



Balkan Public Agenda

IN – depth interviews
Republic of Srpska

March 2001
KEY FINDINGS

Realized by
SMMRI Group

TABLE OF CONTENT

Introduction	2
Summary of Key Findings	3
Key Findings.....	5
1. Most important problems facing the country.....	5
2. Economic issues.....	7
3. Political issues.....	8
4. Civil society.....	9
5. Public services.....	11
6. International relations.....	12
7. Individual characteristics and feelings.....	13
8. Final comments.....	15

INTRODUCTION

Objectives

In order to obtain an insight into the public agenda of Republika Srpska (RS) a standardised in-depth interview was conducted with local opinion leaders (OLs) in the Spring of 2001.

The information obtained in this study does not necessarily represent beliefs and opinions of the whole RS population. While reading this report, one should bear in mind that it describes attitudes of a highly selected sample of people from higher strata of RS society. The OLs are better paid, better informed, have better understanding of the political and economic situation in the country and have easier access to the media, than the general population. Thus, OLs have a higher than average leverage in the shaping of the public opinion.

The interviews were conducted according to the guide designed by IMAS in collaboration with IDEA International. The data were collected by the trained interviewers supervised by Dr. Svetlana Logar, SMMRI Director of Qualitative Research.

The sample

Twenty-two people (19 men and 3 women) were interviewed. The participants were selected through a non-random sampling procedure, forming a quota sample. The findings can only be considered as typical for the population, but can not be used for the assessment of their quantitative distribution in the population, (proportion of the typical attitudes). Due to the imperfection of the sampling procedure and/or the sample size, the sampling error cannot be identified.

Summary of the findings:

- **There are very few optimistic statements among the OLs of Republika Srpska. There is a general feeling of lack of mistrust and lack of confidence: the problems seem to be overwhelming and too complex for the society to solve.**
- ♦ **RS is burdened with poverty, unemployment, poor social services, ethnic tensions. It is subjugated to International Community and foreign bureaucracy that is often completely out of touch with local population.**

Most pressing are economic and political problems. However, the OLs of RS feel powerless and do not show much desire to tackle them. Nobody is happy with the status quo and there is no perspective in sight.

Poor economy and unemployment is the main problem of RS. It seems that RS is not capable of solving its social problems. Unfortunately there is no real hope that things will become better in the foreseeable future. RS will not be able to solve this problem until it becomes attractive for foreign investment.

Lack of foreign investment. Following the end of Bosnian war and the signing of the Dayton peace accord people from RS have expected important influx of foreign capital. However, this has not happened. There are two main reasons for this: negative image of RS in its relationship with the International Community, the lack of general political and economic stability in the country, war-ravaged infrastructure.

Incompetence of the state. There is a general distrust towards the political and administrative institutions. It seems that the Government and the Parliament have no clear vision on how to overcome the present crisis in RS.

- ♦ **There is a little hope for the immediate future. None of the basic political and economic problems is expected to be solved soon. As a matter of fact many participants believe that things will get worse: the economic crisis will deepen and more people will lose their jobs.**
- **Recent wars, unfair treatment of the International Community and the lack of legal regulations are most often quoted as the main sources of economic crises.**
- **The International Community is seen as mostly hostile and too controlling. It provokes many negative attitudes.**
- ♦ **International Community is seen both as a bullish occupying force and as a potential source of badly needed financial help.**
- **Little hope, if any, comes from privatization, fight against corruption and the much needed foreign investments.**

- ♦ **RS is seen as an exercise ground for NATO. The West doesn't care about the local population, its traditions and its values. It doesn't care about the justice. It cares only about spreading its military presence and political influence.**
- ♦ **There is a very little confidence in the political system. Local institutions are perceived as marginal and inconsequential. There is very little belief in honesty and goodwill of international institutions.**
- **The influence of NGOs and the professional organizations in particular is rather trivial and unimportant. They do not have a real power to shape the society of RS.**
- ♦ **Very few respondents have any positive thoughts about the NATO and its role in the region. The best thing that NATO should do is to leave RS. At the same time, some respondents do emphasize that it was NATO and foreign military intervention that ended the seemingly endless war in Bosnia.**
- **Joining NATO is at best perceived as a necessary evil. It will mean complete subjugation and the lost of independence but may prevent further demographic losses. Very few OLs emphasize that joining NATO would bring a long lasting peace to the region.**
- **EU is the most trusted international organization. It brings the promise of European integration , economic prosperity and political stability.**
- **The attitudes towards SEE countries was strongly determined by the traditional political alliances and by the economic performance. Slovenia was sees as economically successful but also as cold and unfriendly country. Greece are seen in a very positive light in a sharp contrast to Albania, Macedonia, Croatia, and Bosnia. The OLs do not think much of Bulgaria and Romania either, but their attitudes were less emotionally charged. The attitude towards Turkey is mixed - more positive things are being emphasized.**
- **The OLs still fear hunger and devastation in RS. The memories of war are still very fresh. The possibility of further military conflicts is not appealing to anyone. The peace and economic prosperity will come to RS only when other regional problems are settled and resolved.**
- **Main worry is that normal living conditions will not be achieved for a very long time.**

KEY FINDINGS

1. THE MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS FACING THE COUNTRY

1.1 What are the most important problems our country is facing today?

◆ **The most pressing issues RS is facing relate to:**

- **Politics:**
 - Implementation of the Dayton peace accord
 - Relations with Bosnian Federation
 - Relations with the International Community
 - Lack of and ineffective legislation
 - Corruption
 - Refugees
 - Lack of coherent social programs

- **Economy:**
 - Privatization
 - Unemployment
 - Poverty
 - No clear vision for the future

1.2 Please rank the most important problems relative to their gravity.

1.3. And why?

Poor economy is seen as the most burning issue. Political and social problems will be much easier dealt with once the economy recovers.

Illustrative statements:

- *Most of the people here in Brcko are surviving on 2-3 German marks (a day).*
- *Economic issues are the most important. If the people solve the problem of employment and if they obtain a source of steady income they will be satisfied. Consequently, the whole country will be satisfied as well.*
- *A great number of people are unemployed and can not earn for their living.*
- *Economic problems are the cause of all other problems.*

1.4. What problems are the most likely to be solved in the next few years?

1.5. And why?

1.6. How can that problem be solved?

1.7. Who can solve it?

There is no much optimism among the OLs of RS. The situation in the country by no means looks hopeful. Everybody realize that it will take years if not generations before solution of economic and political problems. However, there is a trace of optimism regarding the economy. Some OLs believe that privatization and the long awaited foreign financial aid could turn things around in a relatively short period of time. Foreign investment is seen as a prerequisite for economic recovery.

Illustrative statements:

- *(With foreign aid) factories could start with production. It is important that people start working. Factories exist, they are not destroyed.*
- Economic issues would be the possible to achieve, much easier than the political problems, because of the aid given by the International Community. Investing in economy should be a priority. People should be given a possibility to earn money.*
- Economic problems, which are the most important anyway, will be solved first. International Community, if it really wants to help us, should give capital, develop economy, employ people and then everything will be OK.*
- International institutions have a pretty important role. They are supposed to give us loans.*

1.8. What problems are the least likely to be solved in the next few years?

1.9. And why?

1.10. What would be an appropriate solution for this problem?

1.11. Who can solve it?

Demographic consequences of the most recent war are perceived as the most difficult to be resolved. There are many refugees and displaced persons in RS, people who have lost their jobs, their homes and their property in the war. International Community is heavily involved in RS but its presence is not welcome by the majority of OLs in RS. Nevertheless, it is obvious that no progress can be made without the International Community and its organizations. Thus, the attitude of OLs towards the International Community is rather ambiguous: they are not happy with the International Community and its role in RS, yet its presence is a necessary condition for the resolution of the crisis. Obviously, the most pressing problems of RS can not be solved without International Community.

Illustrative statements:

-National issues are will be very difficult to solve because the last two wars, in fact the World War II, post war period and the last war, raised mutual distrust of peoples living here.

-Demographic problem will be the most difficult to solve. So many things have been destroyed in this country.

- There are many refugees, destroyed houses and many migrations. Great financial funds are necessary and they are not in the offing.

2. ECONOMIC ISSUES

2.1 What are the main economic problems our that country is facing now?

2.2 What are their causes?

2.3.What are the main obstacles for their solution?

2.4 What are the factors that could help solving economic problems?

The main economic problems of RS are: war-ravaged economy and infrastructure, idleness of industrial systems, lack of money and foreign investment, rampant unemployment, corruption, poverty, lack of market economy, obsolete technology, lack of the banking system. The economy is exhausted by long years of war, mismanagement, corruption, and the NATO destruction. Lack of fresh investment is the main obstacle for economic recovery.

2.5. Are they internal or external?

External factors are seen as the key for the economy. There is an almost universal agreement that the only way to solve economic problems is full cooperation with foreign banks and international financial institutions

2.6. How would you rate the involvement of international monetary institutions in RS economy?

There is a deep resentment towards the international monetary institutions. They are perceived as biased and their decisions to be politically motivated. So far, RS was discriminated against, most international money went to Moslem-Croatian Federation of Bosnia – Herzegovina. The international monetary institutions are seen as a political mean used for specific purposes.

2.7. What will happen to economy this year?

2.8. Will it get better or worse?

The OLS do not expect economic improvement during this year. As a matter of fact, many of them expect things to become worse. Many people will loose their jobs, some factories will be closed for good, no substantial international help will arrive. Much hope

is put in the governments program of privatization although it is clear that privatization alone can not guarantee economic miracles.

Illustrative examples:

- I do not expect that anything positive will happen in the next few years.*
- Nothing will become better. The crime rate will go up, there will be social unrest and riots.*
- For the time being it will get worse but as soon as privatization comes into force it will be better.*
- Massive firing can not lead to a better situation. If one can not feed his children – than the state has no future.*
- Nothing will get better and everything will get worse.*
- These are long lasting problems and I don't expect that anybody could solve them in a year.*
- The bare fact that many people will loose their jobs is the thing that worries me the most.*

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

3.1 What is the role people have in the decision making in our country and/or our local community?

There is no much belief in openness and transparency of politics in RS can influence decision making. Consequently, few OLs feel that ordinary people can exert real influence on important decisions. The original political will of ordinary people in RS has been often betrayed and modified by the International Community and the political parties. Consequently, little trust is placed in political system and its institutions.

Opinions about certain political institutions are based on personal likes and dislikes directed towards the people who are presently in the office. The power, trustworthiness and the prestige of a political institution depends mostly on the personal reputation of a man who is heading this institution. Political institutions are not valued by the constitutional power that is invested in them.

3.2 What political institutions do you trust the most?

3.3 What political institutions do you trust the least?

3.4 What political instution has the highest impact on everyday life of ordinary citizens?

3.5 How would you rate political/administrative/legal institutions such as: the Federal President, Federal Parliament, Federal Government, the Mavor, Local Government, political parties?

Among general disbelief in political process it is very hard to single out any political institution that enjoys substantial degree of trust and confidence. It would be safest to

say that political expectations are very low. OL's perceive their country as a protectorate, ruled by the International Community and NATO. Therefore, it is very hard for them to place any significant amount of trust in regular political system. Political and legal institutions of RS are often seen only as a decorum for political decisions that are made elsewhere. The office of the High Representative has the power to change and restrict the role of any local authority. Again, International Community is not welcome but it is also seen as someone who can solve problems and move things ahead. Also, some amount of trust is placed in institutions that are closest to people's everyday lives. The Mayor and the Municipal government are given the highest grades. Their good reputation is somewhat based on the fact that their day to day decisions are not dictated by the International Community. The least trusted are political parties and individual politicians. Obviously, carefully balanced cooperation between the International Community and the municipal authorities is a political venue that brings most promise for restoration of the political system in RS.

Illustrative statements:

-I trust local Government. It is responsible for all activities on which economy public utilities or health service depends.

- Everything is reduced to International Community, it is pulling all the strings here in RS.

-All local political institutions have only a secondary influence, relative to the International Community.

-I trust most the city assembly and the International Community. If those two worlds could function together, all present problems could be solved in the best possible manner.

-I trust most the Mayor, the institutions of the International Community such as OHR.

4. CIVIL SOCIETY

4.1 **What is your main source of information?**

4.2 **What is the most credible source?**

4.3 **Please give us some specific examples**

Unsurprisingly, mass media are quoted as the main source of information. However, the OLs do not have much trust in the information provided. Media are seen as biased and heavily influenced by the local political hierarchy. The general advice is that one should obtain information about the same event from various sources in order to form a credible picture. There is no single medium that could be believed one hundred percent.

Illustrative statements:

-If some media give a wrong information that something has happened and it actually did

not then it is a bad example.

-One should approach media realistically, and see who is financing them and then comprehend their political attitude towards the given event.

-One should be constantly comparing various sources of information in order to get a clear picture of what is going on.

-There are very few media that are unbiased. There are many negative examples.

-Media re controlled by the state whether they are privately owned or not.

-All media serve the interest of the government, or more precisely, of certain powerful people. These 'shady deals' to both domestic and foreign organizations.

- The state-owned TV claimed that we are living good lives and that we have a bright future but the situation was exactly the opposite.

4.4. How would you rate the role of the NGOs in RS?

The attitude toward NGOs in RS is mixed, at best. The general idea of NGOs is welcome and their basic goodwill is very well recognized. However, people are also disillusioned with the reality of NGO activities in RS. The NGOs are seen as either marginal and/or inconsequential or as a organizations with some hidden agenda. There is a prevalent feeling that the real role of NGOs is to help people who work for them and not to help the war-affected people of RS.

Illustrative statements:

-Real NGOs do not exist. Someone finances them and they belong to someone. There are no independent organizations. Independent NGOs definitively do not exist.

-Most presidents of the NGOs came here in order to gain some personal profit. I don't think they have any influence here.

- Most NGOs are here because of good intentions but there are also NGOs that are here because of other things, and their name is here to cover some other activities.

-The NGOs have a very bad role. They are involved in money laundering.

4.4 How would you rate the role of the professional organizations?

Basically, there are no professional organizations with any leverage in RS. Professional organizations in RS have a long way to go before they will become a key player in shaping public opinion and the legislature.

4.5 How would you rate the role of religious organizations?

The attitude towards religious organizations is mostly negative, especially the attitude towards political role that churches often presume. During the war in Bosnia, all three churches were closely related with spreading ethnic intolerance and there is little understanding for that in today's post-Deyton RS. The religion is perceived as a thing of the past. It is here to preserve traditional values and national identity but it should not interfere into politics and people's everyday affairs. There is a little room for religious organizations in the minds and hearts of OL's in RS.

Illustrative examples:

-The church must have its place in this society and it should give a full contribution to the society. However, the church should not have any influence on the political life. All 3 churches (orthodox, catholic, and Moslem) should be separated from politics.

-During the war and the period following the end of conflicts, they had taken a role that they were not supposed to take. In my opinion, religious organizations should be dealing only with the spiritual life of people; they should be separated from the state and the politics.

-Lately, their activity has stepped out of the religious limits.

They have caused all sorts of catastrophes and poverty. They are the most operative engine of the new economic and political world order.

5. PUBLIC SERVICES

There is a widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of public services among the OLS of RS. All public services were judged to be inadequate. A very bad financial situation is seen as the main reason for this. Some resources were destroyed during the war. Others were neglected and have fallen into disrepair. Little resources that are available are not used in the most efficient manner. The problem of public services could be solved only with full cooperation with the International Community. There is no much enthusiasm for privatization as a solution for public services in RS. On the contrary, are many concerns regarding possible abuse and efficiency of privatized health care, education and the utilities.

Illustrative statements:

-There were no changes in education over the last 50 years.

-Since its establishment in 1800, health care is at the lowest level.

-We don't have a heating plant and consequently, we don't have heating. As for water supply, we all know that there is no water in our town. Water pipes are worn out. Only International Community and the district government could solve this problem.

-Privatization of public services is a possibility but in that case there should be more than one supplier.

-Presently, privatization would not be a good solution because of the national structure and the money as well.

6. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

6.1. The role of international institutions (European Union, Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, and NATO)

The presence of international institutions in the country is mostly seen as a necessary evil. No money and no long-lasting peace will ever come in RS without help of the International community. International organization have a great influence on the affairs in RS but their intentions are not seen as honest and sincere. European union and its agenda is seen in a more positive light. The Stability Pact, which is mostly an European initiative, is mostly welcome. At the same time, the attitudes towards NATO are very negative. NATO and its leaders are compared to some very unpopular leaders from the past. In the final analysis, all other international organizations present in the area (IMF, the World Bank) are seen only as tools of American foreign policy embodied in the NATO. Even those who recognize some NATO's merit in establishing and maintaining peace in Bosnia believe that demilitarization rather than NATO membership is the right perspective for RS.

Illustrative statements:

- We should demilitarize our country and place ourselves under NATO's umbrella.*
- NATO is disoriented, its role as a world policeman should be reexamined. Even Nazism led by Hitler, came to an end.*
- NATO can't do anything positive because the presence of an army prevents progress. All armies that came to this region brought misfortune. NATO should leave our country and let us live our lives.*
- Everything that is obtained by force is wrong. I would rather NATO don't do anything here.*
- When NATO gets involved then some war breaks out. I would not like NATO to solve our problems.*
- NATO lost its importance and they should leave the region. However, I predict that they will never do it.*

6.3 The key security in the region

The RS is heavily influenced by what is going on in the whole region. Only regional solutions can bring stability to RS. So far, the presence of international troops and economic prosperity is a key for security in the region. Only international troops can guarantee peace, and only peace can bring any hope of economic recovery. Thus the position of international troops in RS is somewhat paradoxical. At the same time they are seen as an occupying force and as a necessary prerequisite for the future.

Illustrative statements:

-Our region has peace because of the presence of international forces. If they leave the conflicts may reappear. This is our reality. They should stay here for at least another 10 years.

- As long as situation in Serbia and Macedonia is as it is now, we can not talk about general stability in the region.

7. INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AND FEELINGS

7.1 Attitudes towards the SEE countries

The whole SEE region is still burdened with problems and political instability. RS is destined to share the future of all other countries in the region. Only 2 countries Slovenia and Greece are seen as stable and prosperous. All other regional neighbors are associated with –more or less- negative attributes. Problems of economic growth and multi-ethnic relationships tarnish the future of the whole region of the most SEE countries individually. Slovenia is praised for its economic development and high standard of living but is also scolded for its aloofness and xenophobia. Croatia is seen as burdened with economic and political problems. Croatia is still struggling with corruption, unemployment and the political heritage of Tudjman’s regime. Macedonia is a country facing an armed rebellion, a distinct possibility of a civil war and disintegration. It is cited as a country that did everything in compliance to the Western demands and eventually got nothing in return. Bosnia- Herzegovina is seen to be in a very similar situation: as an economically backward and politically unstable part of former Yugoslavia. Both Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina are seen as countries with no future. Albania is seen as a country in a complete bedlam and disarray. It will be many years before it could effectively contribute to region’s stability. The OLs that were interviewed in this survey mostly do not have any specific sentiments towards Romania and Bulgaria since they are thought of as countries with basically no influence and no historic connections to the present political issues in RS. Turkey receiving rather favorable marks because of its modernization and democratization.

7.2. Perception of the people’s lives in South Eastern Europe in the near future

The future of SEE will depend largely on the future of the Stability Pact and other European peace initiatives. It will be a long uphill battle but there is always hope that things will become better for a new generation. At the same time there is a distinctive displeasure with the fact that the future of the region will be decided by the political interest of the West and that people of RS will have a little say in that process.

Illustrative statements:

-The future of the region is rather unpredictable and is very uncertain, it depends on series of factors.

-NATO countries (Germany, USA, UK, France) will dictate conditions under we should live. Our lives will be determined by their interests.

7.3. Readiness to leave the region

There are few main reasons for leaving the country: political instability, constant threat of war, ethnic intolerance and poor economy. The opinions about leaving the country are divided. There are those who have actively explored this option and those who would never leave regardless of the situation in RS.

Illustrative statements:

-I thought about it but I changed my mind when I heard experiences of those who have emigrated to USA, Canada or Australia.

-I was born in ex-Yugoslavia. I am a patriot and I do not want to leave my country. I don't think that somewhere else it is much better.

-Yes, I thought about leaving RS. I don't see a way out.

-Everything here happens so slowly and I can not wait any longer. Also, because of instability. The fact is that this region is unstable.

-Yes I thought about leaving RS. I still do. Educated people can not survive here. If nothing changes, I don't want my children to live here.

7.4 Perception of the relations between the ethnic groups

Relationships between 3 major ethnic groups in Bosnia are seen as rather bad. Some headway has been made following the Dayton peace accord but there is still too much to be desired.

Illustrative statements:

-The relations are very bad. I think the relations are even worse than in 1996.

-The relations between ethnic groups have improved following the war but they are much worse than before the war.

-There is a lack of ethnic tolerance in RS.

-The ethnic relations are mixed-up, burdened by history. They have been basically the same over the last 200 years.

-The relations are very bad. Like during the war.

8. FINAL COMMENTS

8.1 Most significant fears and hopes with respect to the future of the country

Mostly, the OLS interviewed in this survey fear future wars, ethnic intolerance and economic decay and poverty that goes with it. Their main hope is economic improvement and the accompanying political stability. Main worry is that it will take a long time to attain this objective, that it will be many years before children of RS can live normal lives.

Illustrative statements:

-Ethnic separation is my main fear. My main hope is economic improvement.

-My main hope is economic prosperity and ethnic tolerance.

-My main hopes are that the international community will stop to be biased. I hope that the people of this region will get more opportunities to participate in the government. The third object of my hope is that this country will finally become a place from where people will not only go but to which they will also return and that they will invest money in this region.

-My main fears are hatred, war and conflicts.

-