Perturbations of Private and Public under COVID-19[*]

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This issue of the Russian Sociological Review deals with the transformation of the public and the private in the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. We could not but respond to current events since they are not only important for understanding the constitution of contemporary societies, but also challenge many common notions of the social sciences. We decided to focus on this topic, first of all, because the question of the private and the public constitutes the main "nerve" of the sociopolitical processes triggered by the pandemic.

In this introduction to the issue, we will offer some general considerations regarding the dynamics of recent changes, and a more detailed outline of the issue's idea and overview of the papers published here.

I

In the habitual vocabulary of political thought, which is, of course, neither the only possible one nor the only legitimate one but whose influence and widespread distribution is difficult to dispute, the political equals freedom. The political appears with the *polis*; the organization of the human community on the principles of freedom is called *politeia*. Of course, free *politeia*, as Thomas Hobbes pointed out at the dawn of the Modernity, is an ambiguous concept. Those who understand it as if it were about the freedom of citizens in a state are wrong; it refers only to the freedom of one political community from coercion by all others. We still call it sovereignty, and we know that a "free city" is not one with

the most freedoms, but only one that is not subject to anyone from outside and determines for itself what should be considered as freedom within it. History is well known for independent political formations within which a rigid order reigns. If we ignore this distinction, it is possible to turn the notion of political freedom into an effective weapon: the freedom of political action is recognized only for those *politeias* where the citizens as well as the rulers are free. This can be achieved by eliminating the distinction between internal and external politics. In doing so, the borders of states become less and less solid, and political actors turn out to be a variety of associations and organizations deprived of a state-territorial identity. We have been witnessing this trend for the past few decades, but now this movement has slowed down and even reversed. This can be called the global retreat of globalization and the return of the state. However, globalization has not disappeared, nor has the old state returned.

In today's world, restrictions on freedoms are on the rise, and it is easy to assume that the pandemic is to blame. All over the world, without coordination with each other, the political authorities of various countries have imposed and are still imposing restrictions that, in effect, mean — in a state of emergency — the restriction of rights and the abolition of freedoms. Above all, this has affected the freedom of movement, but also the freedom of assembly. The inviolability of the home is also in danger, and much more. The intrusions of political authorities into the area of the disposal of one's own body have endangered the dignity of the individual. The reason for such measures is the need to defeat disease. The emergency characteristics of these measures means that once the pandemic is defeated, they will be abolished. This happens, of course, but we see that with a new increase in threat, restrictions can be imposed again. The final return to the pre-pandemic condition has not occurred; rather, we deal with varying forms and degrees of the unfreedom.

Many restrictions on freedoms have been previously introduced for other reasons, for example, in connection with terrorism. Security in transport, in educational institutions, and in public places was a response to new threats, including epidemic ones, albeit on a smaller scale. All this has long ago begun to change the landscape and the rhythm of public life. What is happening these days only manifests, to the greatest extent possible, the old trend. The security checkpoints and the time spent on inspections have become as commonplace an appurtenance of the modern city (subways, shopping malls, theaters, train stations, and airports) as the fortress wall and the gate with guards used to be. It is possible that masks, tests, vaccines, QR codes, restrictions on the number of participants in events and various prohibitions on movement as well as quarantines, which, by the way, are inherited from much earlier times, will become an indispensable part of modern urban life. The city is a place of safe freedom, but the safest city is also the most unfree. It turns out that unfreedom is needed for safety, while freedom is needed by the opponents of safety. To put it more radically, the person who wants freedom is now the *enemy of security and health*.

This is the police point of view. It is the police approach that has prevailed in many areas of practical politics. As Hobbes said, the state offers protection in exchange for obedience.

What is wrong with this thought? The answer is its automatism and its obviousness. It emerges as if by itself and needs no justification. It ignores the specificity of the organization of human life, which in contemporary philosophy is called *biopower* and *biopolitics*. Biopolitics means the disposal of living beings as obedient objects — their health, the birth and upbringing of children, nutrition and recreation, hygiene, and vaccinations. Self-organization and conscious choice are replaced by political management. Biopolitics inherits the theory and practice of the police state. The modern state arises with the introduction of sanitary-police measures and the strengthening of the institutions charged with taking care of the common good. One of the problems facing the police state from the very beginning is precisely that of epidemics. In dealing with the problems of health and security, the sovereign state has, in the course of history, destroyed a variety of freedoms that seemed self-evident, such as, for example, the privileges of certain guilds and estates or the republican freedoms in cities in Europe in the Middle Ages. This is a distant past, but we cannot help but recall it when we find a dramatic increase in the sanitary-police regulation that has risen to a new level in the era of biopower.

Therein lies the specificity of the moment. In today's world, there are many states with very different forms of political life and different interpretations of freedom. What makes them similar is the technique of biopower, since they all dispose of living human beings, space, rhythm, and the way of preserving their lives, employing the same or similar ways of identifying threat, restricting freedom, and sanitary and police management in an emergency situation. This similarity between the states allows for another twist in the consideration of the topic. So far, we have been talking about states taking sanitary measures as if it were something obvious, and the desire to alienate at least some of the freedoms occurs in a quite benign environment. In fact, this is not the case. We remember well that, for several decades, one of the most common ideas was that of "globalization". Globalization meant broad, intensive, and ever-increasing connections between countries, the diminishing importance of national borders, the broadening role of international organizations and institutions, and the widespread use of electronic communications and networks that make the instant connection between people and events around the world possible.

This may have seemed a freedom that was increasingly guaranteed and protected by international law and related institutions. To a certain extent this was freedom, but its nature needs clarification. At the turn of the millennium, the famous sociologist Zygmunt Bauman coined the term "globalization elite". Indeed, at that time, there emerged people and groups who benefited most from freedom of movement, from the actual destruction of borders. These were the businessmen and managers of the global economy, the people of the arts and entertainment trade, the scientists who travel between universities, and the staff of international organizations including educational, environmental, and human rights organizations. Bauman wrote that, at the same time, in their home countries, ordi-

nary people were losing the war for space: public spaces were disappearing, being fenced off, privatized, etc. Obviously, the elite of globalization can set patterns of behavior and lifestyles for the broader strata. World tourism has also meant a new modus of freedom which is not necessarily linked to civil liberties: someone who lives in an expensive hotel, resort area, or spends most of their time in a business park in a foreign country does not need liberties for the locals in the first place, but security and order. Environmental movements and the protection of rights, however, have different constitutions.

The current situation also means the collapse of this freedom as spatial mobility. It directly affects the interests of the globalization elite and destroys the way of life it has fostered for the much broader strata involved not only in tourism and its services, but also in the entire functioning of islands of global society around the world. An objective contradiction arises between the freedom of state disposal of sanitary and police biopower in its territory (including police guarantees to the exclaves of globalization) and the freedom of the globalization elite that maintained the functioning of the world systems through its mobility. (The topic of migration suggests itself here, but should be considered in another place.)

One obvious solution to this problem is the existence of electronic communications and networks, which, in theory, need neither territory nor security guarantees to ensure uninterrupted instant (real-time) communication between all participants in the processes. However, "electronic freedom" has a number of features that make it increasingly undesirable for states that gain momentum again. We can put aside here a rather popular topic, namely, the direct interference of networks in the political process. The discussion of this topic all too quickly leads us to the question of good will and bad will, of whether it is possible to change the notion of law and the desire to comply with national legislation on the part of the so-called "Internet giants". It seems to us that the question is different, and much more complex. Instantaneous connections between territorially distant participants in communications lead to the emergence of numerous communities that cannot be fixed in the territory at all. Their formation and disintegration, topics of discussion, and ways of self-identification may not make any intelligible political sense, nor pose any immediate political threat. In the long run, however, they cannot help but undermine the bond between localization and representation that serves as the basis of the legitimacy of any modern state.

In restricting freedoms and reclaiming power, the modern state assumes that disruptions of the link between the localization of populations in territory, national solidarity, and security (including epidemic security) were temporary, whereas the modern restriction of freedoms and the closure of borders is a return to the norm. Although some systems of communication are almost impossible to "return inside the borders", it is hard to doubt that only temporary successes await states along the way. We cannot permanently count on the interconnection between protection and obedience to be a decisive argument, especially for those who regard neither life nor health as such an unconditional value.

II

Of course, the processes described above are multidimensional. There are other aspects as well. For example, we can see new alliances between knowledge and power, which, on the one hand, reinforce already-existing practices of biopower and, on the other, introduce something completely new. However, it is precisely the relationship between the public and the private, as one of the central dimensions of any society, that becomes a point of convergence for many other processes in a pandemic situation, a subject of multiple stakes, and a node of many conflicts. The sanitary measures recommended and undertaken by various authorities and organizations around the world lead to an unprecedented intrusion into the daily lives and bodies of citizens, previously considered a strictly private domain. At the same time, public spaces are being filled by those who are willing and ready to express their opposition to such interventions.

For the social sciences, the emerging situation in which certain social trends are already on the rise but have not yet taken their final form is of particular importance, since the current changes affect the pillars on which the division between the public and the private is based in the contemporary world. First, the notions of the *legal* and the *legitimate* which always accompany the drawing of the boundary between the private and the public are being transformed. Emergency measures become a reality not only as a sociotechnical component of everyday life, but also as a political reality claiming a higher status than legislation. The object of these measures, the population, faces a constant stimulation to legitimize decisions that appeal to the supreme value of individual life and, in this respect, inherently devalue all other considerations. A large part of the population rejects this regime of constant legitimation, and either resorts to tactics of evasion of the measures imposed on them or resists them outright, questioning the legitimacy of the emerging social order.

Second, there is a change in the content and ways of conducting *public life*. The boundary between public and private, which traditionally coincided with the work/leisure division among other things, begins to move away from the latter, so that previously public forms of activity migrate into private spaces. The most obvious trend of this kind is the move of work and learning into the homes. This inevitably transforms the way relevant public practices are carried out, not only by making the home part of the work environment (if only as a background behind the shoulders of the person looking into the camera), but also by changing the way these practices are carried out (for example, the way work meetings are conducted). Paradoxically, distance working and distance learning do not mean an increase, but a reduction or disappearance of distance to work and learning. The digitalization of work and learning, which has become one of the most visible features of the pandemic, has not, at the same time, led to the decline of the "old" publicity. On the contrary, we can observe a strengthening of those forms of public engagement that involve collective action, from volunteer initiatives to mass protests against the introduction of restrictive measures. The public came into motion throughout the social

space, including in those professional communities that seemed to be the most prepared for new forms of public, for example, among IT professionals.

Third, we see changes in the way people *interact with each other*, especially in public places. The pandemic has created new habits and forced us to invent new ways of doing things. We look at the people we encounter differently, and we construct our social actions differently. This is happening both in the physical world and in the digital world. In the physical world, we are beginning to use new forms of categorizing others and new strategies for orienting ourselves to the rules of public behavior. For example, we invent new forms of handshaking. In the digital world, we are changing strategies for expressing our point of view, depending on the opinions on the pandemic of those people with whom we have online contact. The pandemic puts considerable pressure on our interactions, forcing us to pay attention to the aspects of our interactions with others that were previously self-evident, such as physical distance. As a result, not only do we begin to behave differently, but we also become available to the condemnation or praise from the others in situations where our conduct was not of interest before.

Fourth, the practices and perceptions associated with *the private* inevitably change. The home, which often used to serve as a "shelter" from the public, can become a trap when the amount of time spent there increases. The severity of this situation is experienced differently by different categories of people. It has the most devastating effects on those who are considered "in charge" of the private sphere — women. The pandemic, by opening access inside the home to those who have often or always remained outside it (such as the police and employers), simultaneously encapsulates the home, making its borders less permeable to those who live in it. This poses a threat to members of vulnerable social groups, making them more helpless and defenseless. Another aspect of the transformation of the private is the increasing role of the medical gaze in the sphere of private interactions and bodily practices. Not only are we subjected to constant medical supervision, but we involve ourselves in this supervision by medicalizing our relationship with our bodies. This medicalization becomes a moral imperative: we are obliged to take care of our health not because we have to observe certain social proprieties, but because we have to try not to harm the health of others. Our private relationship with our bodies becomes subject to public scrutiny.

The four aspects of the transformation of the public and the private mentioned above are reflected in the articles collected in this issue. Andrei Korbut's article deals with the specifics of following the pandemic rules. The author notes that if we consider the adherence to these rules as a public activity, it reveals a grey area, that is, an incomplete adherence to the rules, which, however, is similar enough to full adherence to them to not cause conflicts or punishment. The phenomenon of the grey zone extends our understanding of how public space is transformed when it becomes subject of the regulation by multiple agencies that impose rules of behavior. The pandemic allows us to study these processes with much more clarity than the pre-pandemic situation, because it makes the rules "material": they are communicated to the population in the form of inscriptions, images, and signs, and involve the use of certain objects like masks and gloves. In this re-

spect, social scientists who have long been concerned with the problem of rule-following have an opportunity not only to apply their concepts to the new social reality, but also to transform some basic categories of sociological thinking.

Mark Belov's article on the problem of legal order in a pandemic raises the question of what are the legal grounds for the imposition of anti-COVID measures. By analyzing Russian legislation, the author shows that lawmakers essentially establish a state of emergency without declaring it. This allows the existing legal order to be reinforced by extending emergency measures for as long as the authorities deem necessary. Legal space begins to build not around the real danger of COVID-19 to the population, but around forms of control over the population. Ironically, these transformations of legality are confirmed by the mass protests against the imposed measures observed around the world. The author points out that these protests are in fact aimed at preserving the legal order, i.e., they follow the same logic as the laws against which they are directed. According to the author, the negative reaction of the authorities to these protests is explained by the authorities' attempt to retain a monopoly on legal violence. Thus, the legal novelties incited by the pandemic create new grounds for the inclusion and exclusion of certain social groups from the public space.

Daria Litvina and Anna Temkina's article focuses on the boundary between the public and the private, which has been problematized by the pandemic. Analyzing the experience of one social category (academicians), the authors show that even this privileged group whose working conditions did not change as radically as many others' in the pandemic situation has great difficulty in reassembling its professional and personal identity. Tasks previously separated in space and time overlap, leading to a significant increase in the moral burden on members of the academic professions, making them feel anxiety, guilt, and shame. The authors show that this group copes with the intense moral distress generated by the pandemic by developing habits that allow them to find new grounds for stabilizing their selves and their private and public lives. In this sense, the experience of academicians can be extended to many other social groups forced to seek new foundations for self-identity in the face of a radical shift in the boundary between the private and the public.

The article by Arthur Atanesyan, Anahit Hakobyan, and Bradley Reynolds focuses on the changes in public communication practices in the digital space. Summarizing the results of previous studies and analyzing the data from their study of Armenian Facebook users, the authors conclude that online behavior in a pandemic situation can be described using the Spiral of Silence Theory: when expressing their opinions about COVID-19 and the measures taken to combat it, social media users refrain from expressing views that contradict, in their opinion, the generally accepted viewpoint. This leads to an even greater marginalization of their views in public space, despite the fact that these views may be dominant in private life. As a result, the discrepancy between people's actual behavior and their expressed opinions only increases. The authors show that social media, as a public venue for expressing one's opinions about COVID-19, can be perceived as a too-unpredictable environment, requiring the use of communication strategies of concealment and

silence. This is a major research challenge for social scientists, as it challenges them to find new ways to reconstruct how different social groups perceive the current situation.

The article by Svetlana Bankovskaya, Javad Maddahi, and Tahere Lotfi Khachaki describes the changes taking place in the paradigmatic private setting of the home in a pandemic situation. Based on interviews with Iranian women describing their experiences of lockdown and the pandemic in general, the authors reveal the transformations in perceptions and practices related to the home: there is an increase in domestic violence, including physical, psychological, and economic. As a result, the home begins to be perceived not as a shelter, but as a trap from which it is impossible to escape. The experience of Iranian families reflects one of the trends related to COVID-19 of the strengthening of the symbolic and material role of private spaces can lead to the increase in the number of barriers to communication between private spaces and the public sphere, effectively depriving certain social groups (primarily women with families) of control over their lives. This shows that, in a pandemic situation, the private sphere can collapse rather than expand, due to the expansion of certain social relationships and an increase in interpersonal violence.

Finally, Ksenia Shepetina's article outlines the changed moral landscape of public life in a pandemic situation. Analyzing the transformation of the ways of perceiving and categorizing others in public spaces (first of all, in public transport), the author identifies processes related to three categories of others (non-specific, specific, and stigmatized): stigmatized others become even more stigmatized, while the other two categories are homogenized. This suggests that COVID-19 not only introduces yet another basis for perceiving and evaluating others in public spaces, but also transforms habitual social interactions in public spaces. To what extent these changes will take hold is still too early to judge, but they should definitely be taken into account in future research.

These and other issues related to the perturbations of the private and the public during the COVID-19 pandemic are also discussed in book reviews by Nail Farkhatdinov, Irina Trotsuk, Elizaveta Zakharova, and Varvara Kobyshcha.

In publishing this issue, we certainly do not pretend to cover all aspects of the ongoing transformations of the public and the private. Nevertheless, we hope that the articles presented here will provide social scientists with important analytical tools with which they can monitor and describe social processes that have previously escaped the attention of researchers.