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The COVID 19 Pandemic Lessons in the Area of Security, Social Policy and Culture: The Case with Bulgaria

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Abstract: Objectives: The aim of this paper is to discuss from an interdisciplinary perspective some lessons learnt from the global COVID 19 pandemic in the area of security, social policy and culture. **Prior Work:** Theoretical and experimental research of the authors in these three fields. **Approach:** Overview and analysis of the data collected by the authors with the application of two methods - focus group and method of critical incidents. **Results:** The empirical results identify the respondents' perceptions and attitudes towards a number of issues like: human safety, societal and social security, culturally specific reactions and behaviour, etc. **Implications:** The paper can stimulate a larger discussion in the scientific circles about the necessity of joint research on different aspects of COVID 19 pandemic and its reflections. **Value:** The study will contribute to positioning the global pandemic and its various dimensions as one of the most topical issues in the contemporary interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: COVID 19 pandemic; human safety; societal security; social security; cultural reflections; socialization deficits

JEL Classification: Z1 Cultural Economics; Economic Sociology; Economic Anthropology

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of 2020 the global pandemic of COVID 19 has changed the life of the humanity and posed new challenges such as continuous social isolation and its accompanying negative effects on the psycho-emotional state of the individuals; changes in the socialization mechanism of children and adults due to the more intensive impact of the internet and social media; transformation of the perceptions for the influence of the soft power in the international relations because of the proven need for cooperation between the countries to address the global threat.

Along with the many negative consequences of COVID 19 worldwide such as economic decline, increasing unemployment and difficulties for the employers, the most significant negative impact is on the people and their mental health, stemming from the limited social contacts and interactions during the pandemic.

The current work aims at presenting from an interdisciplinary perspective some of the reflections of the pandemic on the individuals, focusing on aspects of security, social life and culture in its part concerning the cultural values.

2. Theoretical Background

The way in which the humanity and, in particular, the concrete countries responded to the pandemic situation created by COVID 19, is related to the manifestations of the so called soft power in the area of security and international relations. According to Joseph Nye Jr., who is an indisputable authority in the typification of soft power in the international relations, the soft power is “the ability to formulate the preferences of others” (Nye, 2004). The guiding principle of this type of power is the persuasion, voluntary shaping the behavior of the others in the desired direction by the influential actor. The desired results are achieved more slowly in comparison with the hard power but they are more durable and stable over the time.

The soft power includes different indicators presented in several global indexes:

Elcano Global Presence Index uses indicators of the soft power, such as:

1. Migration – expected number of international migrants in the country per year;
2. Tourism – visits of international tourists;
3. Sport – world-weighted place according to FIFA rankings and medals won in the Summer Olympics according to the International Olympic Committee rankings;

4. Culture – export of audiovisual services;
5. Information – internet traffic (Mbps);
6. Technologies – number of the patent applications in one or more countries for the protection of one and the same invention;
7. Science – number of articles, notes and comments, published in the area of arts, humanities, social and natural sciences;
8. Education – number of international students in higher education system on a national territory;
9. Cooperation for development – gross flows of the official development assistance or comparable data (Elcano Global Presence Report, 2015).

The Soft Power 30 - Ranking presents the following indicators:

1. Government – engagement with human rights, democracy and quality of the political institutions;
2. Culture – global cultural achievements;
3. Education – level of the human capital in the country, access to scholarships and attractiveness for foreign students;
4. Global engagement – influence of the diplomatic network of the country and its contribution to the global development;
5. Enterprises – attractiveness of the economic model of the country and capacity for innovations;
6. Digital technologies – digital infrastructure of the country and its opportunities in the digital diplomacy (The Soft Power 30).

IfG-Monocle Soft Power Index “Soft Power Survey 2014/15” determines the following indicators: 1. Culture; 2. Diplomacy; 3. Government; 4. Education; 5. Business attractiveness/innovations (Soft Power Survey 2014/15), (Koev, 2015)

The presented rankings of the soft power indicators define their scope with comparable accuracy but it is very likely that the COVID 19 pandemic will cause changes in their theoretical interpretation. For one year only, the societies have brought to the fore the importance of the national health systems, as well as that of the joint efforts and cooperation, in order to cope with the global threat for the health and life of the individuals. In this sense, the ability of the national health systems to

deal with pandemic situations is expected to fall among the soft power indicators (Fletcher, 2020). A number of researchers argue that the countries that have coped well with significant outbreaks of COVID 19 are likely to see an increase of their soft power index (British Council, 2020).

The global rankings indicated above show a constant presence of education and culture among the indicators for soft power. Therefore, the findings about the necessity of stable health systems to cope with pandemic situations can be applied also to the systems of education and culture and in particular to their functions for socialisation of the individuals and formation of hierarchies of values.

Socialisation as a concept is interpreted in different theoretical paradigms in the development of the sociological thought in the 19th and the beginning of 20th century such as structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism and behavioral approach. A scientific understanding of the socialisation issues is presented in the works of F. Giddings, E. Durkheim, M. Weber, R. Merton, T. Parsons, Z. Freud and other researchers.

According to **Giddings** the socialisation is a process of personality formation under the impact of the social environment. (Giddings, 1897). **Durkheim** presents the social coercion and the pressure of the society as key moments in the process of socialisation because they force the individual to implement patterns of behavior which are typical for a concrete community. In this way the society can control and regulate the socialisation process. **Parsons** denies the absolutisation of the social coercion in the Durkheim's views as he believes that the individuals choose a model of behavior not by virtue of the social pressure but on the basis of acceptance of the community culture which takes place through the socialisation process. Through the acquisition of norms, values and roles the individuals integrate into the social environment. According to **E. Fromm** the socialisation process begins from the moment when the individual manifests himself and his attitude to the people through the forms of the human relationships. The development of one form of communication or another leads to the formation of a social character which is typical for most representatives of a culture and is dynamic in the process of socialisation. (Popova, 2019)

If earlier it was thought that the individual socialises mainly in the childhood, today the socialisation is perceived as a continuous process, covering all age groups. Obviously, the foundations of personality formation are laid in early childhood, but the role positions and the social notions change throughout the whole life cycle and,

in this case, we can speak about re-socialisation changing the initial results of the socialisation.

A relative agreement has been reached in the scientific thought about some main agents of the socialisation such as: parents, family, educational institutions and others. However, in the modern information society we can observe an increasingly visible presence of the phenomenon of the Internet socialisation. In this case the mass media and the social networks act as parallel agents of socialisation both for the children at an early age and for all other age groups in the society. This parallel socialisation can be very dangerous for the children in cases of insufficient parental control, because they can acquire aggressive and destructive models of behavior. In connection with the thesis about the parallel socialisation, we can argue that in the postmodern societies the socialisation agents cannot be clearly distinguished into primary and secondary and are even upgraded by parallel sources of the virtual reality, especially in the current pandemic situation and predominating online education of the young people. (Popova, 2019)

As we can see in the theoretical review presented above, the life of the societies and the individuals in pandemic situation puts on the agenda not only issues related to the protection of health and well-being of human societies, which can be explicitly attributed to the areas of security and soft power in the international relations, but also issues about the long-term social and cultural pandemic consequences like deficits in the socialisation of the individuals and transformation of their value hierarchies.

3. Results from an Empirical Study in Bulgaria Proving the Unfavorable Pandemic Effects on Individuals' Socialisation and their Value Profile

In the basis of the empirical study which is an object of interpretation in this paper is the thesis that the Internet, the social networks, e.g. Facebook, and the media can not only downplay or shift the role of other major agents of socialisation, but can also cause some changes in the social relations as in the case with the online education, deepening the social isolation and leading to demotivation and negative mental states. The study results were accumulated through the method of focus group discussion conducted with 40 students in Social Work and Occupational Therapy bachelor degrees at the University of Ruse, Bulgaria, in 2020/2021 academic year. The results from the Covid-screen study conducted in France in 2020 served as a basis of the questions for the focus group discussion. (Gomes, 2020) According to

the study cited, before the lockdown of the European countries in March 2020, the children at the age of 3-10 years had spent 1,56 hours in front of the screens. During the quarantine the children at the age of 6-12 years spent about 7 hours per day in front of the screens – 4 hours for educational purposes and audio-visual content, 1 hour for communication and approximately 1,15 hours for video games.

On the basis of the data indicated was formulated the main question for the participants in the focus group: *What are the advantages and disadvantages of online education*. This main question was divided into the following sub-questions and the following most frequent answers were given by the participants:

1. **How do you understand the term Internet socialisation?** here the most frequent answers of the students are: *online study, communication in the social media, impact of Internet on our life*;

2. **What is the impact of the current online education on you personally?** – *I'm depressed, nothing has changed, people lose their jobs, people become aggressive, online learning does not work very well for me, online learning does not look like the face-to-face study*;

3. **Please, share 5 positive and 5 negative effects of online learning.** As the most frequent negative effects the students mention: *a long stay in front of the computer, a heavy eye strain, little contact with friends, no activities in the fresh air, we cannot concentrate, we cannot study properly at home, the homework has increased, we are locked up at home like in a prison*. According to the participants in the focus group the positive effects are: *more time at home, learning is easier, taking exams is easier, the exams through tests are easier, our grades have risen, more time for sleep, I cannot find any positive things*.

4. **Do you have observations about the effects of online education on the children and young people under the age of 18?** Here the participants in the focus group share the following observations: *they can't get used to it, they don't like it, a lot of strain for the children and their parents, they become depressed and nervous, they lose sight of reality, they cannot concentrate, especially if there are two or more children at home who are online, at home they don't have the authority of the teacher and the school institution, they cannot cope with the heavy workload and the lack of explanation of the lessons by the teacher*.

5. **What are the effects of online education on your parents?** Here the most frequent answers are: *they are happy that we are at home under control, no effects on them*.

6. **Do you have a preferred source of information during the quarantine?** – here the dominating answer is: *the social networks (Facebook)*.

On the basis of the results presented above from the focus group discussion with the students, we can draw the following **conclusions**:

- The online education, interpreted as part of the Internet socialisation of the children and youngsters in the conditions of global pandemic, have more negative than positive effects. It causes both physiological problems (limitation of motor activities, depressive states and others) and many psycho-social problems (deepening social isolation, demotivation for learning due to the limitations in the control and regulatory functions of the educational institutions, reducing the role of the teachers' authority, difficulties for the parents, etc.).
- The social networks are increasingly taking over the role of other agents of socialisation like the family and the educational institutions. They are becoming a factor whose credibility is not questioned and is accepted uncritically.
- The communication in the social networks compensates to some extent the limited social contacts but if there is insufficient or no control over the contacts of the child because of the professional duties of the parents, or there is a limited capacity of the caregivers to cope with the new technologies, then there are a number of risks for the child – the risk of falling under negative influence, the risk of acquiring some patterns of deviant behaviour, etc. Here the child/the young person can become an object of various types of violence and sexual abuse. The absence of a close trusted person with whom the child can share his/her problems can escalate into a breakdown in his/her psycho-social development and, in some cases, it can lead to the need of intervention of a doctor or a psychologist.
- A serious risk caused by the Internet socialisation of children and youngsters, as well as by the uncontrolled surfing in the social networks is the danger of a deficit of values. As it is known, the value hierarchy, consisting of individual and culture-specific values (Buzera et al, 2012), is formed at a very early age of the child's development. If, during this period, he/she is not given enough control by the family due to the professional engagements of the parents, it is very possible that the child will not form important family values such as respect to the distribution of the family roles, respect to the elder family members, etc.

- Along with the other risks for the socialisation of children and youngsters, the value deficit has long-term consequences for the overall development of the individual and his/her integration into the society.

4. Instruments and Tools of the Soft Power and Culture-Specific Approaches, Used in Bulgaria, in the Conditions of COVID 19 Pandemic

From the distance of time, when more than 1,5 years have passed since the beginning of the coronavirus dissemination in Europe and Bulgaria, a number of conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of the anti-epidemic measures and the ability of the governments to cope with the pandemic. An interesting interpretation of the topic can be done from the point of view of the value orientation of the targeted groups and cultural specificity of the applied measures.

As a member state of the EU, Bulgaria has fully harmonised its anti-epidemic policy with the general line of the European Commission and the other member states of the EU. What is acknowledged in the public space is that the country has consistently applied “softer measures” in comparison with other countries like France, Italy, Greece, etc. During the three pandemic waves, until the end of May 2021, the Bulgarian citizens were able to move more freely without a special exit permit and “the easing of the measures” was carried out in a timely manner in accordance with the forecasts for improvement of the situation.

If we return to the soft power indicators, presented above, in the case with Bulgaria we can put a stress on the tool of diplomacy and its ambassadors – public figures with a significant role in the process of minimising the pandemic effects. In a metaphoric sense, such role of an ambassador and public mediator was played by the National Crisis Management Staff and its chairman Major General Professor Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, MD - Director of the Military Medical Academy. This body was established by the Bulgarian government and the period of its functioning was between 26.02.2020 and 06.05.2021 – during the first three waves of the pandemic. Here we can ask the logical question how an institution embodied by a “military” man can be a mediator of the soft power in dealing with the pandemic in Bulgaria. An explanation can be immediately found in the culture-specific profile of the Bulgarians and their value priorities described on the basis of Hofstede’s model of value orientations. (Hofstede, 1991)

According to Hofstede's model Bulgaria is a collectivistic and hierarchical country (with high indexes of collectivism and power distance). The country has moderate indexes (in the middle of the scale between 1 and 10) of masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. These value orientations of the Bulgarian society can be related to the nature of the anti-epidemic measures applied by the National Crisis Management Staff and its chairman.

It is well known that the collectivist societies need powerful and even authoritarian leaders who can take initiative and responsibility. In the case with the pandemic situation in Bulgaria the role of such leader was taken by General Mutafchiyski – a charismatic figure with an impressive biography of a surgeon at various “hot spots” on the world political map. In the difficult and unpredictable situation of the global pandemic General Mutafchiyski and his colleagues-experts managed the crisis successfully and, what is most important, they created an atmosphere of public trust which is also a necessary condition for the functioning of the collectivist societies. Unlike some other countries such as Germany, Austria and Greece in which the uncertainty is strongly avoided and the order and discipline are either part of the value profile (Germany and Austria) or are imposed by force (Greece), in the Bulgarian society the measures imposed by force are not popular and cause public discontent. It is here that the soft power has been mostly used to deal with the pandemic – through the leaders of influence and public opinion like General Mutafchiyski and his colleagues from the National Crisis Management Staff.

Very quickly, with the mediation of the social networks like Facebook, General Mutafchiyski received a very high rating of public approval, which was maintained for the entire period of operation of the National Crisis Management Staff. However, the lower index of uncertainty avoidance had not only positive but also negative effects on the Bulgarian society, expressed in the very slow rate of vaccination of the population and the consequent morbidity and mortality.

The situation presented above demonstrates that the instruments of soft power are very important and useful in crises, but they are not a universal tool and should be applied according to the cultural specificities of the targeted groups.

5. Conclusions

On the basis of the lessons from the COVID 19 pandemic in Bulgaria described, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The impact of the pandemic on human health and life is enormous, putting all systems of the social development to a test.
2. In just a year, the pandemic has caused irreparable damage to the mental health of the people affecting to the greatest extent the children's socialisation process. The Internet socialisation is increasingly displacing the usual socialisation agents as the family and educational institutions, but it is accompanied by risks for the physiological, cognitive and emotional development of the young people. Particularly dangerous for them is the value deficit which can affect their successful integration into society.
3. In crisis situations such as that of COVID 19, the soft power instruments in politics and international relations come into play. However, in order to be effective, they should be applied in accordance with the cultural peculiarities of the targeted individuals and social groups.

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