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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

An anthropological study of the state requires an understanding of everyday practices in human-state interaction. This study, which came about when state-imposed pandemic restrictions required that citizens go into quarantine, draws primarily from auto-ethnography. The conditions under a quarantine brought an end to well-established social practices, presenting a unique opportunity to study them. We explore the ways in which citizens construct the state, looking at citizens working in different institutions and attempting to access various services. This is done by evaluating the quarantine measures implemented by the state in an attempt to understand them.

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“Have You Ever Seen Zelensky Without a Haircut?”

Quarantine in Ukraine: The State and the People

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Abstract: An anthropological study of the state requires an understanding of everyday practices in human-state interaction. This study, which came about when state-imposed pandemic restrictions required that citizens go into quarantine, draws primarily from auto-ethnography. The conditions under a quarantine brought an end to well-established social practices, presenting a unique opportunity to study them. We explore the ways in which citizens construct the state, looking at citizens working in different institutions and attempting to access various services. This is done by evaluating the quarantine measures implemented by the state in an attempt to understand them.

Keywords: ethnography of the state; anthropology of the state; imaginary state; COVID-19; quarantine; Ukraine

Résumé: Une anthropologie de l'État requiert une compréhension des pratiques quotidiennes dans l'interaction humain-État. Cette étude qui a vu le jour lorsque les restrictions imposées par l'État en cas de pandémie ont obligé les citoyens à s'isoler en quarantaine, s'inspire principalement de l'auto-ethnographie. Les conditions de la quarantaine ont mis fin à des pratiques sociales bien établies, offrant ainsi une occasion unique de les étudier. Nous explorons les façons dont les citoyens construisent l'État, en observant les citoyens qui travaillent dans différentes institutions et tentent d'accéder à divers

services. Pour ce faire, nous évaluons les mesures de quarantaine mises en place par l'État pour tenter de les comprendre.

Mots-clés: ethnographie de l'État; anthropologie de l'État; imaginaire de l'État; COVID-19; quarantaine; Ukraine

Introduction

“Have you ever seen Zelensky without a haircut? Or any one of the deputies? They need to get a haircut, but people do not?” This rhetorical question was asked by a hairdresser. This was her attempt at coming up with an excuse for why she was working during the quarantine when this type of work was forbidden by the state. Zelensky, the president of Ukraine at the time, was seen by Ukrainians as the personification of the state. This article examines how citizens imagined their state and interacted with the state in everyday life during the COVID-19 quarantine.

What is the role of the state in the modern world? At the end of the twentieth century, Appadurai (1996) claimed that with the help of imagination a person loses touch with their local space, striving instead for a global space. In 2018, Hart (2018) saw the prospect of the state “return” due to the crisis of liberalism. Colonialism of anthropological discourse was not problematized in the middle of the 20th century, so the “state” as an object of ethnographic research appeared as the study of the “Other” (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Its existence is established by myth (Geert 1973). The assimilation of power and the right to “collect tribute” spreads rapidly from top to bottom throughout the bureaucracy (Sardan 1999).

Anthropological research in post-socialist states focuses on the destruction of the “moral order” (Hann 2011) and the disappearance of collectives that have led to a change in the entire social hierarchy (Hampfrey 2010).

We are guided by Gupta's idea about how the daily “constructing” of the state occurs through confrontations with lower-level officials who skilfully act as mediators between the individual and the state (Gupta 2006, 229). Using the example of Southern Ukraine (the cities of Odesa, Mykolayiv, and Pervomaisk), we explore the ways in which the citizens went about “constructing the state,” by considering how people perceive the state-implemented quarantine and the state.

Methods

The beginning of pandemic and quarantine brought an end to our habitual lifestyle. We experienced the transition to distance learning (two of us were working in higher education) and felt the impact of quarantine restrictions introduced in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (author Liubov Yakymynska performed her military service). We were not allowed to access the services of a hairdresser, although we did experience what it was like to attempt to access medical services. Quarantine opened our eyes to routine, everyday practices we had previously taken for granted. We decided to explore this observation by using an auto-ethnographical approach to study our everyday lives during the pandemic, where the researchers' experience is a legitimate source of knowledge (Roca et al. 2019), which allows the authors to analyze their own experiences. We were also able to carry out interviews. We interviewed factory workers in Pervomaisk and Odesa. In Mykolayiv, Odesa, and Pervomaisk, we interviewed beauty salon owners and employees, as well as mothers of children transferred to "remote care." In Pervomaisk, we carried out interviews with military employees. In total, we conducted 47 semi-structured interviews.

Context

Quarantine was officially announced in Ukraine on 12 March 2020. Educational establishments transferred their classes to distance learning.

Government reports gave workers the hope of receiving state unemployment benefits and entrepreneurs the hope of benefiting from tax holidays. On its official website, the Ministry of Health proposed an action plan in the event of COVID-19 symptoms. Employees of government agencies, including those who worked remotely or did not work at all, were paid. The military were poorly protected from the threat of COVID-19 because no quarantine measures were put in place for them. Because the war in Eastern Ukraine has been going on since 2014, the Armed Forces continue to be on high alert and, therefore, its military force cannot be quarantined.

Quarantine was not new for educators. In Ukraine, the closure of a school or schools in a particular city or region for a week or two as a result of the seasonal increase in the incidence of acute respiratory infections is typical. For the past several years, universities have not been open over the winter months in order to reduce heating costs; during this time, students must study on their own.

For many years now, Ukrainian society has been living under conditions brought about by regular economic and political crises and significant fluctuations in the national currency exchange rate, which has led to rapid price increases of all types of goods, and since 2014, Ukrainian society has lived under conditions of constant military threat. Because of these circumstances of living under continuous stress for years, when reports of a previously unknown virus were first released, little fear was expressed by people in Ukraine. What was feared, however, was the collapse of important economy sectors – such as disruptions in the supply of food and basic necessities, transportation, the banking system. This fear of economic collapse and supply chain disruptions resulted in the mass purchase of large quantities of food and other basic necessities.

Changes took place in the Ukrainian information space in March: The standard newscast was almost completely replaced by reports about the new disease. News from Italy became a powerful conveyor of fear, which had not been felt earlier. The number of city residents wearing masks and gloves increased significantly. However, very soon afterwards, in late April 2020, the front page news changed. First, the standard set of Ukrainian news coverage returned to normal – the war, the political struggle, corruption scandals, appointments, and so on. Secondly, news about COVID-19 changed direction. Information from experts (or those claiming to be experts), who cited the example of Sweden, a country that did not declare quarantine, advocated for the rapid acquisition of herd immunity. Reports appeared about the encouraging prospects of the tuberculosis vaccine, otherwise administered automatically to newborns, to protect against the coronavirus. Conspiracy theories increased. Claims were made that the virus was designed by the United States in order to take over the world, or by China, to defeat everyone. Other claims suggested the vaccine contained a microchip or people who had been vaccinated would die slowly. And, so on. At the same time the number of masked people in the streets significantly decreased. Conspiracy theories could be heard in public transport, in supermarkets, and in conversations with colleagues. People tried to get used to the incomprehensible.

How Thermometers Work: Contacting the Clinic: Liubov Yakymynska's Personal Experience

The introduction of quarantine measures affected the quality of healthcare. Doctors had to work incredibly long hours. "I have to work 10 hours a day.

I'm exhausted," the family physician complained over the phone. It also became very difficult to access medical treatment, as I experienced firsthand.

My daughter called me at work, complaining of chest pain. She had been ill for several days with typical SARS symptoms. After receiving the referral from our family physician, my daughter and I went to the hospital in Pervomaisk during my lunch break for an X-ray. At the hospital entrance were two nurses with a non-contact thermometer, which wasn't reading properly, as I realized later. Temperature checking is a typical procedure in any quarantined facility, so I was not surprised. But I certainly did not expect the following.

"What are you thinking?" shouted the nurse, who was checking our temperature. "You and your child are sick! Your temperature is 37.7, and your child's is 37.2! How could you come here!?"

I insisted on getting the X-ray, but was lectured on my lack of responsibility and the risks I was exposing my child and others to. I was told it was only necessary to see a doctor during the pandemic in an emergency. Yet the chest pain had occurred after a week of illness. When the examination found nothing, the doctor acted even more aggressively, accusing me for bothering the doctors for nothing.

I bought other thermometers to check our temperature and they showed that it was normal. I told our family physician about the situation with our temperature readings. "The thermometers at the hospital are not working properly. When they checked my temperature, it was high, too. They have to obey the order to not let patients into the hospital, so they pretend everybody is ill."

I look back at this situation through a framework of bureaucracy, to help me understand how the state is perceived and understood by its population (Gupta 2006). On its official website, the Ukraine Ministry of Health provides an action plan to follow if a person suspects they have contracted COVID-19. If they feel they are getting worse, they must first call their family doctor. If their temperature increases significantly, they need to call an ambulance. The city polyclinic where I went was under quarantine and did not treat people who might be COVID-19 positive. But, I ask, what exactly constitutes a "significant increase" in temperature? Also, what are people to do when they have other diseases requiring treatment? My experience shows how the medical staff interpreted the vague instructions to mean that people with a fever could not be admitted to the polyclinic. By taking this measure, the medical staff complied

with the formal requirements but was apparently relieved of the responsibility to provide healthcare services. This suggests that when doctors follow the instructions to the letter, they see it as their duty to minimize the case count. However, the case count is a form of statistics, as per bureaucratic language. Under this interpretation of the public health order, specific measures were taken: Strict controls were put in place for those entering the clinic, making it almost impossible to see a doctor. In the case of my daughter, this made it impossible for any doctor to diagnose a possible disease.

Social anthropologist Bazylevych claims that Ukrainian healthcare workers working for state-run clinics take advantage of the lack of order to increase the wealth of healthcare facilities because they “rely heavily on out-of-pocket payments” (Bazylevych 2014, 830). Moreover, healthcare workers often tell patients to pay out of pocket for things such as medication, sheets, the doctor’s gloves, bandages, and so on, thereby taking advantage of patients’ lack of knowledge about what the state finances and what it does not. My personal experience with the pandemic shows that the ambiguity of government wording lets doctors provide statistics rather more than treat people.

The Gender Contract of a Working Mother During Quarantine

The gender contract, which means that a woman combines the roles of housewife and working mother while receiving state support in the form of free child care, on which most Soviet women based their identity, was terminated after the end of the socialist era; in its place, Ukrainian women had the option to choose from two models – housewife or businesswoman (Zhurzhenko 2008). However, because the vast majority of Ukrainian women in reality are not businesswomen but cannot afford to choose the housewife option either, they continue to abide by a revised gender contract. When the nationwide quarantine led to the closure of kindergartens, many women in Ukraine experienced serious repercussions.

Liubov Yakymynska recorded an interview at a playground in Pervomaisk (10 May 2020) where three women were watching their children playing. Oksana¹, a housewife, complained that she was tired of having to be with her children all the time. Tatiana was forced to stay at home with her child during the quarantine period because her workplace had been closed. Halyna, a military employee (soldier), was forced to go to work despite the quarantine.

The conversation was, of course, about the quarantine – the most relevant topic for anyone with children. “They say that kindergartens will open on

May 24!” Oksana said, her voice hopeful. “No! I’ve heard that they won’t open before September! I’m so tired of watching nothing but cartoons!” Tatiana complained. “I want to watch cartoons! My five-year-old has been alone at home all day for more than a month!” Galina said. “You have to earn money in order to survive! Are they even thinking of us?” Her interlocutors sympathized with her.

The risk of getting sick was less pertinent for working mothers than the urgent problem of daycare that arose during quarantine. The problem of deciding whom to leave the child with while they went to work was typical for working women deprived of the opportunity to use state-provided professional childcare during the quarantine. Single working mothers faced an even more pressing problem – simply surviving. Many single working mothers we spoke with had to choose between earning an income for survival and the moral obligation to provide care for their children. Some women were able to send their children to their parents, despite appeals from the government not to endanger the elderly. What are the guiding principles of working parents who are forced to ignore precautionary health measures such as these? Some believed the coronavirus was a fictional problem. Others analyzed the statistics of fatalities in Italy, where the average age of people who died from this disease is over 80 years. These moral excuses helped to alleviate feelings of guilt and maintain a sense of control in a situation where any decision was equally bad. Others, ignoring the basic safety rules during quarantine, took their children with them to their workplace. As Anna, a military employee, said, “I take my son with me because of the quarantine. I can’t leave him at home alone.”

Many women who raise children alone were forced to leave them at home without any supervision. In the case of Natalia, also a military employee, her six-year-old son warmed food up in the microwave for himself and his younger brother while she worked. “My commander proposed [that I take] unpaid leave. But what should we eat?” Natalia explained. The child support she received was not sufficient to buy even bread and milk. “So, I’m still working and my baby has to stay at home alone. Can someone tell me when this will be over? They come up with all sorts of nonsense,” said Iryna, a shop assistant. Women felt abandoned, as they were forced to deal with the problems of looking after and raising children on their own, without government support.

The fear of an unknown disease gave way to another, much more real, fear – children and their mothers not having enough money to pay for food, clothing, utilities. Though payments for gas, electricity and water consumption were deferred for the quarantine period, they still have to be paid. Tenants were

not given a break on their rent payments. Therefore, a single working mother raising children on her own needed to reconcile herself with the risks of physical contact, and resign herself to the fact that she cannot adhere to legal and sanitary guidelines and must go to work. The state left many women no choice but to violate state public health regulations. In our interviews with women, they all regarded the state with hostility, asking “Do they really think of us?”

Factories and Quarantine

In Ukraine, factories were privatized in the 1990s. Maksym works at a private factory as a foreman. Because of quarantine, his employer suspended factory activities in March 2020. As soon as information about the coronavirus spread, employees had to have their temperature checked.

When more severe restrictions were imposed, the company suspended production. Some employees were allowed to work, making them feel lucky to continue earning a wage. But almost all workers were at home for two months without any help or cash payments. This situation did not cause employees to react negatively, at least not openly. Moreover, workers did not know that they could claim legal rights to support payments. “The plant is not operational. How can we get money? We just want to be paid for work we did recently!” said Maksym. “It’s good that they didn’t evict me from the dormitory,” said Oleksiy, another plant employee. Because Maksym and Oleksiy were working at the factory illegally, they did not ask for economic support. According to Maksym, “We have no revolutionaries,” referring to people who were ready to defend workers’ legal rights. “If they [revolutionaries] appear, they are laid off very quickly,” he adds (Odesa, 25 May 2020).

According to Maksym and Oleksiy, factory workers did not accuse the management of not paying benefits during the forced two-month unemployment period. Instead, most workers accused the state of imposing quarantine. Some were indignant at President Zelensky and viewed the state as a “harmful other” that interfered with normal everyday life.

Beauty or Quarantine Rules?

Beauty salons in Ukrainian cities often operate as small businesses and when they are run by one person, this person is both the owner – an entrepreneur – and the employee providing the services. Government measures also included them in the closure. But Ukrainian women continued to be well-groomed, nicely coiffed and manicured. “Girls’ (clients’) hair has gotten so long, so I have to work!

I started taking clients at home,” hairdresser Camila said. She had to continue to pay taxes during the quarantine, while another beauty salon owner was not interested in this issue at all, blaming the state for taking taxes but not giving them the opportunity to work.

The views of these beauty salon operators suggest how the imaginary state did not perform the role of protecting or supporting them. Instead, the state was perceived as a repressive body that created problems. Beauty salons received clients by appointment through a back entrance or they would go to the client’s home. My interviewee’s sarcastic comment, “Have you ever seen Zelensky without a haircut? Or any one of the deputies? Authorities need to get a haircut, but people do not?” reflects their feelings about the state’s response to the pandemic. Another of our interlocutors who ran a salon explained that neither she nor any of her clients knew anyone who died of COVID-19, which was how she justified the safety of her activities.

A series of interviews in Odesa, Mykolayiv, and Pervomaisk with small business representatives suggests that the main reason for ignoring quarantine safety rules was the authorities’ unwillingness to provide the help people need to survive. Indeed, the state required the payment of taxes in full despite people’s lack of income. This explains their views about the state as a punitive, inherently unjust system that disadvantages people and forces them to find a way out through their own efforts within their usual way of life, without trying to analyze reality and their theoretical rights and abilities. The state is imagined as a system that gives rise to problems when anyone comes into contact with it, which is why small business owners tried to circumvent all the state requirements and restrictions, often publicly ignoring them.

Conclusion

The perception of the state in Ukrainian society reflects local traditional approaches – a complete rejection of the state’s significance. Our interview respondents do not see themselves as representatives of the state – whether they provide public services (teaching, healthcare, protection), or use these services.

We found it surprising that, despite their different societal levels and source of income, public and private sector employees were equally negative about any government initiative. However, we noticed that the reactions expressed by these two groups differed. Representatives of state structures tried to pretend to follow the instructions “from above” while not necessarily trying to comprehend

them from the standpoint of state. Representatives of the private sector did not even try to feign their observance of government instructions. They openly ignored government initiatives, whether pertaining to their own survival or with respect to their own comfort and preferences, such as maintaining their physical appearance through beauty services.

The traditional Ukrainian perception of power in any form as a source of “absolute evil” has proved stronger than societal differences. The focus of our interviewees was not on the actual threat posed by an unknown infection, but on the appropriateness (and often the real possibility) of restrictions imposed by the authorities. The fact that the authorities sent contradictory messages to their citizens – “isolate yourself, pay taxes, go to work, work, do not leave children at home alone, do not involve the elderly in child care” – did not surprise citizens, because this contradiction perfectly fit their view of power as evil. The main problem Ukrainians were trying to solve during the quarantine was how to survive under critical conditions when the state de facto withdrew a significant number of obligations (state childcare, providing opportunities to work for business, providing timely medical treatment). But at the same time, it continued to require that its citizens perform their duties (go to work, pay taxes, provide childcare). The official easing of the quarantine in June 2020, which has nothing to do with a reduction in the number of COVID-19-related deaths in Ukraine or in the world, was seen by the vast majority of Ukrainians as official permission to do what they used to do.

The destruction of habitual social practices – opportunities for mothers to return to work while benefitting from inexpensive state-run care for their children in kindergartens or primary schools or to seek medical advice – was criticized by citizens. However, gratitude for the availability of such public services was rarely expressed. What the state gives was perceived as expected and was noticed only when the state took it away.

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Note

¹ All names of respondents were changed.

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