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## **SELF-PRESERVING BEHAVIOUR OF GEORGIAN POPULATION DURING THE PERIOD OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

*The following papers deals with self-preserving behaviour in the period of a global problem — COVID-19 pandemic. Positive self-preserving behaviour determines the level of health of an individual and, consequently, of a society. In the period of the pandemic we have witnessed an increased interest toward self-preserving behaviour. Apart from observing private hygiene or hygiene norms and social distancing, there were no other protective mechanisms during the process of the research, and vaccination has not yet begun. As a result of the urgency of the issue, the staffs of Institute Demography and Sociology Ilia State University under the guidance of professor A. Sulaberidze have conducted a sociological research in October 2020, “Awareness of the corona virus pandemic’s impact on the social-economic situation of Georgian population and self-preservative behaviour”, in four regions of Georgia. The regions were selected based on the level of the coronavirus’s proliferation. Respondents were selected using the method of random sampling. We interviewed 500 respondents with the help of pre-composed questionnaires. The following research is one of the attempts in Georgia to study self-preserving behaviour under the circumstances of the pandemic and it shows us to what extent the population’s self-pre-*

*servicing behaviour is directed toward defense against the coronavirus. One of the main functions of a state is to prevent the spread of diseases and protect its population from harmful influence of environmental factors. In this regard, the state has implemented significant measures; however, they are not sufficient as the joint efforts of the state and each citizen determine the robustness of a country's population as well as the scope of a pandemic's proliferation. Our goal is to evaluate the efforts of the citizens, as for our objectives, we aim to ascertain the factors which seem auspicious and adverse for the mentioned efforts. The analysis of the research's results outlined important differences between genders with regard to evaluating one's own health and self-preserving behaviour. The researchers had also shown that men value their health more highly and take care of it less. This tendency is immutable even when self-preserving behaviour significantly determines not only the possibility of one's own infection, but also of those surrounding us. Women respondents are more prone to observe every recommendation of epidemiologists than men. The level of population's awareness is high with respect to the symptoms of the infection as well as recommendations for self-protection and the existing infection situation in the country. The dissimilar levels of infection between various regions gave us varying indicators of awareness. The higher the infection rate, the higher the awareness rate. The respondents' health condition significantly determines the population's attitude toward the coronavirus infection. Self-assessment of one's health condition has an impact on the level of fear caused by the pandemic. The respondents with chronic ailments are more liable to express fear than those who evaluate their health highly. The perception of the risks associated with the coronavirus infection is different in terms of sexes. Compared to men, women, on average, perceive the coronavirus threat and its subsequent problems more emotionally and give a lower assessment to their health condition. The population's fear of the pandemic is exacerbated by the fact that this viral infection has not been adequately studied yet and we are not aware of its future repercussions or complications. Therefore, those respondents who are fully healthy also express justifiable apprehension. There emerged a proportionate connection between the level of following the epidemiologists' recommendations and perception of the threat of the COVID infection. The more seriously people perceive the mentioned threat, the more eager they are to fulfill the epidemiologists' recommendations.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, self-preserving behaviour, recommendations pertaining to defense against infection.

**Description of the research problem.** Last year proved to be unusually crisis-ridden for the whole world as it was marked by the eruption of the third zoonotic infection of coronavirus in the XXI century. The virus was transmitted from human to human, and the mankind was confronted by a global health problem. The entire world found itself in an isolated situation, and one year after the virus spread to every continent. The pandemic is still raging, and the data of those people who contract the infection and die multiplies daily. The pandemic, which was caused by a new coronavirus (SARS-COV-2), has been assessed as the mankind's biggest challenge and modern global health crisis. Furthermore, it represents an unprecedented social-economic crisis, which, together with human loss, has incurred the greatest economic costs. World's attention is directed toward overcoming the pandemic and eradicating its devastating outcomes.

In order to extricate itself from the harsh situation the world came face-to-face in 2020 and ameliorate some of the hardships, the World Health Organization came up with recommendations that concerned self-preserving behaviour

and social distancing. As researchers realized the importance of self-preserving behaviour, they began to focus their attention more on studying it. Sociologists and demographers have paid a substantial attention to investigating self-preserving behaviour starting even since the previous century. It must also be mentioned that the coronavirus pandemic is not the first one, thus, scientists have been interested in the issue for quite a while. Talks concerning issues of methodology and studying pandemics as an object of sociological research commenced over 100 years ago, when the planet faced the so-called Spanish Flu (which lasted from January 1918 through December 1920), and as the result of which more than 500 million humans became infected with this virus (nearly one-third of the then world's population). According to other estimates, the number of the deceased ranges from 17 to 50 million, which makes it one of the most deadly pandemics in the history of the mankind [2].

**Relevance of the article.** In order to highlight the relevancy of the research, we will present here some of the data with regard to the coronavirus infection in Georgia. The first case of the coronavirus infection in Georgia was registered in February. The country withstood the first wave of the pandemic relatively lightly. The indicator of incidence was characterized by a small variation and fluctuated in the range between 0.1-0.7 from 10<sup>th</sup> of September through 26<sup>th</sup> of February. Since the 10<sup>th</sup> of September, the number of confirmed cases grew sharply, and by 29<sup>th</sup> of September the incidence indicator rose 9 times and amounted to 6.6. The number reached its maximum level on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December. By 15<sup>th</sup> of December, Georgia held the highest position among the countries of Europe in terms of COVID-19 incidence [6]. As soon as the first case of the coronavirus infection was registered in the country, mass media started paying close attention to, emphasizing and broadcasting information regarding the symptoms of the disease, its preventive measures and generally reflecting the scopes of the spread of the pandemic in the country as well as in the world. The population was kept informed with regard to the asymptomatic nature of the viral infection and in extreme cases, its lethal outcome. Risk groups were identified. In other words, the population was warned and constantly pushed toward positive self-preserving behaviour.

**Literature view.** Scientists and researchers have evinced a great interest toward the coronavirus pandemic and its related issues. Assuming we accept S. Patel's view, which he expressed when defining the task of global sociology: that its mission is to identify those problems and challenges which arise before the whole mankind [8], it should not be surprising that the scientists and researchers possess a big interest toward the issues related to the coronavirus pandemic. Foreign as well as Georgian scientist-researchers evaluate existing tendencies and attempt to systematize them. Among them are D. Cohan [3], K. Palit [9], K. Fitzpatrick [4], etc. From among the works of Georgian scientists we must note that of A. Sulaberidze [10] and J. Archvadze [1].

**The aim of the article and innovation character.** The aim of our research is to study the following issues: the awareness level of the population; is the coronavirus threat taken seriously by the population? How do people observe the recommendations of epidemiologists? Do they have the infected individuals among relatives and family members? How do they evaluate their own health? And so on. Additionally, the research enables us to assess the population's attitudes, self-preservative behavior and health situation.

**Data and methods.** Sharp increase of the confirmed cases determined the time of conducting a sociological research. In accordance with various regions, the different indicator of the coronavirus infection determined the necessity of conducting the sociological research in those regions where the infection level was the highest, medium and lowest. Since the highest indicator was registered in Adjara and Imereti, we chose Batumi (Adjara), Kutaisi (Imereti), Khashuri (Inner Kartli) and Tbilisi for our research. For the purposes of representativeness of the research the aggregate number of interviewees was determined according to the general aggregate number of populated cities. In total, 500 respondents were interviewed and the interview was conducted with the help of a recomposed questionnaire. The questionnaire included the research of such issues as: the population's evaluation of their own health; the evaluation of the threat of coronavirus in Georgia; awareness in regard to the symptoms of the coronavirus as well as its spread within the country; determining direct or indirect connections of the respondents with those who were infected, etc.

**Basic results of the research.** Once the first case of the pandemic was identified in Georgia, epidemiologists, through mass media, constantly trumpeted warnings and recommendations. In spring, after the number of viral infection cases rose comparatively, the government imposed a three-month period of strict limitations. The country withstood the first wave of the pandemic rather easily. This might explain the population's heterogeneous attitude toward the pandemic. Some people regarded the threat of pandemic with suspicion. In October, after the survey was conducted, in spite of the substantially increased quantity of the infected individuals, only some portion of the population looked upon the coronavirus threat "very seriously". Among such people, the number of women exceeded that of men. Amidst the female citizens 77.5 % deemed the threat to be serious or utterly serious; the same indicator of attitudes among the males was 1.17 times less. Therefore, the number of the men

*Table 1. Respondents views about the coronavirus threat in Georgia %*

| How serious is the coronavirus threat in Georgia? | Total | Male | Female |
|---|-------|------|--------|
| Very serious                                      | 35.8  | 31.1 | 39.4   |
| Serious   | 36.9  | 34.9 | 38.2   |
| Less serious                                      | 17.8  | 22.0 | 14.7   |
| Not serious                                       | 9.5   | 12.0 | 7.7    |

*Source:* sociological research of the Institute of Demography and Sociology if the Ilia State University, October, 2020 [11].

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who indicated the coronavirus threat to be unimportant or less serious was 1.5 times more.

The population's opinions concerning the coronavirus threat are different with regard to populated areas. The population of Batumi (86.0 %) mostly lends credence to the threat and deems it serious or very serious. This indicator of population is 1.1 times higher than that of Tbilisi, 1.5 times higher than that of Kutaisi and 1.4 times higher than that of Khashuri. However, if we take into account the fact that during the period of interviews the indicator of the infected was the highest in Batumi, then the reason for varying indicators becomes clear.

When studying self-preserving behaviour of population close attention is paid to determining the level of awareness. The population must be notified about the symptoms, proliferation rates, complication risks and other characteristics of the coronavirus infection. The type of the population's self-preserving behaviour is substantially depended on it — whether it would be positive or negative, how seriously do people take the situation and how well do they take care of their own health as well as that of the citizens surrounding them [5].

From among the interviewed individuals 91.7 % (88.0 % of the men and 94.4 % of the women) know about the symptoms of the coronavirus, what recommendations they must observe in order to protect themselves from the disease, and how they must act in case the symptoms become noticeable. The highest level of awareness with respect to the coronavirus symptoms was revealed in Batumi (100 %). This was probably stipulated by the above-mentioned reason (during the period of the research, the highest level of the coronavirus infection was observed in Adjara). Those who were the least informed lived in Khashuri (84.0 %). The number of people who were not aware of the coronavirus's symptoms in this town was nearly twice the number of the country's average indicator (Khashuri 16.0 %, the rest of the country 8.4 %). This was also stipulated by the fact that the pandemic exercised the least impact on Khashuri.

More than half of the interviewed people (53.4 %) systematically acquaint themselves with everyday data. It can be said that the level of awareness is high within the country. However, the process of observing recommendations by the population in order to prevent the spread of the disease is non uniform. Only less than half of the interviewees mentioned that they always obey the recommendations dispensed by epidemiologists.

**Table 2. Observance of anti-coronavirus recommendations among the respondents %**

| How often do you obey the recommendations of epidemiologists? | Total | Male | Female |
|---|-------|------|--------|
| Always  | 46.8  | 36.4 | 54.4   |
| Frequently  | 39.1  | 42.6 | 36.5   |
| Rarely  | 10.3  | 14.8 | 7.0    |
| Do not obey   | 3.8   | 6.2  | 2.1    |

Source: sociological research of the Institute of Demography and Sociology of the Ilia State University, October, 2020 [11].

The women stand out as those who observe the recommendations. From among the females 90.9 % observe (always or frequently) the recommendations, which is more than we can say about the men. The number of the males who observe (always or frequently) such recommendations is 79 %. A relatively simple attitude toward the threat of coronavirus and nonuniform observance of the protective recommendations determined the dissimilar levels of infection among different genders. During the research period, 51 % of the men and 49 % of the women were infected with the coronavirus infection [6].

The highest indicator in terms of observing the epidemiologists' recommendations was identified in the capital (95.6 % - always or frequently observe the recommendations). This indicator is 1.4 times higher than that of Kutaisi, 1.2 times higher than that of Khashuri and 4 % more than that of Batumi. As regards to the recommendations, they include: wearing a mask, washing hands constantly, applying antiseptic solution to hands constantly and practicing social distancing. In essence, these are the basic norms of hygiene. From among the interviewed individuals 46.2 % observe all the listed recommendations, and the highest percentage (47.4 %) falls on the indicator of wearing a mask in closed space and public hangout areas. However, this figure is not sufficient. As epidemiologists stated (the research period) only 65 % of the country's population wore masks and they think the figure is low. According to these scientists, provided that the indicator of wearing the mask rose to 95 %, sharp increase of the indicator of infection would no longer occur [7]. It is noteworthy that the women are more responsible than the men in observing all those norms of hygiene that are required from the population by the epidemiologists. The men are more oriented toward wearing the mask.

The research has revealed the connection between the level of epidemiologists' recommendations observing and the perception of the threat of COVID infection. It was established that the quality of threat perception greatly determines the quality of observing the recommendations.

**Table 3. Connection between the coronavirus threat and the observance of the recommendations among the respondents %**

| The quality of perception of the coronavirus threat | The quality of observing the epidemiologists' recommendations |                                |
|---|---|--------------------------------|
|   | Observing always or frequently                                | Observing rarely or not at all |
| Very serious  | 97.2  | 2.8                            |
| Serious   | 93.4  | 6.6                            |
| Less serious  | 72.7  | 27.3                           |
| Not serious   | 38.3  | 61.7                           |

Source: sociological research of the Institute of Demography and Sociology of the Ilia State University, October, 2020 [11].

The epidemiologists and psychologists warned the population that in order to protect oneself from the pandemic, it is of utmost importance to obey the recommendations to the letter. Panic and fear should not be given rein. From among the interviewed people 17.8 % are not afraid of the coronavirus because according to their opinions the information regarding the pandemic is exaggerated. From among these individuals 26.9 % had some “experience” with respect to the coronavirus, which took the form of the infection of their family members, relatives or acquaintances. The largest share in this group falls on those people (69.7 %) whose family member, a relative or an acquaintance overcame the virus, 22.7 % of them are infected and undergoing the treatment, as for 2.6 % of the group, they died of coronavirus infection.

One of the factors that inspire the population with apprehension toward the coronavirus infection is the fact that the latter is not thoroughly studied and identified as belonging to the group of the fully recognizable viruses by medics, and we do not yet know what kind of complications it may leave behind in its wake in the human organism. The mentioned reason was the cause of fear among 37.7 % of the respondents.

Epidemiologists appeal to the individuals suffering from chronic diseases to pay special attention to the thorough observance of the recommendations. The number of those interviewed people who mentioned that they had a chronic ailment was 32.8 %. This indicator is higher among the women (34.7 %) than among the men (30.1 %). The indicator of the chronic ailment was the lowest in Batumi. The quantity of the respondents living in Batumi who said they were suffering from the chronic ailment was 22.0 %. This figure is 1.5 times less than that of the capital, 1.35 times less than that of Kutaisi and 2.27 times less than that of Khashuri.

While studying self-preservative behavior, close attention is paid to evaluating one’s health. This issue becomes even more noteworthy during the period of pandemic. The respondents were asked to evaluate their health based on a

**Table 4. Evaluating one’s own health with the help of a five-point system**

| Populated areas      | Evaluation points |      |      |      |      |
|----------------------|-------------------|------|------|------|------|
|                      | 1                 | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    |
| All of them together | 2.4               | 7.5  | 18.2 | 37.4 | 34.4 |
| Tbilisi              | 2.4               | 8.4  | 16.1 | 39.0 | 34.1 |
| Kutaisi              | 3.4               | 5.5  | 20.0 | 32.4 | 38.6 |
| Khashuri             | 2.0               | 12.0 | 32.0 | 36.0 | 18.0 |
| Batumi               | 0.0               | 4.0  | 10.0 | 46.0 | 40.0 |

Source: sociological research of the Institute of Demography and Sociology if the Ilia State University, October, 2020 [11].

five-point system, where one signified the lowest figure and five the highest. It became clear that 34.4 % of them gave their health the highest evaluation point.

The calculation of the average health self-evaluation point manifested that the highest average point was identified in Kutaisi 3.97, the lowest in Khashuri 3.56. As regards to Tbilisi and Batumi, the average self-evaluation point here was equal (3.94).

The self-evaluation of a person's health condition influences the fear caused by the pandemic. From among the respondents 21.5 % have no fear at all toward the coronavirus infection as they think that they are as fit as a fiddle. However, the number of those people who are fully healthy exceeds by 12.9 % the number of those who are not afraid of the virus.

The difference between these figures must be explained by the fact that this viral infection is, in effect, unexplored and we do not possess any idea as to its future complications. Consequently, the population's fear is well-grounded.

**Conclusions.** Georgia started its anti-pandemic preparations in the early stages. Since the identification of the first confirmed case, the organized management of the pandemic and its constant control became the number one priority of the country. The government implemented significant measures which weakened the force of the first wave of the pandemic and the country emerged with relatively low number of human losses. In the process of withstanding the pandemic the state's role solely is not determinative, and each of the citizens must combine their efforts in the fight against the crisis. The spread of the infection is largely dependent on observing the norms of sanitation-hygiene. It is every citizen's moral responsibility to protect themselves as well as those around them by displaying correct self-care behavior. Primarily, the population must be provided with accurate information which will help them perceive the threat realistically.

From among the interviewed individuals 9/10 think the coronavirus threat is serious in Georgia. The correlation between the levels of perception of the COVID-19 threat and obeying the Epidemiologists' recommendations is quite high. The higher the level of the threat perception, the higher the figure in terms of observing the recommendations.

The absolute majority of the respondents realize the necessity of obeying the medics' advice in the fight against the COVID-19. Nevertheless, here too, in terms of observing the medical-hygiene recommendations, the women display more responsibility and discipline compared to the men. Moreover, from among the close circle of the respondents (family member, relative, and acquaintance) those who do not observe the medics' recommendations are 5 times more likely to become infected than those who observe them. It is true that the absolute majority of the interviewees think they observe the epidemiologists' recommendations, however, only half of these people obey them constantly, which must also be considered as one of the important conditions for the proliferation of infection. The research made it clear that observing the epidemiologists' recom-

mendations and the quality of observance are directly related to the avoidance of the infection. The women manifested more responsibility for observing the recommendations than the men. Among the females the level of disregard for the recommendations was 2.1 times lower than the analogous figure among the males. This accounts for the fact that during the period of research the infection rates among the men were higher than among the women.

The percentage of the respondents who displayed infantile and frivolous attitude toward the COVID-19 was 39.3 %. This contributed to a rapid increase of the number of the infected individuals 2-3 weeks after the research first in certain regions and then in the entire country.

From among the interviewed people 26.9 % had a direct or indirect contact with the infected. If we take into consideration that according to the recent data, the share of the infected in the population of Georgia is approximately 3 %, then it follows that no fewer than 9 individuals have a direct or indirect contact with one infected person, which, in turn, must also be taken as an important factor of a quick spread of the infection.

The loss caused by the pandemic is quite substantial and includes several spheres in Georgia. Almost 5 000 people have died in two waves of the pandemic. Unfortunately, this figure is not final, as at the end of April the country is facing the third wave. There is nothing more valuable than each person's life. Therefore, it is imperative to fulfill again those recommendations that are constantly voiced by the epidemiologists. Moreover, the campaign of vaccination has already commenced, and, hopefully, we will defeat the pandemic once and for all. Nevertheless, until that day comes, each of us must remember that Georgia is among the list of dying nations, and we have to take care of one another's lives.

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#### САМОЗБЕРЕЖУВАЛЬНА ПОВЕДІНКА НАСЕЛЕННЯ ГРУЗІЇ В ПЕРІОД ПАНДЕМІЇ COVID-19

Стаття присвячена самозбережувальній поведінці в період глобальної проблеми — пандемії COVID-19. Позитивна самозбережувальна поведінка визначає рівень здоров'я людини і суспільства. У період пандемії посилюється інтерес до самозбережувальної поведінки. Окрім дотримання особистої гігієни або гігієнічних норм і соціального дистанціювання в процесі дослідження не було ніяких інших захисних механізмів, вакцинація ще не було розпочато. У зв'язку з актуальністю питання співробітниками Інституту демографії та соціології Державного університету Ілії під керівництвом професора А. Сулаберідзе в жовтні 2020 року було проведено соціологічне дослідження «Поінформованість про вплив пандемії коронавірусу на соціально-економічне становище населення Грузії та самозбережувальну поведінку» в чотирьох регіонах Грузії. Регіони обрано зважаючи на рівень поширення коронавірусу. Респонденти відбиралися методом випадкової вибірки. Було опитано 500 респондентів за допомогою заздалегідь складеної анкети. Це дослідження є однією зі спроб вивчити самозбережувальну поведінку в умовах пандемії в Грузії, що показує, як поведінка населення направлена на захист від коронавірусу. Одна з основних функцій держави — профілактика поширення хвороб і захист населення від шкідливого впливу факторів навколишнього середовища. У зв'язку з цим державою реалізовано протиепідемічні заходи; проте їх недостатньо, оскільки спільні зусилля держави і кожного громадяни-

на визначають життєздатність населення країни, а також масштаби поширення пандемії. Наша мета — оцінити зусилля громадян, а завдання — виявити фактори, які сприяють і перешкоджають цим зусиллям. Аналіз результатів дослідження виявив важливі відмінності між статями щодо оцінки власного здоров'я та самозбережувальної поведінки. Дослідження також показало, що чоловіки вище цінують своє здоров'я і менше про нього піклуються. Ця тенденція незмінна, навіть коли самозбережувальна поведінка значною мірою визначає можливість зараження не тільки людини, а й оточуючих. Жінки-респонденти (на відміну від чоловіків) більш схильні дотримуватися всіх рекомендацій епідеміологів. Рівень поінформованості населення про симптоми інфекції, а також рекомендації з самозахисту і актуальну інфекційну ситуацію в країні високий. Різні рівні інфікування в різних регіонах показали, що чим вище рівень зараження, тим вище рівень обізнаності. Стан здоров'я респондентів багато в чому визначає ставлення населення до коронавірусної інфекції. Самооцінка стану здоров'я впливає на рівень страху, викликаного пандемією. Респонденти з хронічними захворюваннями більш схильні висловлювати страх, аніж ті, хто високо оцінює своє здоров'я. Сприйняття ризиків, пов'язаних з коронавірусною інфекцією, є різним залежно від статі. На відміну від чоловіків жінки в середньому емоційніше сприймають загрозу коронавірусу та пов'язані з ним проблеми і нижче оцінюють стан свого здоров'я. Страх населення перед пандемією посилюється тим фактом, що ця вірусна інфекція ще недостатньо вивчена, і ми не знаємо про її наслідки або ускладнення в майбутньому. Тому обгрунтовані побоювання висловлюють і повністю здорові респонденти. Виявлено пропорційний зв'язок між рівнем дотримання рекомендацій епідеміологів і сприйняттям загрози зараження *COVID*. Чим серйозніше люди сприймають загрозу, тим більше вони виконують рекомендації епідеміологів.

**Ключові слова:** пандемія *COVID-19*, самозбережувальна поведінка, рекомендації щодо захисту від інфекції.