

## PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AS A CHALLENGE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Abstract.** The article discusses the role of personal responsibility in preventing/containing a new coronavirus pandemic in the context of social responsibility theory. Georgia's centuries-old successful experience in fighting infectious diseases was based on the practice of social distancing. Amid the spread of misinformation flow and conspiracy theories, the society could not properly understand the risks associated with the pandemic.

The article shows that after overcoming the first wave of the pandemic and easing the restrictions by the authorities in the summer of 2020, the population was not ready to take on social responsibility in order to curb the further spread of pandemic followed by a new wave of infection with more serious socio-economic consequences.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, State of Emergency, Isolation and Self-Isolation, Social Responsibility, Personal Responsibility.*

**Introduction.** More than two years have passed since the world has been living in a global pandemic that has called into question a number of issues in public and political life.

The political elite of the Euro-Atlantic world faced serious problems: on the one hand, they must defend human health and dignity, on the other hand, the universal values of democracy. The developed states proved to be dysfunctional and failed to take effective measures to stop the pandemic. Analyzing the causes of American dysfunction, Charles S. Maier concludes that the symptoms of American “decline” were in place before the Corona virus made them visible: the long-term trends toward growing income inequality, the underfunding of public education, the difficulties in accessing health care, and most clearly the intense political polarization [1].

In conditions of an overcrowded health care system, isolation/self-isolation has become one, if not the only, means of protecting one's own health which is strictly controlled by the government. Restraining the disease spread requires collective responsibility, which includes collective punishment. Roderick Condon argues that it clashes with the neoliberal model of social reality. According to him, the question of post-pandemic societal transformation should be examined in terms of the pre-existing legitimation crisis of the neoliberal social model. From this crisis two social movements have emerged in contention for control of societal development: radical-pluralism and reactionary-populism [2].

During the coronary crisis, Georgia faced almost the same problems as the rest of the world. A weak health care system, shortcomings in education system, growing social inequality, problems of regional development manifested in the first days of the crisis. The authorities had to solve important economic and social problems in a force majeure situation: stop the spread of the pandemic, ensure access to health care, protect vulnerable groups and protect freedom of speech, and so on. In such conditions, the lockdown, declaration of a state of emergency, quarantine, and self-isolation have become some of the main tools in the fight against the pandemic.

The situation in Georgia is exacerbated by the Russian occupation. Citizens living behind the occupation line are vulnerable to the threat of a growing pandemic and the resulting economic crisis. Russian information warfare also remains a problem, one of whose targets is the Lugar laboratory. The aim of the Russian disinformation campaign is to falsify existing reality, to demonstrate the need to distance Georgia from the West, disguised attacks on democratic institutions [3].

The topic of “microchip” conspiracy theory and vaccination has gained relevance. As if the vaccinations serve the aim to gain total control over people, artificially causing diseases, etc. In the face of such a complex media landscape, it has become challenging to develop a well-organized communication strategy for understanding the risks of a pandemic. The website StopCov.ge was created, where information on the course and danger of the disease was available in Georgian, Abkhazian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani languages, but it was not available to a significant part of the population due to lack of the Internet.

Ethnic minorities, living compactly in different regions of Georgia, found themselves in an information vacuum, which contributed to the rapid spread of the virus among the population. It was important, with the support of the EU and in coordination with the Government, to conduct an on-site information campaign in minority languages.

The analysts are studying the long-term impact of the pandemic on the economic and cultural life of Georgia. This problem requires a comprehensive study of processes and

multifaceted structural analysis. To date, interesting works have been created [4; 5; 6; 7; 8], which discuss the government's anti-crisis measures, the legal aspects of the state of emergency, human rights issues, and the rule of law during the restrictions.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the social responsibility of society during the period of tightening/expansion of restrictions. Social sciences consider such forms of social responsibility as individual moral, political, legal, economic responsibility. The responsibility of political institutions implies the interconnection of constitutional, legal, and political norms; Religious associations, civil society, businesses, etc. bear their share of responsibility. Naturally, it is difficult to cover all these areas in the format of one article; so, we will limit ourselves only to personal responsibility since the moral and legal responsibilities of a citizen to society and the state is to comply with laws and existing ethical standards.

### **The historical Experience of Combating Infectious Diseases in Georgia**

For centuries, social distancing, isolation and self-isolation have been considered effective means against the spread of infection. Georgia has extensive experience in fighting plague, cholera, measles and other infectious diseases [9; 10], which was primarily based on high social responsibility and, along with the observance of other sanitary rules, manifested in distancing or self-isolation from the focus of infection. Until now the Anatori burial vaults have been preserved, where the infected buried themselves during the Black Death epidemic [11].

The Georgian historian Tedo Zhordania in his personal letters emphasizes social distancing as a method of containing the spread of infection. In one of the letters, dated October 1909, the author tells how he temporarily relocated his children during the spread of Scarlet fever in Kutaisi [12:56].

These letters contain interesting information about the complications of Influenza, which causes Pneumonia and death. They also present details on the level of development of medical diagnostics in Georgia: the doctors were able to do a urine test and determine the number of proteins and granular casts in it, which was important for the diagnosis of kidney diseases [12:3]. It is known that back in 1897 for the first time in entire Caucasus, X-ray and electrotherapy rooms had been open in Tbilisi. The development of a network of clinics, sanitary and preventive measures carried out by the Government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia in

1919-1920, during the Cholera epidemic [1], significantly weakened, along with other infectious diseases, the so-called Spanish flu and decreased the number of its victims in Georgia [13].

In the fight against the pandemic, it is important that the population understands risks correctly, adheres to respiratory etiquette and understands the need for social distancing and isolation.

Cambridge University studies clearly show that risk perceptions of COVID-19 are strongly and consistently correlated with empirical knowledge, traditions and socio-cultural factors, the dominance of social values over individual interests, social efforts and trust in authorities. Researchers argue that a better understanding of not only the knowledge that people have, but also social and cultural factors that drive COVID-19 risk perceptions around the world could help policy-makers design risk communication strategies [7: 10]. According to UNICEF study, the level of knowledge and perception of the risk of COVID-19 among the population of Georgia is quite high [17], which created a positive attitude towards the measures taken by government to combat the pandemic, increased confidence in them and all above mentioned raised expectations that the population was ready to take social responsibility for fighting against spread of the pandemic.

### **The First Wave of the Pandemic and the Declaration of a State of Emergency**

On March 21, 2020, upon the submission and co-signature of the Prime Minister, the President of Georgia issued a decree declaring a state of emergency and a decree “On Measures to be implemented in Connection with the Declaration of a State of Emergency throughout the Whole Territory of Georgia”, which was approved by the Parliament on the same day. The legal basis of the decree was the massive spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and the growing challenge facing the country in order to adequately respond to the pandemic, so that the State fulfills its constitutional obligations to ensure the necessary public security in a democratic society, to reduce any possible threat to the life and health of the population of the country.

On March 23, 2020 the Georgian government adopted ordinances # 180 and # 181, on the basis of which imposed a number of restrictions on transport services: international air, land, and sea transportation; banned transportation of more than 3 people (including a driver) in a vehicle; shifted the educational process to remote learning; restricted the cultural and sporting events, rallies and demonstrations, as well as meetings in public places, public events involving more than 10 individuals (for example, funerals, weddings, and similar events); restricted economic activity, including the supply and sale of all goods and products, except the retail sale of food and feed, household chemicals, hygiene products, medicines and veterinary drugs, during the state of emergency [14]. The municipalities of Bolnisi and Marneuli were quarantined due to the internal spread of Covid-19 infection; for the period of the state of

emergency, all types of transport were banned in the territories of the above-mentioned municipalities from April 16 to 27 [15].

The restrictions were managed by monitoring global trends in accordance with international recommendations, taking into account the analysis of the epidemic situation and possible risks in the country. At the same time, the Georgian delegation sent a notification to the UN and the Council of Europe about the derogation from the relevant articles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on Human Rights [9].

In accordance with the recommendations of the World Health Organization, the rules of isolation and quarantine, respiratory etiquette were determined. An innovative STOP COVID app was created that allows users to know if they have come into contact with a person infected with COVID 19.

Population found it difficult to accept the social distancing and self-isolation rules introduced during the first wave of the pandemic. Part of the population did not comply with the restrictions, conducted ceremonies (weddings, commemorations), and participated in religious holidays. There was an arbitrary exit from self-isolation or quarantine space, not wearing masks, etc. Citizens often violated curfews and other emergency measures. According to a government report, 8,716 individuals and 21 legal entities were fined for violating the state of emergency in March-April 2020 [7:39].

The inconsistent policy of the government towards the Georgian Patriarchate has caused some confusion. Despite the prohibitions, Sunday services were held in churches, including ceremonies with an overnight stay. These actions challenged the rule of law and the civil sector openly accused the government of implementing “selective quarantine” and “discriminatory quarantine” policies.

According to experts from the non-governmental organization Transparency International Georgia, which monitored the processes taking place in the country, the government's actions at the initial stage of the fight against the virus were timely and effective [16:28]. Unfortunately, the risks of infection were not fully understood by citizens, social responsibility was low, and positive dynamics in preventing the pandemic was achieved thanks to state control.

### **Personal Responsibility Policy and a New Wave of Pandemics**

According to the International Monetary Fund, the anti-pandemic restrictions have simultaneously weakened economic activity around the world, especially in the service sector, and hit the labor market and international trade hard. The Georgian economy is in a difficult situation. A significant part of the population was left without a permanent source of income which created a real threat of a sharp rise in the level of poverty. The World Bank has provided

Georgia with an \$ 80 million financial support package to help mitigate the social and health impact of COVID-19 and Asian Development Bank approves \$ 200 million policy loan.

The government has implemented a number of social projects, including providing compensation to employees and self-employed people, who lost jobs; support for small and medium-sized businesses, and so on. However, these measures were not sufficient to stop the process of economic decline. The country needed to return to its usual rhythm of life in proper time. The return to economic activity was facilitated by the so-called COVID fatigue - society demanded the removal of severe restrictions and a return to normal life.

The easing of restrictions has been carried out in six stages. At the same time, the rules of social distancing and respiratory etiquette, wearing a mask, etc., have been preserved. In short, the responsibility for containing the spread of infection has been delegated to the population, and this meant taking moral responsibility both for their own safety and at the same time the security of others. However, against the background of business activity of tourism, restaurants, and entertainment, it was impossible to maintain the achieved control over the infection.

The authorities, for their part, relaxed control over compliance with the recommendations; international visitors were allowed to cross the border without any testing for Covid infection during the tourist season. All this contributed to the uncontrolled internal transmission of the virus and the emergence of a new, more aggressive wave of pandemic.

The number of infected people rose sharply in October during the parliamentary campaign. While as of October 2020 there were 32,744 cases of the disease and 270 deaths, then by mid-November 2020 the number of new infections daily varied from 3,000 to 5,000, and deaths - from 30 to 50. As of February 21, 2021, 268 355 cases of infection were registered (about 7,2% of the population), and the total death toll was 3 435 [4], which gives death rate of 1.3%. These figures are alarming for such a small nation like ours.

Taking into account the epidemiological situation in the country, the Interdepartmental Coordination Council decided to introduce a new lockdown from November 28, 2020, to January 31, 2021. As a result of these measures, a new blow was dealt to the financial and economic systems of the country, which directly affected the socio-economic situation of the population.

According to ISET, which relies on data from GEOSTAT, unemployment rose to 12.3% in the second quarter of 2020 (April-June), 43.8 thousand employees lost their jobs. As of January 2021, the country's external debt is \$ 22 billion, which is almost 54% of the expected GDP. According to the National Bank, the average economic activity in 2020 was -6.1%.

According to current forecasts, economic growth in 2021 is expected to be only 4% [17]. With such forecasts, the economic situation of the population is likely to continue to deteriorate.

Trust between government and society is especially important when constraints need to be relaxed. The second wave of the pandemic showed that the infection can only be stopped by joint efforts of the state and society, the manifestation of social responsibility and social efforts on the part of the population. With the easing of restrictions, everyone should take on the moral and personal responsibility to care of themselves and others.

**Conclusions.** The government and population of Georgia, like the rest of the world, met the first wave of the pandemic unprepared. The pandemic made the socio-economic and political-legal problems especially noticeable. Weak economy and health care system, problems with education, low social responsibility has become the main challenges of the day. The government's anti-crisis measures were implemented in accordance with international recommendations and were based on an analysis of the situation in the country.

Due to misinformation, it was difficult to conduct a correct information campaign. The problem was exacerbated by the government's preferential treatment to the Patriarchate of Georgia. Thus, in the face of weakening government control and increased economic activity, the population was unable to take personal responsibility for preventing/containing the spread of the pandemic, which contributed to a new outbreak with more serious consequences.

Society has already accumulated some experience and knowledge in the fight against the pandemic, therefore after the loosening of restrictions, planned for the spring of 2021, the policy of personal responsibility should come into force, we should strengthen social efforts and each of us should take on the moral responsibility for observing social distancing and other protective measures. But the situation is aggravated by the fact that Georgia has not started mass vaccinations yet. Will strengthening of social efforts be enough to avoid another lockdown with complete collapse of the financial and economic system of the country? In the post-pandemic period, great attention should be paid to updating the humanitarian agenda. We must promote awareness of social responsibility and social solidarity among young people; we must comply with the rules that are now being developed, including respiratory etiquette. Along with educational institutions, other social institutions should be involved in setting these new standards.

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## პერსონალური პასუხისმგებლობა როგორც გამოწვევა COVID-19

### პანდემიის დროს

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ლოგიისა და მშვიდობის ინსტიტუტმა*

**აბსტრაქტი.** კორონავირუსისი შეეხო საზოგადოებრივი ცხოვრების ყველა სფეროს. მან დაგვანახვა, რომ არ არსებობს უფრო დიდი ღირებულება, ვიდრე ადამიანის სიცოცხლე. სტატიაში, სოციალური პასუხისმგებლობის თეორიის ჭრილში, განხილულია პერსონალური პასუხისმგებლობის როლი ახალი კორონავირუსის პანდემიის შეკავება/პრევენციის საქმეში. საქართველოში ინფექციური დაავადებების წინააღმდეგ ბრძოლის მრავალსაუკუნოვანი ტრადიცია ეფუძნება სოციალური დისტანცირების გამოცდილებას. დეზინფორმაციული ნაკადის ფონზე, მოსახლეობამ სწორად ვერ გაიაზრა პანდემიით გამოწვეული რისკები. ამიტომ, პანდემიის პირველი ტალღის დაძლევის შემდეგ, 2020 წლის ზაფხულში, ხელისუფლების მიერ შეზღუდვების შერბილებისას, საზოგადოება არ აღმოჩნდა მზად აელო სოციალური პასუხისმგებლობა ინფექციის შეკავებაზე, რასაც მოყვა პანდემიის ახალი ტალღა უფრო მძიმე სოციალურ-ეკონომიკური შედეგებით.

საქართველოს ხელისუფლება და მოსახლეობა, როგორც მთელი დანარჩენი მსოფლიო, მოუმზადებელი შეხვდა პანდემიას. მან განსაკუთრებით თვალსაჩინო

გახადა, ის სოციალურ-ეკონომიკური და პოლიტიკურ-სამართლებრივი პრობლემები, რომლებიც წლებია გადაწყვეტას ითხოვს. სუსტი ეკონომიკა, სუსტი ჯანდაცვის სისტემა, განათლების სფეროში არსებული ხარვეზები, დაბალი სოციალური პასუხისმგებლობა დღევანდელი მთავარ გამოწვევად იქცა. ხელისუფლების მიერ გატარებული ანტიკრიზისული ღონისძიებები განხორციელდა საერთაშორისო რეკომენდაციების მიხედვით და ეფუძნებოდა ქვეყანაში არსებული ეპიდემდგომარეობის ანალიზს.

ჯერ კიდევ არაა განსაზღვრული, თუ როდის დასრულდება მოსახლეობის სრული ვაქცინაციის პროცესი. ასეთ პირობებში ქვეყნის კიდევ ერთხელ ჩაკეტვა გამოიწვევს საფინანსო ეკონომიკური სისტემის სრულ მოშლას, რაც დაუშვებელია. ამიტომ უნდა გავაძლიეროთ სოციალური ძალისხმევა, თვითოეულმა ჩვენთაგანმა უნდა აიღოს სოციალური დისტანციისა და რეკომენდაციით გათვალისწინებული სხვა ღონისძიებების დაცვის მორალური პასუხისმგებლობა.

პოსტპანდემიურ პერიოდში დიდი ყურადღება უნდა დაეთმოს ჰუმანიტარული დღის წესრიგის წინ წამოწევას. ახალგაზრდებში ხელი უნდა შევუწყოთ სოციალური პასუხისმგებლობისა და სოციალური სოლიდარობის შეგნების ამაღლებას; შევინარჩუნოთ ის წესები, რომლებიც ამჟამად ყალიბდება, მათ შორის, რესპირატორული ჰიგიენა. ამ ახალი ნორმების დამკვიდრებას საგანმანათლებლო დაწესებულებებთან ერთად, ხელი უნდა შეუწყონ სხვა სოციალურმა ინსტიტუტებმაც.

*საკვანძო სიტყვები: COVID-19, საგანგებო მდგომარეობა, იზოლაცია და თვითიზოლაცია, სოციალური პასუხისმგებლობა, პერსონალური პასუხისმგებლობა.*