

THE NEW PANDEMIC NORMAL THROUGH THE EYES OF BULGARIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract. The present article attempts to situate the reflections of Bulgarian students on the “new normal” in the pandemic situation. The authors analyze the results of an empirical survey conducted in the period January-February 2022 at the University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria. Under the conditions of the COVID pandemic, students were the social groups that had to radically change the mode of its basic activity, learning. Education was conducted entirely in the form of distance learning, which, along with the other anti-pandemic measures, proved to be the first serious change in the way of life of the surveyed students.

Keywords: new normal; normal life; COVID pandemic; students; Bulgaria

Introduction

It is an elementary truth that societies pass through various changes in the course of their development. These changes are the subject of different sciences; the findings of researchers, although not always unambiguous, have built humanity’s memory along the path of human development. Some social changes are of fundamental importance and assume the nature of transformations when they concern the values upon which society’s institutional system is built, especially the modes of production and distribution of goods. Other changes, for instance, the appearance of new technologies, new means of communication, new labor tools, etc., may considerably influence separate social spheres, but without leading to a transformation of the social system. What unites these differing in character social changes is that, to a lesser or greater degree, they change the lives of people, their habits, stereotypes, attitudes and models of behavior. Social changes and their impact on people’s lives unfold an never-ending tale, the continuation of which each generation leaves to the next, and in which the frequently encountered expression is, “the world is no longer the same”. This phrase seems to sum up most categorically the change that has come about in the lives of people, whether it be caused by war, natural disaster, epidemics, global crises, etc.

In the last few years, the world finds itself in a pandemic brought about by COVID19. This is “a new type of contagious disease, caused by a virus that spreads at great speed on a global scale and has various social consequences (effects)” (Kineva 2021, p. 24). The COVID pandemic imposed changes in the lives of millions of people, who are probably increasingly aware that they are living in a risk society. According to Ulrich Beck, this is a society that debates on and manages risks, and in which “a transformation of normality into absurdity” takes place“ (Beck 1986, p. 15). The transformation we have witnessed in the last two years, in addition to the familiar expression “the world is no longer the same”, has come to be described through the term “the new normal”.

Methodology of the survey

The article is based on a survey that combines two basic methods of information gathering: a theoretical overview of the relevant scientific literature and a qualitative empirical social survey, conducted by the authors, on the topic “The New Normal”. The study was conducted in January-February 2022 as a survey among 28 students (aged between 20 and 24 years; with an equal number of men and women) from the University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria. The survey is not representative. Information was registered by means of a virtual in-depth interview (Markova 2021). The questionnaire (in terms of its length and the nature of the research questions) took into account the specific online environments in which the survey was conducted.

Outlines of the new normal

The concept of “new normal” began to be more widely used to primarily describe the economic consequences of the global financial crisis of 2007 – 2008. The person who contributed to its spread was the CEO of PIMCO Mohamed El-Erian (The Economist 2009). In the context of the global crisis, “the new normal” is most often used to describe all the changes that have taken place in the world’s economy (Bragina 2012), as well as the transformations (economic, cultural and social) that give rise to insecurity and have an impact on individuals’ and society’s perceptions (Corpuz 2021).

In the context of the COVID pandemic, the term “new normal” gained wide currency thanks to the former German chancellor Angela Merkel, who, in a New Year’s address to the nation, stated that the Coronavirus was dramatically changing our lives and putting to the test, as never before, our notions of the normal, of social life and social connectedness. (Die Bundesregierung).

“Normal” is most often used as a normative term dependent on the context, and contains a certain evaluation of social facts. The concept designates “ordinary or usual, the same as would be expected” (Cambridge Dictionary); “typical, usual or ordinary, what you would expect” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries); “something that

characterizes a standard” (Collins); “according with, constituting, or not deviating from a norm, rule, procedure, or principle; occurring naturally; generally free from physical or mental impairment or dysfunction; exhibiting or marked by healthy or sound functioning” (Merriam-Webster). Following this line, V. Proykov gives the following definition: “a harmonious activity, in which a person instinctively chooses that which would bring him in harmony with others and make him to some degree, if not happy, at least satisfied” (Proykov 2018, p. 13).

Two meanings stand out in the definition of “normal”. One is related to norms, rules, customs; it stems from the root of the word “norm” and points to repetitiveness. The second is related to expectations that derive from some obviously objective (in our opinion), but subjectively defined as such, standards of conduct and action that are a kind of daily hypotheses regarding normality. For instance, it is normal for a student to be anxious during an examination; it is normal for a sick person to worry when he is expecting the results of medical tests; it is normal for a child to be afraid of the dark, etc. The normal is connected with formal rules – laws and norms, and also to informal rules derived from traditions, customs, religions, etc. The knowledge of the normal in a society makes recognizable that which is considered to deviate from the normal, which is defined as abnormal or a deviation (for example, for corruption practices, including tolerance for them in Bulgarian society, see Petrunov 2019, p. 568). While normality related to formal rules is a generally valid standard, the normality based on informal rules is not such a standard. What is normal for one group of people might not be for another, even within the framework of the same situation: for instance, a dispute between representatives of different political parties, or representative of different scientific currents. Hence, the two meanings of normality – based on formal or informal rules – might not coincide; some discrepancy between them might arise.

The concept of “new” also has several meanings: “a situation, activity or idea never seen or experienced before, something different from the familiar, the previous one” (Cambridge Dictionary); “something unknown, that is just beginning; modern, of the most recent type” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries); something that is in the process of creating, building and inventing; something that has replaced another thing, which no longer exists (in the sense of replacing “the previous normality” (before the pandemic) with a new one) (Collins).

The connection between normal and new in the concept “the new normal” describes a situation that was unusual in the past, but in the present is what should be expected (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries); a previously extraordinary situation that suddenly becomes standard or typical (Collins) (i.e., not a temporary phenomenon, but the new normal).

Every pandemic has a specific scale, speed and way of dissemination of the disease, a specific duration, specific economic and social effects, etc. The fact is that, despite the differences, there are also some similarities between present pandemics (including COVID) and past ones. A theoretical overview shows that part of the

preventive measures taken against COVID19, which contribute to the emergence of the “new normal”, are in fact not unfamiliar to people. Such are the quarantine, isolation, disinfection, the wearing of masks and protective clothing. As basic measures for fighting infections these means have been used in previous epidemics and pandemics, such as cholera, influenza (Spanish, Asian, Hong Kong), ebola, etc.

The concept of “new normal” now describes not only the existing pandemic situation but also the conditions that will continue after the pandemic is past, insofar as some of the present changes will be preserved as mechanism for preventing future pandemics. The basic changes that occurred during the COVID pandemic were based on normative acts – new laws and/or new norms adopted by government organs; these changes will probably be preserved in the future. They include: wearing protective masks (in closed spaces and in the open); regular disinfection; physical distance; hybrid forms of teaching (online and in person); distance work, home office; the digital COVID certificate; the possibility of prohibiting organized group and mass events or visits to trade centers, etc.

From a researcher’s perspective, the new normal is interesting not only as a set of changed rules that regulate how people live together, but also, resulting from these rules, as a set of new experiences and changes in people’s way of life. Different social groups probably experience the new normal in different ways. A considerable number of studies have already been produced in this research perspective; research has related the new normal to: changes and problems in higher education (Yasmin et al. 2020; Hoyt et al. 2021; Anthony et al. 2021; Stoyanov 2021; Varbanova et al. 2022); the implementation of many new technologies (Zakaria 2020); the digital activities of people (Survey XII); adaptation to the pandemic and the culture of the new normal (Corpuz 2021); working from home and income inequality (Bonacini et al. 2021), etc.

The new normal through the eyes of Bulgarian students

A qualitative social survey was conducted among students of the UNWE in April-May 2021. Its purpose was to identify the most important changes that had taken place in their lives under the new rules of coexistence in a pandemic situation, and how these changes impacted on their notion of a normal life. The theoretical model of the survey was based on the following assumptions:

First of all, in the course of his/her socialization, every person acquires knowledge of what is considered normal in society. Within that knowledge, a person fits his/her notion of a normal life. That notion bears the cultural stamp of the society in which he/she lives.

Second, because society is a dynamic system, each person needs to decipher and understand every important change in the social context of his/her life. If not, as Fromm writes, a person would be filled with doubts that would paralyze his ability to live (Fromm 1941).

Third, during the lives of the surveyed students, there had until now been only one serious global crisis, that of 2009. But they were then too young to understand and assess its consequences for their own lives. The COVID pandemic is the first serious change in their already established way of life.

In analyzing the obtained results, we can identify four basic changes in the lives of the surveyed students under the conditions of the new normal: the nearly ubiquitous digitalization of their daily lives, the feeling that their freedom is restricted, the growing feeling of insecurity, and a reconsideration of the values in their lives.

Ubiquitous digitalization of everyday life

One of the basic changes to have come about in the lives of the surveyed students under the pandemic conditions is the almost ubiquitous digitalization of their daily lives. This change was indicated by all the interviewed students. The pandemic has intensified and compressed the requirements of adaptation to the digital world and the application of digitalization towards a change in the ways certain activities are carried out. This process would probably have been more gradual if it had not been for the pandemic and the restrictive measures introduced. The students' basic activity, learning, was performed entirely online in Bulgaria. Examinations were also administered online. This radically expanded the digital life of a student. Though students had performed many activities online even before (e.g., shopping, communication, making references, watching movies, playing online games, etc.), now they started to satisfy additional needs online, for instance, listening to concerts, watching performances, sightseeing and visiting museums, etc. (*"I rediscovered digital visits to museums, concerts, theatrical and opera performances as a new kind of experience, which, moreover, does not cost much and so I could afford it."* – woman, aged 20; *"digitalization increasingly determines our lives and will structure our everyday life"* – man, aged 24)

Online learning provokes the surveyed students to think more about their place of study at home. Many homes rarely have special spaces for work (offices or work corners). That is why many of the students have allotted, or plan to allot, more funds for the interior design of their working space. In this connection, one of the respondents shared that *"online learning, in which I have to turn on a camera, faces me with the need to think more about the interior that others are seeing"* – woman, aged 22.

The feeling of restricted individual freedom

During the COVID pandemic, the governments of various states imposed a number of restrictive measures (restriction on travel, on visits to public spaces, on cultural events and entertainment; closing of stores, theaters, restaurants, fitness halls; time slots for shopping, etc.). Some researchers describe society under quarantine as a kind of closed society (Krastev 2020, p. 12) or a locked-down society (Markova 2021). One of the basic characteristics of these restrictions is

that they restrict the individual freedoms of people. But “individual freedoms have never been an absolute value and must always be assessed in view of the public good” (Krastev 2020, p. 80). Under the new normal, it is necessary to revise the previous view on the freedom-security ratio.

More than two thirds of the surveyed students express the opinion that one of the basic changes in their daily lives was the new feeling that their individual freedoms were being restricted. They share that, *“our lives are not the same anymore in terms of our everyday life, of our freedom. The restrictions and measures that have been imposed on us during the last year are something we had not encountered until now. Free travel to foreign countries, financial security and security in our work, being physically present when learning in educational institutions, the possibility to enter a closed space without wearing a mask – all these things sound like a distant mirage”* – man, aged 21. It was also said that, *“many norms were imposed that until now had been a mirage for people. Restrictions on travel, on going outside the home, on visiting establishments after certain hours. Because of these restrictions, people more or less acquired discipline and now none of these things will be as before”* – woman, aged 22.

The requirement for maintaining “physical distance” between people is rather distressing for the surveyed students; some of the respondents mention that this is growing into a social distance: *“Social distance – an incorrectly used term that has gained currency, and although it was corrected, it remained, because in fact they had in mind physical distance, but it turned into social isolation.”* – woman, aged 23; *“For good or for evil, we ourselves started to impose restrictions on ourselves, to even stay away from people. This social distancing is something exceptionally unfamiliar to us, which I believe will continue to escalate in the future.”* – man, aged 24.

The growing feeling of insecurity

More than two thirds of the surveyed students indicated that one new thing was their feeling of insecurity. A basic reason for this is the restructuring of their daily lives, of the activities they perform and the pace of these activities. Every change in already established stereotypes, even in the daily schedule and of the established structures of everyday life, creates a relative degree of instability and unpredictability as to the results of activities. The feelings of insecurity and fear grow additionally due to ignorance and anxiety with respect to the pandemic, the new CORONA strains, uncertainty about the eventual long-term consequences of the vaccine, etc. Diverging information about the disease and its consequences also increases stress. According to the surveyed students, the lack of trust in institutions is one of the marks of insecurity. With so much information pouring in, it is hard for them to discover what is true and who to trust, for instance, as concerns the variant of COVID, the vaccines, the treatment, the prophylactics of the disease, etc. The feeling of insecurity resulting from the pandemic was present among nearly all the surveyed students. To illustrate this, we will present some of the answers to our questions: *“I was living more calmly*

before, there were no restrictions on anything, there was none of this fear of the virus.” (man, aged 21); “I am constantly tormented by the fear of falling sick, and if so, whether the worst might not happen” (woman, aged 23); “I am afraid for my close ones and for my own life. Every day on the news, they announce the number of the dead and more and more sick people. This is a stress and frightens me” (woman, aged 24); “The panic and fear that accumulates is enormous” (man, aged 20); “People started fearing one another and guarding themselves from one another, which is a pitiful thing to see, because even without COVID, we were not a very helpful society, and now, not at all” (man, aged 20); “The new normal is seeing people everywhere wearing masks and gloves, people who are scared stiff, stressed out and frightened” (man, aged 24).

Reconsidering values

More than half of the surveyed students expressed the opinion that the period of the COVID pandemic was a time of reconsidering the values in their lives. This rethinking is based on the growing feeling of insecurity. In this respect, one of the students gave a telling answer. *“To be asked ‘how are you?’ by the people who are really interested in me, to be thankful, to wake up and see it’s a beautiful sunny day outside, to get a smile from an unknown person in the street, to remember the good moment, to receive a true hug.” (woman, aged 24).*

The surveyed students rediscovered the value of the family and closeness between people, the possibility of going out into the clean air, enjoying nature, taking pleasure in every moment of life. They were increasingly aware of the impermanence of existence, the relativity of many things they had previously considered important: material acquisitions, career, income. Overall, this is a deep look at the things in life that they seem to have disregarded or not paid enough attention to. Here are some indicative responses from the students: *“People are more responsible and concerned about their close ones, and not only. They devote more time to things they hadn’t thought about before” (man, aged 20); “Now I have more time for my family and to put in order the thoughts in my head” (woman, aged 22); “We now started to pay more attention to things like personal hygiene, we started to notice the people around us. Before we took them for granted, but this virus gave us the possibility to spend time with our loved ones” (woman, aged 24); “Up to that moment, I had not valued as I do now the time spent with my family, I had not valued this closeness and perhaps we had not been so united” (man, aged 20).*

The reconsideration of values does not change the students’ notion of a normal life; which according to two thirds of them, means family, work, friends, a home, income, freedom. Here are some responses to the question as to what a normal life is. It is, *“to go to work, to have a decent financial situation that would satisfy my basic human needs; to be able to practice my favorite activities; to have time for myself, which I will spend as I like; to have a home and people close to me”*

(woman, aged 24); “... when all the people I love are healthy and well, when I have a job and enough money for mine and my friends’ needs (man, aged 21).

But in the context of the growing feeling of insecurity during the COVID pandemic, some of the elements of the normal life become hard to achieve: for instance, income, the freedom to perform certain activities, entertainment, sports, travel, the combination of family life and work, etc.

Conclusion

The survey results give us reason to assume that the combined dimension of the new normal under pandemic conditions probably represents a dynamic enhancement of already familiar risks. The COVID pandemic is not simply a new risk. It is a catalyst for other risks, such as loss of employment, loss of income, which in turn may lead to loss of a home, reduced possibilities, and for certain social groups, the impossibility to educate their children, constant stress and anxiety, etc.

As Krastev writes, “people will be impatient to return to normality, they will find that is impossible. It will turn out that there is something disturbing about yesterday’s world. The difference between past and present is that it is impossible to know what the future of the present is, but we are already living in the future of the past. And we know that the future of yesterday was the COVID pandemic we are experiencing today. And that is why yesterday’s normality will seem to us both desirable and frightening” (Krastev 2020, pp. 19 – 20).

In such a situation, the role of the state becomes increasingly visible. First, because, through its institution, it created new rules of coexistence; and second, because in it lies the hope that society will be preserved. The rule “every man for himself” does not preserve society. The state remains the basic agent for dealing with critical situations, even in its quality of counterparty to other states searching together for international solutions. In this respect, one of the students said something very indicative: “*The normal is to be sure that whatever happens, the state (or what is left of it) will help me recover if something bad happens to me*” (man, aged 21).

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