

People's Reactions to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Hate and XenoPhObia in Latvia

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Abstract

Our aim is to understand main ways of people reactions to the pandemic and analyze how social-psychological processes of Latvian inhabitants, especially such danger phenomena as hate and xenophobia, could be explained in the time of pandemic.

How this pandemic situation in 2020 changed people's relationships, attitudes and emotions? Has it only accelerated previous tendencies, or has it created new trends that could open a new page in human and societal development, especially in the field of such negative socio-psychological phenomena as hate and prejudices?

Keywords: *Hate; Xenophobia; Pandemic; Estimation of the Danger of Covid-19; Q Attitude to Government*

Introduction

Pandemic of the Covid-19 is such a fundamental general danger for humankind that it looks as the beginning of a new world. At the same time it is the biggest challenge and tremendous test for all political and cultural institutions, especially those dealing with society's safety and international cooperation. The Latvian case looks similar to many other countries [14,17], but some particular aspects could be recognized.

The first wave of the winter-spring Covid-19 pandemic was very mild in Baltic countries, especially in Latvia. At the peak of the European pandemic, the amount of infected was under 0.1% of residents, and for the vast majority of them the illness was experienced in the very light form, the 24-hour day average number of hospital patients was 10 or fewer, and for the difficult cases the maximum was 6 patients simultaneously. The dilemma of economic interests versus human's health during the first wave showed strong humanistic priorities of people's lives in all countries, including Latvia, but governmental reactions to the second wave were not so consistent.

It is understandable that people reacted on the pandemic situation very differently. The short qualitative analysis of main types of these reactions may help to understand corresponding expectations of overcoming of pandemic in Latvia and predict changes in the intergroup relationships, especially in the hate and negative attitudes to outgroups.

The reaction of residents to the pandemic was possible to differentiate into three main groups [6]. First one could be considered as "contradictious" toward the danger of Covid-19. Typical for this group was the critical attitude towards the strong governmental restrictions and a negative view of the mass media. Members of the "contradictious" group criticized the government for huge restrictions on human lives, including the limitation of human rights and deterioration of economic conditions. Mass media appeared to them as too anxious and panicking, producing something like collective psychosis in society. The representatives of this group tended to ignore the danger.

Second group could be considered as “overestimating” the danger of Covid-19. They tried to increase governmental restrictions and sanitize all things around them at all times. “Overestimating” weren’t so active on the Internet, and they were critical towards the government as well, but from the opposite side. It appeared to them that strong governmental reaction and announcement of the quarantine and lockdown was delayed and too soft. They thought that the real situation has changed from bad to worse and people should stock up on provisions. All people’s activities should have been stopped and directed to self-isolation with centralized government supporting with food, water, masks and disinfection supplies. The majority of this group represents people over 60, but some older people were very active “contradictious” as well.

The third group perceived the pandemic situation more or less adequately, with understanding of real danger and personal responsibility. They accepted official requirements of masks and two-meter distance without problems. They accepted safety rules and were concerned not only with personal and family health but with opportunities to maintain their way of life and businesses, and were also looking ahead to the time after the end of lockdown and quarantine. They were not sure about the necessity of full lockdown in Latvia and were not satisfied with insufficient governmental support, but tried to find mutual understanding with authorities. It looks that this part of residents would be more trustful to local mass media on governmental decisions in the pandemic.

The discussions of the Covid-19’s harmfulness and necessity of substantial limitations of work, learning, sport and cultural activities between representatives of different groups, including physicians, resulted in people’s distrust toward mass media as well. According to the biggest Latvian sociological agency SKDS’ data, 45% of Latvian residents in December 2020 didn’t trust the mass media (trustful - 44%). In this case, it could be expected that deterioration of the pandemic could not predict quick changes in the people’s conduct, with the exception of the second group that from the beginning was suspicious against governmental soft recommendations without strong punishment for all transgressors.

In the summer the number of infected and hospitalized was decreased more and this situation was perceived by first and third group as the basis for restarting of all previous activities including tourism, local and international meetings, sport activities in fitness clubs and other. Some remaining restrictions became perceived as unnecessary restrictions that interfered with goals of renovation of normal economic life.

The second wave of Covid-19 had caught authorities of many countries by surprise. They tried displacement activities to minimize possible negative consequences of the next lockdown and quarantine but “contradictious” perceived them as too significant restrictions and “overestimating” - as too soft and too late. Frustration over many residents’ activities being restricted by governmental policies has actualized some tensions not only in marginal groups but in some middle-class groups in the segment of small and medium business especially.

The majority of the second and third groups became more anxious and aggressive not only towards the government but to all migrants from the inside and outside Latvia. In the social climate of reduced off-line communications, this hostile discourse was displaced to the on-line communication. It is not easy to classify such remarks as hate speech because direct expression of hate or calls to arms and violence against foreigners are forbidden by law. At the same time it is not difficult to find traces of subtle and even blatant prejudices (“they don’t respect pandemic restrictions”, “they ignore our norms of communication”, and “they are too indiscreet visitors”, “they are drinkers”).

While there is not an organized movement promoting racism in Latvia, we have data on the existence of racism. Latvian Centre of Human Rights collected the survey data on 200 foreign students, mainly from Asian and African countries. More than 50% of respondents stated that their treatment was fraught with devaluation, derogation or hostile aggression based only on their racial or ethnic origin. Obviously they didn’t appeal to the police but sometimes to helping NGOs, which collected more than 1000 cases of social discrimination by race or ethnic origin [13].

It looks that most dangerous for different intergroup relations in the time of the pandemic and outside is the hate [19]. Analysis of this concept can help us predict possible level of violence and aggression in society [20]. Some authors reduce the *hate* construct to the *prejudice* construct with the same factors and tendencies, viewing *prejudice* as a precondition of *hate*: “the seeds of hatred are present in even subtle contemporary forms of prejudice” [10]. While it can be accepted that social prejudices involve negative attitudes and emotions to definite out-groups, and hate involves some prejudices, this does not mean that these constructs are identical. According Hall: “A person who commits a ‘hate crime’ need not actually be motivated by hatred for his or her victim, but rather it is his or her expression of prejudice or bias against the victim’s (presumed) group membership that more properly characterises such crimes [12].

Children very easily assimilate most prejudices from their social environment, but they very seldom lead to the development of hate. At the same time, prejudice can be generalized as a primary component of *hate* [15] and as a type of biased stereotypes that haters can assimilate easily from their environment, because they strengthen and justify the existing negative attitudes to a target group. Later the cognitive biases can be over generalized – the transgression of specific members of the enemy group may be seen as characterizing all the members of the group [4]. Sometimes particular negative labels (ethnophobias) are used for this devaluation. In Latvia the popular label for ethnic Russians - “occupants” - and the one for ethnic Latvians - “fascists” – were xenophobically distorted overgeneralizations of real events of the past and expressions of the most popular prejudices.

A deeper similarity between prejudice and the hate can be traced. Both constructs are mostly directed to a group target. A hated group seems to a hater to be more or less responsible for the harm done to him/her and/or to other people, especially to those belonging to the in-group. Such assignment of responsibility for harm-effect results in the hated group’s devaluation, derogation or “moral exclusion” [9,16]. “Moral exclusion” means that all humanistic principles, human rights, freedoms and rules do not apply to the hated group. The same effect can be achieved through real and symbolic threats to values, norms and well-being or through a threat to self-esteem or self-image from the out-group [2,11,18].

It is difficult to understand the emergence and maintenance of xenophobic or racial prejudices in adulthood without taking into account the hate and its emotional derivatives. In Allport’s opinion [1], the main reason for the rigidity of prejudices and resistance to changes is based on their emotional aspect. It seems that hate ensures the emotional basis of most human pre-judgements and prejudices. The core of xenophobia is the hate towards the out-groups or strong antipathy that can be considered as a subtle form of hate.

Taking into account most of the various views in one comprehensive study on hate [20], it is possible to give an integral definition of hate: hate is a compound negative emotional construct described more particularly as a long-term set of negative attitudes, motivation, emotion, and dispositions against a human or nonhuman target. The target of hate emphasized in all definitions can be a person, a group, animals or a more complex object (landscape, weather, city, country, something supernatural, etc.). Hate always has a particular target but this target is sometimes displaced and/or mythologized (“enemies of democracy”, “agents of imperialism”, “axis of Evil”, “enemies of Allah”, etc.).

Our study confirmed the two-factor structure of hate: the first factor was labelled *passive hate* and second - *active hate* [8,5]. The former is characterized by the fear of the target and the tendency to avoid contacts or to increase the distance, while the latter is characterized by condemnation, anger and the desire to punish the target. (See Figure 1). More often not an individual but a group was considered by participants to be the target of antipathies, which seems to be a confirmation of the intergroup nature of the hate. This two-factor structure is in accordance with Beck’s theory who held that the fight-flight reaction can be an integral part of hate, haters feel compelled either to escape or eliminate the threat by incapacitating or killing the enemy [3].

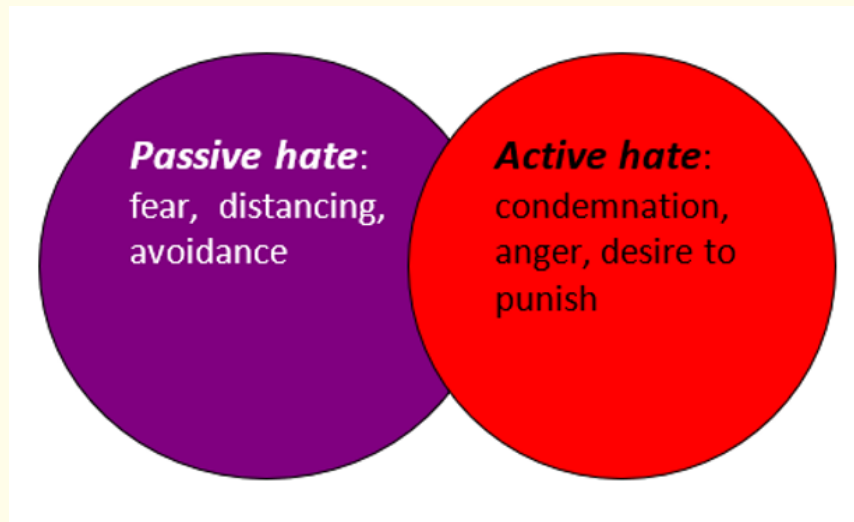


Figure 1: Two-factor model of Hate [5].

Our studies showed significant positive correlation between hate and ethnic intolerance parameters in Russian-speaking and Latvian-speaking populations in Latvia [7]. The essential consequence of intolerance is social discrimination. The Russian-speaking citizens of Latvia strike off Latvian surnames from the voting bulletins of their favorite ('pro-ethnic-Russian') party during parliamentary or municipal elections. Latvian-speaking citizens prefer to vote for 'pro - Latvian' parties, despite being greatly disappointed in their previous activities. The majority of the Latvian-speaking citizens are against granting full citizen rights to Russian-speaking residents, even the right to vote in municipal elections, despite the fact that all European Union citizens who live in other countries have these rights.

At the time of the second wave of the pandemic all three groups of residents became dissatisfied with governmental policy and the charge of grievances against government started to outweigh the "defects" of other groups. All people perceive themselves as the victims of governmental restrictions and it can produce a new basis for a social consolidation against authorities. In December, 12 NGOs "For stability" had organised a public event against restrictions in the center of Riga, the capital of Latvia. It was aimed not only against governmental restrictions, but was also calling for the resignation of some members of the Cabinet or for the resignation of all government. It didn't look as mass action but noticeable for Latvia as an expression of popular discontent.

More essential for Latvia is the expression of discontent and strong criticism towards the authorities in social networks such as the Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and others. Obviously, if we can differentiate the hate speech into two categories accordingly to main versions of hate (active and passive, 5), it is possible to find in Latvian on-line discourse the passive version of hate speech. It means that there are no incitement to riot or to physical violence against other groups or authorities, but only devaluation and representation of opponents in the dark light as liars, bullshit-artists, profit seekers etc. In the case of pandemic the main zone of stigmatization covers all official restrictions and the lack of governmental support for the people. "Why we cannot buy gifts for Christmas and New Year's celebrations?", "How can we survive in the situation of full lockdown? - people are asking. It looks that the gap between "they" (authorities) and „we" (people) became bigger, and negative attitudes to authorities became stronger in Latvia. Surely, we need intensive psychological and sociological investigation for a more detailed understanding of these changes.

Conclusion

The second wave of the global pandemic has shifted the people's displeasure from the xenophobic objects to national government's policy that temporarily can lower intergroup tensions in the networks through associating oneself with other residents as victims of governmental restrictions. It looks that the pandemic changed the direction of people's hate and hostility from other social groups to establishment. Is it a temporary effect only in Latvia, or can we expect long-term decrease of xenophobic prejudices - it is issue of the future when mass vaccination will be over and pandemic will be completed. Hate speech should be differentiated into more aggressive active and more soft - passive form that makes it easier to disclose it as the expression of xenophobic prejudices and hate.

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