?	Number	Percent
1. World war	141	9,0
2. Larger dimensions European war	175	11,7
3. Possibility of a renewed armed aggression of NATO	402	26,6
4. Armed conflict with some of the neighbouring states	121	8,3
5. Conflicts with the ruling establishment in Montenegro	319	22,2
6. Unresolved problem of Kosovo	1305	84,0
7. Occurrence and activity of the so called OVK (UCK) in Southern Serbia	1097	73,7
8. Possible conflicts and instability in the nationally mixed areas	456	33,4
9. International crime (smuggling of people, drugs, capital)	335	24,5
10. Something else	19	1,9
11. No answer	81	5,2
Total	4451	300,5

As the Table 7 shows, the public of Serbia sees the main threats to the security of the country in the internal political problems and uncertainties. According to the opinion of the respondents the problem number 1 that endangers the security of Yugoslavia is unresolved status of Kosovo – 84,0% of them voted for that option. The second problem is the appearance and activity of Albanian separatists in Southern Serbia (73,7%), which was the topic at the time of survey – beginning of March 2001. The third problem which could endanger peace and stability in the country to the opinions of the respondents (33,4%), is a possibility of conflicts and instability in ethnically mixed areas. Only by one tenth of the respondents opted for the world or the larger scale European war as a source of the security threat for the country. Equally, the respondents do not see any danger in potential war conflicts with any of the neighbouring states.

8. Concluding remarks

The survey of the public opinion of Serbia carried out within the frame of the research project "Protection of human rights in the Army and Police of the FRY" was fully justified. The results have given important indicators relating to the attitudes of the broadest public toward some basic questions of the army and defence.

In connection with the problems of defence and security of the country and prospective development of the armed forces the broadest public supports these stands and determinations:

- It is necessary to change the policy of defence of the country, because tragical experiences of the past years are more than convincing;
- That policy should be changed toward gradual inclusion into regional and European security integrations, primarily in Partnership for Peace;

- The Army of Yugoslavia should be downsized and modernized in accordance with the possibilities of the society and within the context of a realistic estimate of the external and internal security threats;
- Cut down the length of compulsory military service, but retain conscription, with introduction of professionals for specialized duties, because the citizens and the economy still do not dispose with sufficient material assets for full professionalization of the Army of Yugoslavia;
- According to the beliefs of the public, the ranking order of the security threats to the country would be as follows: (1) unresolved problem of Kosovo and Metohia, (2) unstable situation in South Serbia (Bujanovac, Presevo) and, (3) potential conflicts and instabilities in the ethnically mixed areas of the country. The external threats to the security of the country, according to the convictions of the public, are much less dangerous than the internal ones.

In the further democratic development of the political system in Yugoslavia the public will play an important role, both in formulating of the policy and in its implementing. The strategy and the doctrine of defence of the country are constituent parts of its general political strategy from which they emanate, therefore the role of the public in their formulation should not be neglected. The public will be motivated to support and carry out only the military strategy and doctrine which, at least in general terms, correspond to the ideas of that public about the state and national interests, but also to the well-being of the individual. Therefore, in the imminent transformation of the Army of Yugoslavia the opinions, attitudes and convictions of its citizens concerning the courses of development of the system of defence should play much more important role."

The entire process of defining defensive strategy and doctrine, reduction and modernization of the armed forces and the normative regulation of their position in the political system should result in establishing democratic civilian control of the army and police in Yugoslavia. Democratic political parties, social institutions and organizations, but the individual mostly, as a member of the active public and the main bearer of the obligations and the rights in the sphere of defense, are interested in these issues. Democratic social development will more and more open the space for the influence of the citizen and the structures of civic society in the sphere of defining and implementing of the system of defence.

¹Taken from: *Political profile of the civic insatisfaction*, public opinion of Serbia, summer 2001, CPA/CPS, p.25