

FAMILY WELL-BEING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BULGARIA

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Abstract. *The COVID-19 pandemic over the past three years has affected various aspects of life – political, economic, social and cultural. Their management and overcoming are crucial for the survival of our post-global society. The present study is complemented by disaster anthropology, and the goal is to track the pandemic and its impact on family well-being. The paper is based on the conducted field ethnographic research. Its aim is to describe and analyze three models of coping mechanisms for the crisis – in the capital, the small town and villages. The interlocutor's individual stories present changes in the economic situation, social relations, cultural transformations and the psychological consequences of the pandemic (insecurity, stress, negative emotions, etc.). The research is following the construction of various mechanisms to overcome the consequences of the pandemic, often adapting to the old ones, which are from the previous crisis periods, as a way to ensure family survival in the new disaster.*

Keywords: family; COVID-19] well-being] overcoming mechanism; Bulgaria.

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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of COVID-19 over the past three years has affected various aspects of life – political, economic, social and cultural. Managing and overcoming them are critical to the survival of our post-global society. This study is complemented in the field of disaster anthropology, with the aim of tracing the pandemic and its impact not on different types of local communities and groups, but especially on the family. The study assumes the COVID-19 pandemic as a biological disaster that has short-term and long-term psychological, mental, social and emotional impacts on all family members (Hoffman 2017; Hoffman & Oliver-Smith 2002, 2020). The 2020–2022 experience has become a serious threat to the well-being of children and families, who have to cope in a short time with a range of challenges such as health threats, social disruption, financial insecurity, caregiving and stress, etc., which affect individual members but also family structures and processes (Prime & Wade, 2020: 631). Family resilience is determined by many vulnerability factors such as age, educational status, existing mental health status, economic disadvantage or quarantine due to infection or fear of infection (Gayatri & Irawaty, 2022). All of these call into question the stability and novelty of being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some families will be more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic than others due to low income, mental health and/or special needs and/or experiences of marginalization. Other families may experience resilience or post-traumatic growth – the ability to not only survive, but thrive in times of hardship (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014; Masten & Narayan, 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SCOPES

Implemented within the project ‘COVID-19: The 2020 Challenge. Community Attitudes, Strategies and Responses’ (KII-06-ДК2/1-30.03.2021), financed by Bulgarian Science Fund, the study is based on different types of sources. First of all, it is realized on a round of field ethnographic research con-

ducted in the period 2020 and 2022 in different types of settlements – capital Sofia, in a small town like the town of Bansko, Southwest Bulgaria, and in villages such as Seslav, Dalgach and Belomortsi in Northeast Bulgaria. Classical ethnographic methods, such as in-depth and semi-structured interviews, were used.

The interlocutor’s individual stories present changes in the economic situation, social relations, cultural transformations and the psychological consequences of the pandemic (insecurity, stress, negative emotions, etc.). The research is following the construction of various mechanisms to overcome the consequences is monitored, often adapting to the old ones, which are from the previous crisis periods, as a way to ensure family survival in the new disaster.

The study describes and analyses the processes and consequences in families during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on family well-being and quality of life (Prime et al., 2020: 631). It seeks to capture the micro-level and the focus is on family relationships and family rituals within the nuclear and extended family, often including elderly parents. On the other hand, as pandemic-like disasters are associated with a range of emotions experienced, and which have an impact on relationships, the study will also explore these (cf. Wuropulos, 2020).

The family is seen as a system indivisible of its parts. The study focuses on different problems and coping patterns and it is focused on individual examples according to the type of family structure. on families with children. It encompasses several family types: nuclear families that include two parents and a child / children, single parent families, families that lost a family member during the pandemic, extended family (three generations), and elderly parents living alone. Because the research is multidirectional, the purpose of the article is only to sketch some aspects of what happened during the pandemic, and the quest for more in-depth research to be pursued further.

According to F. Walsh (2020) ‘family resilience refers to capacities in family func-

tioning to withstand and rebound from adversity. More than surviving loss and coping with disruptions, resilience involves positive adaptation: regaining the ability to thrive, with the potential for transformation and growth forged through the searing experience'. The study adopts the conceptual idea of family well-being as consisting of three overarching processes: (a) communication (clear information, emotional sharing, collaborative problem solving, dyadic and family coping), (b) organization (adaptability, connectedness, and access to social and economic resources), and (c) belief systems (creating meaning, hope, and spirituality) (Walsh, 2015). On the one hand, it is these processes that have been disrupted or altered in many families in the context of the pandemic, but on the other, they can also serve as sources of resilience (Prime et al., 2020: 634).

COVID-19 IN BULGARIA

The first confirmed case of the disease in Bulgaria is as of 8 March 2020. As of 15 November 2022, there are 1 284 051 confirmed cases of coronavirus disease, and the number of deaths is 37 965. Bulgaria ranks eighty-seventh in the world in the number of infections per million inhabitants (over 187 thousand) and second in the world (after Peru) in the number of deaths per million inhabitants. In Bulgaria, as in other countries, there is an increased mortality rate during a pandemic, i.e. the deaths in a given period are more than the deaths expected in the same period out of a pandemic. In many countries, however, the increase in mortality is even greater than the recorded cases of deaths from COVID-19 (Todorov, 2022). Two doses of the vaccine were administered to 2 073 773 people in Bulgaria, 34% of the population, leaving the country in last place in the EU.

The pandemic goes through five main waves: March–April 2020, November–December 2020, March–April 2021, October–November 2021, and January–March 2022.

There are several key events to note about the evolution of the pandemic in Bulgaria. The first is related to the establishment of a

National Operational Headquarters (*HOH*) on 25 February 2020 to manage the situation. On 13 March 2020, the government declared a state of emergency throughout the country for a period of one month, which was extended on 3 April until 13 May 2020. At the beginning of the pandemic, there were also closures of checkpoints. The first such case was the town of Bansko, a winter resort with a large number of foreign tourists, on 17 March 2020. During the Easter holidays, regional cities are also blocked, among them Sofia. Separately, some of the country's Roma neighbourhoods have been quarantined. This happens in the period March–June 2020 and affects Roma communities in Plovdiv, Sliven, Kazanlak, Nova Zagora, Kyustendil, etc. In the following months, the epidemic situation is prolonged several times (see Ilieva, Baeva 2021). On 17 November 2022, a green certificate was also introduced for restaurants, malls, and large non-food stores. On 30 March 2022, a new green certificate was introduced. The Council of Ministers issued a decision that the epidemic emergency was lifted as of 1 April. This removes the mandatory wearing of a protective mask in indoor public spaces, the observance of physical distance, and restrictions on the number of people who can visit indoor establishments such as shops and educational establishments at the same time.

Measures taken by the Bulgarian government to reduce the spread of COVID-19 are far weaker than in other countries, but involved quarantine/blocking, travel bans, social distancing, school closures and closure of public places. Families in Bulgaria also faced health challenges of the pandemic as staying at home, social isolation, distancing, but also health care problems, lack of medicines and medical staff. These had an inevitable impact on family well-being because they are associated with home confinement, restricted freedom of movement, economic hardship, reduced or loss of financial resources, lack of work or online work, increased levels of vulnerability and poor mental health (loneliness, stress, depression, and anxiety) (cf. Gayatri, Irawaty 2022; Mazzucchelli et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered an economic crisis in the country. COVID-19 and the restrictive measures to combat the virus led to significant changes in the country's macroeconomic environment as a whole. They were the result of the social distancing measures imposed, the deterioration of the international environment and the change in business and household behaviour in the face of a pandemic. By 2019, Bulgaria is in a period of a marked upturn, with GDP growth holding above 3% for the past five years. The factors behind this growth retain their influence in the early 2020s, but gradually, under the influence of the spreading pandemic, GDP contracted by -8.6%, and by -5.2% in the third. Investment activity is declining, pro-manufacturing is being curtailed, the level of services is declining, and overall economic uncertainty is rising, with inevitable long-term consequences for the whole of Bulgarian society (Institute for Market Economics, 2020).

FAMILY WELL-BEING IN BULGARIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Interviews with different types of families, regardless of location type, show the same trends in family relationships and emotional experiences, although local specificities are also observed. They primarily concern the period before the beginning of the state of emergency. It is about the preparations for the pandemic. According to the interviews, some of the families in Sofia started preparing for it as early as January 2020. Then the interviewees shared that they understood what was happening outside Bulgaria. They told they got information from the media, including social media, but mostly it was discussed in workplaces and offices and even collective orders were made for high protection masks and disinfectants. The next step was to stock up on food and essential medicines and antibiotics. According to one conversation, the regular weekly markets in the big chains turn into stocking up on dry food, with shopping for 300–400 BGN (150–200 EURO). Another of the interviewees even confirmed that he was

considering buying weapons for self-defence because of anticipated social clashes. At the opposite pole are those who greeted these practices with laughter and disbelief then and considered as part of yet another conspiracy for the 'end of the world' according to the Mayan calendar. Comparisons are made to the panic of 2012 when some people were worried and stocked up on candles, rusks and medicine.

The declaration of the state of emergency and the closure of homes in March 2020 was the real beginning of the pandemic situation for my interlocutors. Most of them told that they were going through different stages of experiencing social isolation. That is why almost all interlocutors tell us that at the beginning of March 2020, home closure was met with some joy. They counted on the positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to give more quality time spent with all family members (cf. Gayatri, Irawaty 2022). Overwhelmed by intense daily life, those living in big cities shared they needed a break. Plans are beginning to be made for a range of family activities such as games, cooking or just family movies and relaxation. Among the positive outcomes were more time for family socializing and fun as mentioned: 'We thought it would be good to spend more time together' (m., 45, MA, Sofia); 'You were always flying up and down, stress, work, home. We needed to slow down' (m., 54, secondary education, Sofia).

The development of the pandemic in the following months and years and the imposition of prolonged restrictions inevitably led to a number of problems, however, strongly affecting family relationships (cf. Luttik et al., 2020). They show that experiencing the disaster affects family stability, which is put to the test, as well as how the family could adapt to challenges and stress. The main challenge that interviewees have to deal with is related to sharing the common space, which is often limited. Small apartments in Sofia, often without balconies, put families to difficulties and became their prison: 'Just here, in this apartment, four people, two children. Can you imagine? Without a balcony!'

(m., 47, MA, Sofia). For the other of the interlocutors: 'I'm an introvert. As they say, I've been preparing for this all my life' (m., 44, MA, Sofia).

If, until before the pandemic, this common space sharing was short-lived and often associated with holidays, during the COVID-19 restrictions the family's resilience depended on the ability to withstand and recover from the disaster, which required constructive adaptation (Walsh, 2020). Life confined to the home constant communication and cohabitation for long periods of time. For many participants, their time at home was intensely busy. The day was reorganised to increase productivity. In order for survival to take place a change in daily routines and rituals is required. The distinction between workdays and weekends disappeared. The pandemic changed the structure and routine of the family. They experienced 'the home in a radically different way, putting it to new uses and with a new geography.' (Moretti & Maturi, 2021).

Disruptions in daily routines changed some areas such as physical and mental health problems and family issues (Ameis et al., 2020). However, parents and children tried to cope with the pandemic together by establishing routines together and doing things that involve all members. Joint activities such as playing games, movies, creating (such as painting), gymnastics, cooking or planning meal times became a daily practice. Interviewees told that these are activities that are practiced before the pandemic on weekends or holidays, and during the lockdown became a daily practice and contribute to building family well-being and create a sense of security during the pandemic. These routine activities could improve the family with love and support each other (Gayatri & Irawaty 2022). They contributed to good communication within the family and to building cohesion and happiness among family members. Apart from within the family, interviewees said that they also sought support from other family members such as parents, siblings and friends. They communicated with them on a daily basis through

communication technologies and this communication became an important part of seeking and receiving social support during social distancing (Fuller & Huseth-Zosel, 2020).

One of the main issues shared by families with children was the need to reconcile different types of activities, family and work. One of the families recounted that the main role for this was that of the wife, who took care of the children, cooking and having to work at the same time. This created tension and requires renegotiation of duties to maintain balance. In another of the families interviewed there was an equal division of duties between the partners, but it was above all the exception. The main duties in the biggest part of the interviews continued to be performed by women, who were placed at a disadvantage. However, interviewees recounted that during the pandemic and confinement at home they relied on their partner exclusively to cope with the experience. It was the opportunities for increased communication, long conversations, sharing of experiences and emotions that contribute to strengthening relationships. On the other hand, family relationships were challenged by anxiety, hostility, dominance, stubbornness or rigidity (see Randall & Bodenmann, 2017).

Additional stress on family isolation was introduced by the ban on going out and visiting parks and mountains. Families experience heightened negative emotions that build up, reinforcing the panic of illness: 'Everything was fine, but why do they have to close the parks and mountains! I didn't understand that!' (f., 52, secondary education, Sofia). Some of the families even said that they forbid their children to interact with street cats or dogs because of the danger of infection.

The third challenge that the interviewed families had to deal with is the online education of the children. The situation is complicated by the fact that even before the pandemic began, pupils and students in the city of Sofia have been studying online since early February 2020 due to the declared influenza epidemic. Since the study included parents with younger children as well as teenagers,

the goal was to find specific experiences. For parents of younger pupils main concerns were having to leave work responsibilities to focus on their children's education. Lack of sufficient devices for working and learning was cited as an important problem. Lack of financial resources to purchase devices for learning and work is the main problem at the beginning of the pandemic. This has subsequently been solved by distributing tablets to students who cannot afford them (following the example of Bansko). Elderly children, on the other hand, coped better with online learning, but the lack of physical activity also affected their psychological state.

In addition to training and social communication, families had to deal with economic and financial problems. In interviews, they told they were affected by unemployment, problems with loans repayment and the lack of adequate financial assistance packages that the government is leaving to overcome financial turmoil. The main victims are those who have no constant income. Financial stress affected families directly through individual loss of work, as well as indirectly through uncertainty about the national economy and/or local unemployment levels (Schneider et al., 2015, 2017). In these situations, family networks are relying on the survival to ensure. For some of the families, the pensions of the elderly parents were the only income.

Important part of the interviews was the deal with biomedical problems. That is why, last but not least, stress, anxiety and fear of illness come out in the interviews. COVID-19 affected many communities indiscriminately, which causes the population to distance themselves socially and physical, to live in fear (Polizzi et al., 2020) and in uncertain conditions. These include threats to the health of themselves and/or loved ones, reducing social support outside the home and changes in work roles and/or routines, as well as the weight on the persons who care for them to meet the social and educational needs of children with children with closure of local schools and children's centers. Parents shared that they have experienced difficulties

to convince their children by complying with the health protocol, such as the purpose of wearing a mask, washing hands, social and physical distancing to protect public health, the aim of maintaining the health of others (cf. Gayatri, Irawaty 2022). The pandemic was conceived as a problem from the older ones, who also understood well the health hazards that their families faced. One of the interviewees shared that their child had developed disease symptoms associated with permanent disinfection. A similar symptom gradually affected one of the parents, which put the family in an even more complex situation. In addition to the training itself, the study suggested that when children were not at school, they were less physically active, had worse sleep hygiene and spent more time in front of screens. That is why parents were forced to consider various family games to include them so that they could divert them from the screens, but also created a positive atmosphere in the home (cf. with Prime et al., 2020: 634).

According to X. Zhou (2020) children and adolescents were more vulnerable to the psychological effects of the COVID-19 epidemic than adults because of their immature cognitive and emotional regulation systems and tend to show more negative psychological results. Interviewed parents say that their children are also experiencing stress at several levels caused by concern about the health of parents, grandparents (cf. Markov, Pileva, 2021: 70). This anxiety is even deeper than in the other people.

That is why some of the children did not want to go out so that they did not infect their relatives. According to the interviews, the lockdown is defined as the basic prerequisite for the depressive states of adolescents. They were also worried about the financial consequences, especially in families where there are unemployed. As a result, older children lose their desire to go out, even when the restrictions were raised. The only fun is still laptops and online peers games. Even after the restrictions were raised, some of the teenagers, regardless of even vaccinated, have continued to refuse to go out. Thus, families

were placed both in front of financial and emotional stress.¹ The fieldwork materials show that children were experiencing stress, in some it is long -lasting, while in others it is gradually overcome after the restrictive measures are raised. However, parents are adamant that the pandemic still at the end of 2022 has insurmountable influences on them in a long-lasting aspect. On the one hand, it affects the education and accumulated knowledge during this period, and on the other, it makes them more isolated, communicating within the family or to a large extent online with their peers: 'They have no real friends anymore. They stay home, play and that's it' (f., 46, MA, Sofia).²

For single parents, the situation was even more difficult. The parent was faced with the challenge of raising a child alone during the pandemic. Often, elderly relatives were also involved in raising a child, despite concerns about their health. For single parents, stress was compounded by the worry of raising children alone, and often adult parents depend on their income.³ Thus, although financial stress and fears of unemployment may be a common experience during the pandemic, the consequences for families may be greater for those with prior economic hardship compared to less economically vulnerable families. Lack of social support also played a role for parents and also increases stress.

But according to interlocutors' accounts, those who lose a family member face the worst situation. Since among the families interviewed there are those who have lost children or parents as a result of the illness the families face a serious crisis. On the one hand, they share the horror of losing a loved one within a few days, and on the other hand, the impossibility of say-

ing goodbye and burying them in a closed coffin. The interviewees even expressed doubts that they did not know who they had buried, especially since due to the poor organization of the hospitals there was confusion of the belongings of the sick and loss of documents. Children who lose their parents in a short time were also in a particularly complicated situation: 'After his father died, he had to grow up quickly. Now he feels like the man of the family' (f., 52, secondary education, Sofia).

In extended families, older parents played an important role in survival. Thanks to their pensions, daily expenses were covered. Due to the crisis, the young families often moved to the older ones. This practice reduced costs. In one of the cases studied, the young couple moved in with the parents due to unemployment. Their wedding was also postponed for better times when the young couple would have stable employment.

Finally, I will consider the situation of elderly parents living alone. According to one of the interviewees, 'The children took advantage of the pandemic not to go to see their parents' (m., 62, MA, Sofia). This clearly shows the disruption of social ties that occurred under the influence of the pandemic. For children who work and live in another locality, the pandemic limited opportunities to visit relatives. One of the respondents said that they had shopped for the elderly mother so that she would not have to go out of the same place for a long period of time.

According to the research of I. Markov and S. Pileva (2021), in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, responsibilities and obligations towards elderly relatives did not disappear, on the contrary – they were strengthened. However, the interviews conducted

¹ Some signs of stress are emotional signs (anxiety, frustration, sadness, anger, and confusion), physical signs (such as changes in energy, eating behavior, and sleeping disorder), cognitive signs (such as problem in thinking/worrying, concentration, and memory), and behavioral signs (such as withdrawing socially, arguing, risk-taking, and being less productive) (Gayatri, Irawaty 2021).

² To overcome the consequences of the COVID Zhou (2020), it proposes to use a model of psychological services including simultaneously social, school, and family systems, which interact and have a synergistic effect.

³ According to Ponnet (2014), for example, the relationships between financial stress and compromised mental health are stronger among low-income mothers than middle-income families, perhaps due to more severe consequences related to insufficient financial resources in low-income families.

show changes in social structures and attitudes and a strengthening of the kinship network in family relationships. This was a trend that is particularly visible, in the case of parents of expatriates living abroad. Other mechanisms were related to the mediating role of local networks that translate migrants' resource flows into delegated care practices (Baldassar 2007: 279). Such a variant of social support was provided by younger relatives caring for their elderly kin (cf. Baldassar et al., 2006). The best option was an immigrant sibling who fully takes care of the parents who stayed behind. In addition to the lack of real help, a reduction in financial resources sent by emigrants was evident in the pandemic context. Some interlocutors said that those living abroad remained unemployed for longer periods and relied primarily on social assistance. For this reason, the resources they send to their parents in Bulgaria also decrease. Visits, which often take place once or twice a year, became more distant and the separation between parents, children and grandchildren becomes even more difficult: 'Grandma, when will the corona virus end? You miss me so much!' (f., 75, secondary education, Seslav).

Therefore, more and more often the remaining elderly relied on the kin network in the neighbourhoods or settlements where they live. During the pandemic they supported each other by taking care of each other – they bought each other daily necessities, medicines, took each other to the doctor, even went to the pensioners' clubs together. Often, elderly relatives even spent much of the day together, especially during the autumn-winter period when opportunities for farm and garden work were more limited and there was the possibility of staying at home longer. According to one interlocutor:

'We are two sisters in law, we live on the same street... She is older than me by 3 years. So every morning I call her over the fence or call her on the phone. Until she answers - I don't calm down. We check each other if we are alive (f., 78, secondary education, Bansko).

However, during the pandemic they communicated only by phone, which reinforces their loneliness.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 is an example of a disaster that creates a crisis in both society and family. It affects all family members of families, and of course has a greater impact on weaker members such as children and the elderly. They are also particularly affected by negative emotions such as sadness and depression. At the meso-level of family structure, the crucial role of kinship ties and relationships for survival is clearly visible. As part of the rebalancing within the family is the change of social roles that is characteristic of crisis situations. Adverse and stressful life events strongly influence and contribute to strengthening feelings of togetherness. Family relationships are deeply affected as they face challenges to cope with previously unknown illness, maintain economic and social status, manage the challenges of caring for ill or elderly parents and relatives, care for children and support them in distance learning while continuing employment.

Lockdown has an impact on weakening ties at the geographical level, but on the other hand it contributes to strengthening local and neighbourhood networks. The activation of mutual aid is visible, especially in smaller localities. Despite the necessary role of the state in overcoming the consequences of the pandemic, the family once again proves its importance for the survival and recovery of the community.

The health emergency associated with the spread of COVID-19 has fundamentally changed people's lives, both in terms of family and meaningful relationships and in the workplace, fundamentally altering the relationship between these two important areas and their respective impacts on a person's identity. The relationship between family and work, already marked by great difficulty and complexity, was further tested during this period.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, strengthen family and kinship networks, which became a coping mechanism. Even though COVID-19 triggered a crisis, families and family structures were able to adapt

different coping mechanisms to deal with the crisis. On the one hand, the mobilization of social support was observed, and on the other hand, the creation of a sense of security and cohesion was registered through various rituals. Although at a distance, it was necessary for the interlocutors to cope with the crisis that occurred. The social support they received from relatives and acquaintances also contributed to this.

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