Ivana Stepanović

TRANSFORMATION OF THE PRIVATE/PUBLIC DIVIDE IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19: HOW ECONOMY-DRIVEN POLICIES ARE RESHAPING THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL/PHYSICAL DISTANCING IN SERBIA

ABSTRACT

The evolution of social/physical distancing narratives throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has left the concept itself ambiguous and vague while cutting through the borderlines between private and public. In the case of Serbia, economy-driven policies have shifted the focus from isolation, solitude and remote work during the first and the only lockdown towards the idea of physical distance in public spaces and work environments. This paper aims to analyse how social distancing narratives in Serbia were construed over time through governmental policies as well as companies' regulations, and how they redefined the concept of privacy during the pandemic.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19, private/public, social distancing, physical distancing, privacy

1. INTRODUCTION: DISTANCE IS THE NEW SOCIAL

The Covid-19 pandemic has further relativized already problematic delineations of private and public and redefined the social itself. While events and gatherings have been eradicated from public spaces, people were confined to their private spaces and their everyday lives continued to happen online. From working and learning to dating and partying or cultural and political events, all the social interactions have been transferred into the realm of the internet. During the first wave of the pandemic, the only public events were the balcony music performances and organised actions such as clapping for medical workers and the so-called "balcony wars" in Serbia [Telesković, 2020]. But even these outbursts of creativity, solidarity and resistance which occurred on the borders of private spaces (on windows, roofs and terraces) went online as well because they were filmed and shared via social media. This is just one example of how Covid-19 has pushed us "further along the path of digitalisation and datafication" [Nowotny, 2021: 107] and accelerated the processes which would naturally unfold slower [Harari, 2020].

The idea that the internet is a free public space open to everyone [Habermas, 1991: 1] is problematic because social media platforms are privately owned and increasingly organised and censored by algorithms. Furthermore, transporting all social interactions to online spaces is challenging as well because it is based on the assumption that it is possible to compartmentalise it and make clear divisions between private and public segments. However, even the private pockets of the internet can never be sealed off and fully private because they are confined to technologies with in-built surveillance systems. Both spheres tend to condense in the increasingly controlled spaces of the internet, which revokes Hannah Arendt's warning that the elimination of private and public creates conditions for totalitarianism as both of them are vital for democracy [Arendt, 1977]. Covid-19 has made this a global threat.

The concept of distance is crucial for understanding the crisis of private and public exacerbated by Covid-19. Throughout the pandemic, technology has been overcoming physical distances by offering alternative ways to communicate, socialise and cooperate in times of crisis but only in the surveilled environment of 'social' platforms which produced a whole universe of new micro (social) distances that alienated people and detached them from their genuine social circles and domestic life [Stepanović, 2020: 32]. These platforms are not just the new media but a new modus operandi of socialisation.

In the context of the pandemic, the concept of distance is ambiguous. The adjective 'social' has been gradually replaced by the adjective 'physical' on a global level [Sørensen et al. 2021: G], but this transformation has drawn different repercussions in different parts of the world. During the first wave of the pandemic in Serbia, the dominant discourse focused on narratives of solitude, isolation and staying at home. The "social distancing" discourse implied that people are advised to stay away from each other, especially from their elderly. The country's officials kept repeating that people should 'stay at home' [Vucic, 2020], but after the lockdown, the focus has shifted towards the concept of physical distancing. Despite the epidemiological crises caused by surges in Covid-19 infections, the Serbian government has refrained from subsequent lockdowns and insisted that physical distancing is the most important epidemiological measure. There was a clear transformation from the radical approach inspired by China's initial response to Covid-19 to the light approach that resembles the Swedish model, and it was motivated by economic reasons.

This paper aims to identify these fluctuations in the 'distancing' narratives in Serbia and discuss how this transformation relativizes the meanings of 'social' and 'physical' while investigating the ramifications on the conceptualisation of private and public during the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper investigates various theoretical concepts of social distancing and "extended self", and this theoretical research is followed by the analysis of distancing narratives in Serbian media and

policies. The aim is to contribute to the discussion on the concept of social distance by analysing it in the context of privacy and show how it operates at the same time as an epidemiological measure and a principle of sociability. By analysing its practical use in Serbian media and policies, this paper investigates how the subtle changes of narratives correspond with economic and political interests during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. SOCIAL, PHYSICAL OR BOTH?

With multiple definitions and interpretations of the social or physical distance, the concept itself is becoming increasingly complex and perplexing. Proclaimed as one of the key epidemiological measures in the world, the idea of distancing remained to be vague and ambiguous. From the beginning of the pandemic, Covid-19 has been referred to "in terms of statistics" with lives being "transformed into mathematical summaries" [Horton, 2020: viii]. During the first wave, the key statistics were numbers of infections and deaths and mortality rates, while it started including the numbers of vaccinated people during the second hit. The calculations of distance have been a crucial part of this mathematics, there has never been a coherent policy on the distance.

Multiple theories on how the virus can spread have led to the proliferation of different distancing tactics. The World Health Organisation has changed its definition of safe distance and increased it from "at least one-metre distance from a person who coughs or sneezes" to the rule that the same distance should be kept at all times from all people in public spaces [1]. The distance varies from 1.5 meters in Germany and Hungary to 2 meters [2] in the UK[3] or G feet in the USA [4]. In Serbia, the official governmental website COVID-19.rs kept the initial WHO's recommendation to keep at least 1-2 metres distance from the person who coughs or sneezes and then later modified it to recommend keeping at least one-meter distance from the person one is talking to [5], while the officials have later revised their statements suggesting that there should be a distance of at least two meters at all times in all public spaces. In short, there is no definite "safe distance to maintain between individuals in the street, on public transport or in a queue outside a supermarket" [Horton, 2020: 110-111].

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1 WHO https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public (Accessed: 15.05.2021.)
2 Infektionsschutz https://www.infektionsschutz.de/coronavirus/ (Accessed: 15.05.2021.)
3 Gov.uk https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-of-health-and-social-care (Accessed: 15.05.2021.)
4 CDC https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/2019-ncov-factsheet.pdf (Accessed: 15.05.2021.)
5 COVID19 https://covid19.rs/ (Accessed: 15.05.2021.)

But even if there was a universal measure, the problem of maintaining the distance remains. Just like the virus particle, the social distance bubble is invisible and difficult to secure in public spaces. Aided with other barriers (masks, gloves, PVC barriers etc.), it provides a new definition of personal space within the public space. Additionally, the concept encompasses other aspects of distance including quarantine, self-isolation, contactless shopping and even disinfection of purchased goods (because particles of other bodies might be on surfaces of groceries and other products). In other words, distance refers to the invisible space around the body which is contaminated by the body and its microorganisms.

With its complex relationship of the signifier and the signified, the concept of social distance is an ideological term that possibly implies alienation, solitary life and radical individualism. Its traditional meaning can be extended to include permanent online life under surveillance as it can be seen as alienated, solitary and individualistic. The use of this notion can be traced to German sociologist Georg Simmel who has coined it to describe a phenomenon of class differences. "The social distance between the classes does not allow their members to be seen as individuals but as a unified mass", he writes [Simmel, 2009: 19]. He connects the concept of distance with the concept of strangeness saying that "distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near" [Simmel, 1950: 402]. Simmel's definition of a stranger points towards the ideas of otherness and exclusion while sociologist Robert E. Park defined the social distance as a desire to isolate oneself from other members of the society. This refers to keeping distance from co-workers, neighbours or other shoppers by minimising communication to "institutionalised interaction" [Steinbach, 2004: 18]. Both definitions imply a desire to keep others at a social distance even though they are physically close.

Throughout history, the term has been widely used in epidemiology to refer to sets of measures that can deter or contain an infectious disease [Bauch and Galvani, 2013; Caley et al, 2007; Glass et al. 200G] while being stripped off all the other meanings that come from sociology. But in the context of Covid-19, the term 'social distance' felt inappropriate. Initially used by WHO, medical experts and government representatives across the globe, it has been contested and eventually replaced by the much less problematic concept of physical distancing [Kumar, 2020]. One of the arguments for dismissing the word social and replacing it with the word physical is that it entailed negative implications on mental health [Wasserman, Gaag and Wise, 2020]. Far from describing Park's distanced relationships or Simmel's concept of a stranger, the concept of distance was supposed to denote merely a physical disconnection between people, which is why the word 'social' needed to be disconnected from the concept of distance. However, living on a distance is a "reinvented sociability" (Horvat, 2020) because it implies many drastic changes in the way we behave around each other from

wearing masks and fist-bumping to conferencing and partying on platforms like Zoom. This transformation is not simply the consequence of Covid-19 but a part of the evolution of the social caused by the way we are living, developing technologies or impacting nature.

3. EXTENDED BODY, EXTENDED SELF

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised fundamental questions about our personal online and offline space. We started questioning which information about ourselves should be public with the emergence of new "under the skin surveillance" [Harari, 2020] and rethinking the borders of our physical bodies. A virus that spreads through tiny particles certainly challenges our "traditional, limited concepts of the human body" while showing that "bodily boundaries are not static" [Wolf, 2012: 107]. The concept of distance can therefore be seen in connection with the idea of extended self or extended body that stretches "beyond the border" [Wolf, 2012: 111]. Because human bodies are interconnected with viral bodies, keeping a distance is an epidemiological measure and a form of "disciplining ourselves" [Žižek, 2020: 43].

This territory of distance that spreads around the visible core of the body can also be seen as a personal space within the public space. It can even be argued that this is an extension of the right to privacy in the sense of the right to be left alone as John Stuart Mill defines it [Mill, 2003: 153]. Microparticles that are carrying a virus can invade one's extended personal space around the body and therefore endanger the body. In the context of the Covid-19, the right to be left alone can be interpreted as the right to stay at a safe distance from other bodies. While the issue of privacy in public has already been raised concerning contemporary surveillance technologies [Moreham 200G; Nissenbaum 1998], especially with regards to facial recognition cameras [Gray, 2002; Chesterman, 2019], there is also a need to rethink the implications of digital health [Maturo, Moretti, 2018] and revise physical borders of bodies with regards to infectious diseases. Even though physical distance defined in terms of epidemiology does not resonate with the concept of privacy *per se*, it is undeniably a form of personal space and therefore interferes with our demarcation lines of private and public. The question on how to define personal space and the right to be left alone in traditionally public spaces is an increasingly relevant question not just in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also because of the possible future pandemic as a consequence of the climate change and human impact on nature and its ecosystems [Brooks, Hoberg, Boeger, 2019: 5; Horton, 2020: 83; Mackenzie, 2020: G5]. In other words, the concept of distance could be here to stay and bring about substantial social, political, economic and cultural changes.

The concept of distance also cuts through the realm of private life by minimising the public sphere and maximising online communication. The concept of the extended body could, therefore, be linked to the concept of the extended self in the digital sphere [Bauman, Raud, 2015: 78]. Social media, online gaming and other digital activities represent the dematerialised and disembodied extended self [Belk, 201G; Parkinson, Millard, O'Hara, 2017; Holiday, Norman, Densley, 2020]. This notion of extended self, therefore, resonates with the concept of a "digital double" comprised of personal data which can outlive the body [Buitelaar, 2017: 129].

Encouraged to use the technology to maintain the distance during the Covid-19 pandemic, people around the world have replaced the majority of their offline activities with online doings including shopping, learning, exercising and therapy or even partying and dating. But these communication technologies are at the same surveillance technologies which are constantly active in the background as they are accumulating, analysing and sharing personal data. Perpetually entangled into complex surveillance networks, people live transparent private lives online [Gilliom, Monahan, 2013: vii] while they are physically detached from one another. And because even seemingly depersonalised metadata can be traced back to individuals [Perez et al, 2018], creating „islands of privacy" [Nippert-Eng, 2010] in the public sphere of the internet is increasingly challenging.

Just like the extended body, the digital double is also prone to privacy violations because both physical and online spaces are porous. The invisible extension of a private territory around the body correlates to the personal pockets of cyberspace that are personifying our digital privacy and invisible surveillance around it. Contemporary definitions of privacy depart from the concept of total seclusion and converge towards the concept of control over information. Privacy today is primarily understood as the ability to decide what is visible to whom and monitor what happens to personal data. This includes control over digital doubles and the limitation of digital surveillance which can also be perceived as the principle of „informational self-determination in the internet era" [Buitelaar, 2014: 2GG]. But because it is privacy in the public space of the internet, this ability to control data is not solely an individual responsibility but becomes a „shared responsibility of connected individuals" [Walrave et al, 201G]. Similarly, in traditional public spaces, the privacy of the extended body is a shared responsibility because maintaining social or physical distance in dense areas requires cooperation and respect of each other's boundaries in streets, parks, public transport, shopping malls and other places.

The main challenge to respecting privacy in the age of information technologies is its miniaturisation which resulted in imperceptible and untraceable surveillance. The development of nanotechnology has therefore radically transformed the traditional concept of privacy [Van Den Hoven, Vermaas, 2007: 283] and transferred it into the realm of the invisible where information becomes viral. The parallel between digital and biological becomes apparent in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic because the virus as a natural phenomenon is observed and researched by modern technology [Peters, Jandric, McLaren, 2020]. Moreover, the virus becomes a social and cultural phenomenon that constitutes new borders of the private sphere by introducing ideological concepts such as distancing. And yet this concept is as arbitrary as the concept of privacy itself - a fluctuating signifier that is context-dependent.

4. SOCIAL DISTANCING NARRATIVES IN SERBIA

During the state of emergency in Serbia which lasted from 15th of March to Gth of May 2020, maintaining one or two meters of distance has not been highlighted as one of the main strategies for fighting the spread of COVID-19. The distancing narratives revolved mainly around the ideas of self-isolation and staying at home. They were illustrated in a video published by the Ministry of Health entitled "If you love me, stay away from me" [COVID19MZRS, 2020] which references only one aspect of the concept of distancing – the social one. While many other countries across the world started with mild measures such as bans of gatherings and closure of non-essential shops or services while promoting physical distancing in public spaces, the government of Serbia has been focusing on prohibiting any type of movement at that time. "Please don't leave your homes", said President Aleksandar Vučić at one of the press conferences in March 2020 [Studio B, 2020]. During the state of emergency, the government prohibited people over G5 years of age to leave their homes, abolished public transport, introduced long curfews and discouraging physical activity in outdoor public spaces. When Dr Darija Kisić-Tepavčević, a member of the Crisis Command (a governmental body appointed to advise the government on medical aspects of the pandemic) uses the term "social distancing" in March 2020, she underlines that it is one of the key measures for preventing the spread of Covid-19 and links it to "self-isolation" [Telegraf, 2020].

Narratives on physical rather than social distancing in public spaces have become dominant in Serbia during the second phase of the pandemic that started in May 2020. Ever since then, the focus has been on preventive measures, and the government never imposed further lockdowns or curfews. Keeping the physical distance has become the "key measure" after the lockdown in Serbia, however, there was no clear consensus on what constitutes a safe distance in different situations. For example, some medical experts have stated that the recommended

physical distance after the lockdown was two meters, while others claimed that it should have been one meter [Stanković, 2020]. Dr Daria Kisić-Tepavčević who has previously been using the term "social distancing" has replaced it with the term "physical distancing" that should be two meters [Sputnjik Srbija, 2020], while Dr Branimir Nestorović claimed that the distance of one meter is enough to prevent the spread of the virus [Danas, 2020]. On the other hand, a special Directive on the measures for preventing the spread of Covid-19 states that the prescribed distance should be "at least two meters" in both indoor and outdoor spaces [G]. Distancing narratives were also conceptualised by different retail companies, banks, pharmacies, supermarkets and small local shops who displayed their rules and regulations on entrances and had their floors marked to map the distances. International retail companies such as Delhaize imported international distancing rules - the case of the supermarket chain Maxi (Maxi.rs). However, depending on the business, the rules varied in terms of the number of people allowed inside or the distance itself [Georgievski, 2020].

Due to these multiple interpretations of the distance and other epidemiological measures, there was no consensus on what should have been appropriate behaviour in public spaces in general. This led to contradicting statements illustrated in one of the TV shows where three medical experts offered three interpretations of prescribed measures. Their approaches corresponded with the way they have been wearing their masks on the show: Dr Srđa Janković used it to cover his nose and mouth, Dr Predrag Kon had his mask under the chin, while Dr Zoran Radovanović kept it in the pocket of his shirt. They have engaged in a discussion that showed their different opinions on how easily the virus can spread in various situations. Each of them elaborated on a different strategy on how to wear a mask and keep the distance [Nova S, 2020]. In the later stage of the pandemic, the government has decided to reopen cafés and restaurants despite the surge in Covid-19 infections after only two weeks of closure. The decision motivated by economic reasons has caused disagreements between different actors including the members of the Crisis Command, the Major of Belgrade and police representatives. In the attempt to establish a balance between economy and public health, the members of the Crisis Command have suggested that customers in restaurants should wear masks except for when they are consuming food and drinks. This suggestion has been criticised by the communal police representatives and the Mayor of Belgrade who claimed that it would be impossible to enforce this rule [K1 Televizija, 2021 a, K1 Televizija, 2021 b]. Another example is an article that quotes scientific research and claims

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[G] Uredba o merama za sprečavanje i suzbijanje zarazne bolesti Covid-19, article G Službeni glasnik RS", No. 151/2020, 152/2020, 153/2020, 15G/2020, 158/2020, 1/2021 i 17/2021 https://www.propisi.net/uredbu-o-merama- za-sprecavanje-i-suzbijanje-zarazne-bolesti-covid-19/ (Accessed: 15.05.2021.)

activities such as running or cycling can ease the spread of the virus and that two meters are not enough. According to this article, a safe distance could be between four and twenty meters when people are running or cycling [Nedeljnik, 2020].

The difference between social and physical distance was emphasized in the context of gerontology institutions [Lemajić, 2020], disabled people [Dušej Ristev, 2020] and the elderly [N1, 2020a] who were severely hit by the epidemiological measures. Some of the public debates focused on ways to ensure distance without isolating people. However, physical distancing narratives in Serbia are mainly associated with the underlying economic issues. One of the key members of Serbia's Crisis Command, Dr Predrag Kon has been giving statements on epidemic measures and changed the distancing narratives over time. In the first phase of the pandemic, he claimed that the lack of social contact is the only effective measure and that people should be allowed only for short visits to food stores and pharmacies [Insajder, 2020]. In the second phase, he has repeatedly stated that normal life is necessary for "economic" reasons [Beta, 2020] and that another lockdown is impossible due to the "economy dictum" [Tanjug, 2021]. The idea to create a "balance" between economy and health has been reinforced by the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić as well. He repeatedly stated that 'we need to protect the citizens without jeopardising the economy' [Politika, 2020] and that steps should be carefully "measured to support both the economy and the healthcare sector" in Serbia [Beta, 2021].

With no subsequent lockdowns and with the majority of business staying open despite surges in Covid-19 infections, Serbian officials relied solely on policies made to enforce physical distancing, mask-wearing and similar measures. Medical experts claimed that physical distancing is crucial in all public places where people are gathering [N1, 2020b], including cafés and restaurants which remained open almost throughout the pandemic [Nova, 2021]. During this second phase of the pandemic, some of them claimed that keeping the distance and wearing masks is the best "preventive measure" [Petrović, 2020] after they have abandoned the narrative of social distancing and the "stay at home" imperative.

However, in everyday life, physical distancing hasn't been properly enforced in Serbia, which is why government officials and medical experts repeatedly called the people "irresponsible" [Novosti, 2021], while others blamed it on the lack of resources to police the distance [K1 Televizija, 2021 a]. Either way, the balance narrative heavily relied on the vague concept of distance and the 'light' approach to the pandemic endured despite multiple waves of the epidemic hitting Serbia after the state of emergency.

CONCLUSION

Distancing narratives in Serbia evolved in two stages. The first one refers to the first two months of the pandemic when the country introduced the state of emergency. In the beginning, the "porous lockdown" [Šantić, Antić, 2020: 550] entailed harsh epidemiological measures such as 12-84 hour curfews, bans of gatherings and travel along with other restrictions of the freedom of movement. The emphasis was on social rather than physical distancing, and the discourse revolved around the ideas of self-isolation, staying at home and lack of social contacts. During this period, both the private and public realms have been eradicated from physical spaces and transported to online platforms and social media. Governmental policies have imposed severe intrusions into the personal sphere by limiting many human rights and freedoms.

During the second stage which followed the abolition of the state of emergency, the term social distancing has been replaced with the term physical distancing. The narratives shifted from isolation to "normality" which revived social life for the sake of the survival of the economy. In this new Covid-19 normality, keeping the distance remained to be one of the key measures that could prevent or at least partially control the spread of the virus, while the business remained open. The "balance" between health and economy relied on the concept of distance despite the criticisms that said it has never been properly implemented or policed in Serbia.

While it can be argued that there was a global shift from social to physical distancing narratives [Sørensen et al, 2021], there are considerable differences in the ways different countries have been developing them. While many other countries including the UK and the EU member states opted for other models of the "balance" between health and economy which led to imposing multiple lockdowns and curfews, Serbia has chosen an alternative route starting with a light version of the Chinese lockdown model and continuing with partial restrictions instead of lockdowns while working on mass vaccination.

The analysis of Serbia's response to the Covid-19 crisis has revealed the evolution of the concept of distance and its role in the "balance" strategy while showing how the distancing narratives further relativized the private/public divide. Social distancing measures related to the first stage of the pandemic in Serbia have enclosed the realm of the public in private homes where it continued to exist online. At the same time, physical distancing narratives that were operating during the second stage of the pandemic have extended the personal zone within public spaces beyond the borders of our physical bodies. Paradoxically, while opening up a completely new private sphere within the public, distancing measures at the same time confined people to their private spaces where they can only have online lives that are constantly monitored and surveilled. Just like the

digital doubles protected only by partially functional laws and ambiguous definitions of privacy are exposed to online surveillance, extended physical bodies protected only by the vague concept of distance and equivocal epidemiological measures are exposed to other bodies and the virus.

The concept of distancing operates at two different levels and carries both epidemiological and sociological connotations. This research shows how its two different sets of meanings are intertwined and that physical distance translates into the social distance in specific contexts. It also shows how switching from one definition of distancing to another can justify a shift in narratives that are also transforming public policies that are not only regulating the approach to the pandemic but are offering a rationale for managing the economic crisis caused by the pandemic and providing a solution for reorganising the datafied society which requires a specific type of distancing as well. The confusion created by the switch from the concept of social distance to the concept of physical distance does not seem to be coincidental at all as the two notions are interchangeable when we think about how the epidemiological crisis has been managed with the help of technology.

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