

PANDEMIC ISOLATION IN BELARUS THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF PHOTOGRAPHS: THE CASE OF A FAMILY'S QUARANTINE

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Abstract: *This photo essay examines the process of isolation during the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic based on the quarantine photos of a family from Belarus. It illustrates how the content and form of the collected images visualized the invisible markers of the pandemic and reflected various stages of isolation, transformations of the notion of home, and changes in family dynamics and routines. To collect the photographs, a weeklong remote participatory project was conducted. The findings of this project thus pointed to a direct correlation between photographs and changes in the social world and individuals' lives brought about by the coronavirus outbreak.*

Keywords: *COVID-19; isolation; photo-elicitation method; family; home*

Introduction

Photographs explore, document, and communicate social reality. They have been used as a tool for “examining the connection between people’s lives and the social and economic structures of the larger world” (Wagner 1979, 18). With the introduction of various public health measures in response to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, the socio-cultural changes associated with the crisis situation could not escape the photographic gaze. Numerous scholars used images captured during the pandemic to provide a glimpse into

both individual and collective lived experiences of quarantine, virus, illness, and contamination (Hossler 2021; O'Callaghan 2021; Bogumil 2022; Navazo-Ostúa and Pérez Valencia 2022). The pandemic images presented new viewpoints on the homescape and domesticity, visualizing the social distancing and its impact on people's lives (Pixley 2021).

The social isolation that came with COVID-19 also affected the way research was conducted. The pre-pandemic standards for carrying out participatory photo-based projects had to be altered to suit the new circumstances of the quarantine. The researchers were forced to devise different ways of establishing a connection with their participants. Remote participatory methods, digital ethnography, instant messaging interviews, and video-call software became the primary methods and means of conducting research amidst the pandemic (Burkholder et al. 2021; Hall et. al 2021; Polat 2022; Watson and Lupton 2022).

This essay was also produced as a result of distance-based participatory research, meaning that all interactions between the researcher and the participant took place online. In it, I examine the isolation process of a quarantined Belarusian family and the changes that COVID-19 brought into it, based on the photographs taken by one family member. More specifically, I look into how the content and form of the photographs depict various stages of isolation, the transformation of the notions of home, and changes in family relationships and routines. The collected photographs are part of a seven-day project that was conducted in May 2020, whereby the participant from Belarus took photos during their family quarantine and later presented and discussed them in an interview with the researcher (myself).¹ I build upon my conclusions with both my interpretations and the participant's perspectives on the photographs. Additionally, I aspire for this essay to become one of the very few documented personal accounts of the Belarusian pandemic context.

Contextualising the Pandemic

There is a substantial lack of reliable informational sources available for researching the Belarusian context of the pandemic. During the COVID-19 outbreak, censorship prevented local media from providing readers with

¹ The initial version of this essay (including the photographs) was produced as a part of the "7 (every days of quarantine" project developed during the Visual Sociology course under the supervision of Prof. Ludmila Władyniak at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague.

information critical of the authority's actions (Przetacznik and Tothova 2022). While the state media coverage of COVID-19 in Belarus did exist, the information that represented the reality circulated only on independent online platforms (SATIO 2022, 4). As a result, it is difficult to determine whether the information received by the population was accurate or how many people had access to and were influenced by independent online sources.

The official sources state that COVID-19 entered Belarusian homes as early as on 28 February 2020 (Reuters 2020). As of the start of the project in May 2020, no quarantine measures such as social distancing, public use of face masks, or remote work to limit contact among people had been implemented (Ilyushina and Hodge 2020). Belarusian authorities officially denied the seriousness of the virus (Kramer 2020). To maintain the false image of a virus-free nation, the rising COVID-19 cases were nevertheless underreported. This meant that COVID tests were rarely performed, citizens were not diagnosed or treated according to their symptoms, and the population decline at the start of the pandemic was not officially attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic (SATIO 2020, 4).

Notably, while the lack of preventive measures against the spread of the virus affected everyone in Belarus, the experience was different for lower classes and other vulnerable social groups, who were disproportionately overwhelmed by the pandemic. As such, people who lived in closed institutions, medical workers, homeless people, and disabled people were daily exposed to the virus (Human Constanta 2022). Their access to appropriate medical treatment, testing, and protective equipment (e.g., face masks) was not always guaranteed, also considering that the majority of available protective measures were not implemented until much later in the pandemic's course.

PEI Method

This research relies on interpretations of photographs that depict the intimate realities of the quarantined family, and therefore it is critical for the method to allow the family participant to be involved in both the production of data and its explanation. This way, the collected visual data could depict and reveal important family aspects of the isolation to the researcher, while being complemented by the participant's emic perspectives on the meanings behind the images.

The method that I chose for this research was the participant-driven photo elicitation method (PEI): a qualitative interview technique that uses participant-produced images as stimuli to elicit various responses from research

participants during the interviews (Copes et al. 2018, 475). The presented photographs can evoke in participants memories, feelings, and in-depth responses that may not be easily accessed by relying solely on the oral interview method (Collier 1957; Prosser 1998; Hurworth 2003; Meo 2010). This effect of the images is frequently explained in terms of how the human brain functions. When compared to exchanges in which the brain is processing word-only information, the combination of images and words is found to utilize more brain capacity (Harper 2002, 13). It means that PEI can potentially elicit a broader range of information than a standard interview.

The photographs also serve as a “medium of communication” between researcher and participant; they provide structure for the interview and bridge the differences between the two (Clark-Ibáñez 2004, 1512). The participant can use the images to communicate their reality, while the researcher can expand on their interview questions based on the presented photographs and discover new elements of the participant’s story (ibid.).

In participant-driven research, the quality of the data heavily depends on the participant’s input. It is thus important for the participant to be fully invested in the project, putting forth effort and devoting their time to creating images and discussing them in an interview. When developing the research design, I therefore compiled a set of criteria for selecting the participant that would be most suitable for this kind of research. To begin, the participant had to have enough time for the research and be interested in taking photographs daily for one week. Given that the COVID-19 social distancing measures were in place, the participant also had to be prepared to communicate with the researcher, submit, and discuss images exclusively online, while having the means to maintain a reliable internet connection. Additionally, to avoid any unnecessary social contact, the participant had to have access to image-capturing device(s) and know how to operate them. It was also advantageous for the participant to be artistically inclined in order to work well with the visual rhetoric of the photographs, as well as to effectively communicate personal feelings through them.

The possibility to establish trust with the participant and their family while communicating remotely was also an important factor in choosing the participant. Since social interactions outside of home were no longer safe, creating a comfortable environment for the participants to share sensitive visual information without meeting the researcher in person could prove to be the most challenging part of the study. Having considered all of the aforementioned factors, I decided on a participant whom I knew prior to conducting this research.

In our personal communications, Alina, my friend, volunteered to be the main family participant in the project and to do the photographing. She was a 19-year-old female student at that time, and the older child in a Belarusian middle-class family of four. Both parents are employed in the public sector: the father is a police officer with a teaching practice, and mother works as an emergency paramedic. At the time of the project, Alina was enrolled in an IT coding course at a private educational establishment in Minsk. Photography was one of Alina's passions. She and her family resided in a newly purchased and renovated two-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of Minsk, which also served as the project's location. No common space (e.g., living room) was present in the apartment. One bedroom was shared between two working parents, and the other belonged to Alina and her ten-year-old sister Asya, who attended primary school. Sisters slept in the same bed. Alina and I share a similar cultural and linguistic background, as we both grew up in a small town in Belarus. Our relationship could be described as a close friendship, and since 2018, we have communicated primarily online.

The research design comprised three stages. First, Alina was required to take photographs daily for a period of seven days during her family's social isolation. The second stage involved a reveal of the photographs taken by the participant and a subsequent photo-elicitation interview (PEI) discussion between the researcher (myself) and the participant (Alina), focusing on the context and meaning behind the photographs. Lastly, I analysed the family's life during their pandemic isolation based on Alina's interview comments and my interpretations of the photographs. Thus, the main method of the project was PEI. By examining Alina's insider perspective on her family's handling of the pandemic quarantine, PEI helped unveil the intimate aspects of the pandemic's effect on the family, personal emotions associated with the quarantine, and changes in family dynamics that were reflected in the collected photographs.

Methodological Considerations

Before moving forward with the main task of the project, I asked Alina to obtain permission from her family members for me to conduct the research, since it could potentially involve their personal images. All further arrangements described in this chapter were also made using online messaging platforms. I informed Alina of all stages in my research design, which also involved the recording of the interview once the first stage of the project (i.e., taking

photographs) was completed. After the project was finished and its results were put in writing, I asked Alina to obtain additional permission from her parents to publish the essay, including the photographs of their children in it. The parents responded with the permission to publish the text and the photos. As requested by the family, all names in this essay are replaced with pseudonyms.

The project lasted for one week, resulting in a total of 18 pictures taken by Alina using her phone and digital camera. The content of the photographs ranged from portraits of family members and home to various memorabilia items. The seven-day project was not designed to exceed the limit of seven photographs (one photo per day), but I decided not to omit any of them without first consulting Alina. Every image was an important part of the family's story, and removing any photograph would entail changing the original narrative, mangling and misinterpreting the context that Alina chose to present. It was also agreed to include three photographs that were taken outside of the project's timeframe in order to better illustrate the context: one had been taken a week before Alina officially agreed to participate in the research (Figure 1), and the other two Alina took one day after the end of the quarantine (Figures 16 and 18).

The photographs were revealed and discussed in a three-hour online interview conducted on 8 May 2020, on the videoconferencing platform Zoom. The program allowed us to see each other while sharing a screen on which all photographs were displayed. The interview was held in Alina's first language: Russian. The excerpts, which appear as quotations from Alina's speech in this essay, were transcribed and translated to English using the recorded version of the interview. When I processed the collected data (photographs and interview excerpts) and completed the first draft of the analysis, I gave Alina the opportunity to suggest changes to the preliminary text and my interpretations of the photographs as needed. Alina had no major disagreements with my perspective on the photographs since many of the interpretations presented in this essay came up during the interview discussion. She did, however, point to the more nuanced meaning of the photographs (e.g., the discussion of Figure 15), which I preserved in the analysis section.

Choosing Alina for this research brought a few advantages. Since I had known Alina and her family before the start of the project, the necessity to gain their trust was eliminated. The preestablished friendly relationship allowed Alina to deliver visual data that was personal and meaningful, depicting intimate family moments. Alina also had prior experience taking quality photographs with a digital camera as a hobby. Possessing high-quality devices



Figure 1. One day before the beginning of the project, and the first week of the family's unofficial isolation: Asya is looking out of the window, watching other kids playing outside.

and photography skills allowed Alina to have more creative freedom in how she wanted to portray her family life and articulate her feelings through images. Thus, the visual elements in most of the collected photographs were not accidental but well thought-out intentions of the photographer, which added a layer of meaning to the photographs' analysis.

The Beginning of Quarantine: Sorrow, Uncertainty, and a Brief Moment of Curiosity

The first photograph (Figure 1) was taken during the first week of the family's social isolation. When Alina's mother began to show early signs of the virus, it was decided that all family members would be quarantined. In the interview, Alina shared that she took a photo of her sister Asya huddled up by the window, watching the neighbourhood kids play outside because it represented the way she felt. Alina was joyless and sorrowful from passively observing rather than participating in the activities she enjoyed doing. She and her sister were

confronted with a stark reminder of what their new reality was not: “It is spring, everything is blooming and singing. [...] It is very strange, there is a dissonance between what we have in our family and how beautiful and alive it is out there”, said Alina.

As we were discussing the main elements of the photo, I asked Alina to talk about the window in the photograph in greater detail, given its overpowering presence: “Our window is [a] sort of tease: you can see everything that happens outside, you want to go there but you can’t do it [due to the quarantine measures]”. Indeed, the window in this picture becomes a tricky barrier – the reality is not hidden, and everything that happens out there is visible through the glass; it gives a sense of involvement, yet it physically separates from the outside world. The participation, however, was illusive, and the ability to observe what was happening outside did not bring much comfort to Alina: “I only feel sad when I look through this window. [...] Everything in our life is frozen. The only reminder of the motion of life is nature, but we’re trapped in this concrete, and the only way to observe it is through this plastic window”. As seen in this photograph, Alina’s notion of home has evolved and transformed in response to the changes brought about by the pandemic in her social environment. When isolation was introduced as a safety measure, Alina’s understanding of home as a refuge and safe space was shattered (Martinez et. al 2020). The window’s lines in the photographs thus resemble prison bars, which represent how Alina’s home became a place of confinement, with its occupants being forced into a standby mode (ibid.).

The project formally started on 1 May, and the second photograph was taken the same day. For the family, that date was important – it was the day Alina’s mother was admitted to the hospital and the rest of the family members officially entered the quarantine. This significant moment was captured in Figure 2: Alina’s little sister is leaning against the window, frozen in expectation, watching her mother being taken away by the doctors dressed in alien-like protective costumes. The neighbours are peeking out of their balconies, becoming the event’s witnesses and spectators. The street is filling up with neighbours’ curiosity and fear for their own families. Similarly, Alina described her and her sister’s feelings as a combination of fear, confusion, and curiosity:

When the doctors came to take our mom to the hospital, we did not fully understand what was happening at that moment. There was a great interest, curiosity, and a question as to what was going on, but we also understood that our worst

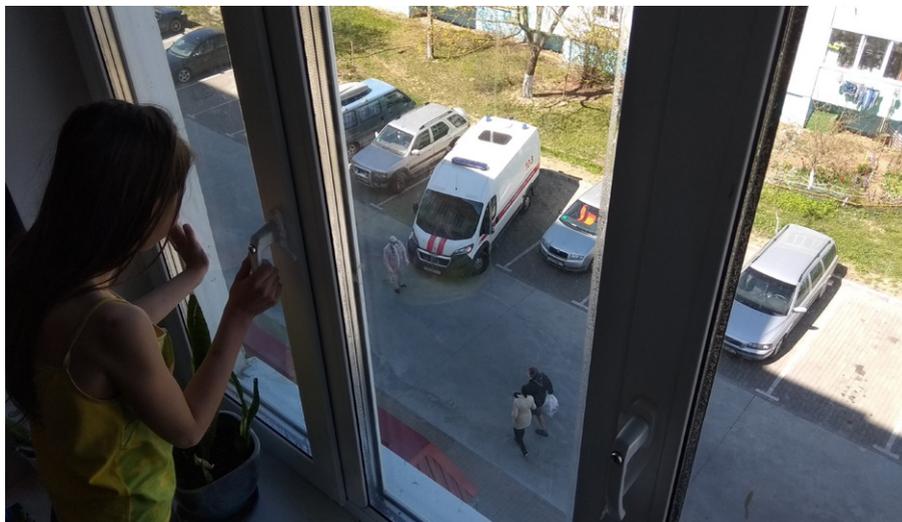


Figure 2. Day one of the project, morning: Alina's mother is taken to the hospital.

fears [of contracting the virus] could be confirmed, and no one could believe it was real, and no one knew what was going to happen next. We were scared yet curious, as it was something that had never happened to our family before.

Here, Asya is no longer a passive observer of the outside world but she is part of the persistent change. The anticipation, the on-going uncertainty, and the changing dynamics of the situation are reflected in the composition of the image. Taken from a dramatically high angle, the photograph is depicting an event in progress. The elongated shapes and lines of the window, which almost seem to be moving upwards, match the walking parents and Alina's sister watching them get closer to the ambulance. The existing distance between the mother and the doctor adds to the unpredictability of the situation: the doctors have not yet gotten a hold of the mother, and therefore her condition has yet to be determined. Due to the angle and Asya's position in the far-left corner of the photograph, she appears small and vulnerable. Her tiny figure contrasts the window view of the street, which is central in the photograph and which also points to the grand pervasive role the event played in Alina's family.



Figure 3. Day one, afternoon: Asya is showing first symptoms of the disease.

It was the same day Alina's mother was taken to the hospital when Asya started experiencing similar symptoms. In the photograph that Alina titled "In Between Two Worlds" (Figure 3), Asya is still smiling while watching cartoons, but she has lain down and covered herself with a blanket in the summer-like temperature of the apartment. The first signs of the viral infection have begun to appear, but Asya could still enjoy doing her favourite activities. The cartoon-watching helped her distract from the fever and establish a balance between normality and unpredictable sickness. The photo was taken horizontally, from an eye-level perspective, mirroring the sister's comfortable lying position affected by the disease. Both the angle and the content of the photograph represented family life at the time: the virus was already permeating all aspects of the family's routine, and even simple activities such as kids watching cartoons began to be viewed differently.

The narrative unexpectedly changed later that day, in the evening, when Asya's symptoms became progressively worse. "Everything was centred on my sister. [...] All the anxiety and panic were concentrated around her. We were worried about her health and what might happen next. [...] We were aware that children were not dying [from COVID-19], but we had no idea what to expect", Alina expressed concern for her sister. A human figure can barely be recognized



Figure 4. Day one, evening: Asya is sleeping early as her viral symptoms got worse.

in the photograph of Asya taken on that day (Figure 4). As Alina's sister was getting sicker, she turned away from the camera, blending into the dark shadows of the room. The image demonstrates that all of the family's attention was given to Asya, and the outside world no longer had its appeal. The window's presence can still be recognized in the image, but it does not serve as a glass portal to the outside social world as it did in Figure 1. Instead, the sunlight reflected on the wall exists as a mere reminder of the outside life that passes by the isolated family.

The Further Unravelling of the Virus: The Beginning of a "Dark" and Unstable Period

The next day, Asya's health deteriorated further. Their mother was already in the hospital, leaving Alina and her father alone with the responsibility for taking care of Asya. The virus cases were spiking when Asya needed to be treated in the hospital; therefore, it was a matter of luck that one of the hospitals was

able to take her in. In the next picture, Alina captured the moment when Asya was getting ready to go to the hospital, accompanied by her father (Figure 5). Alina's choice to photograph her sister rather than herself reveals a lot about their family's circumstances. Alina experienced fear and loneliness, and felt isolated from most of the social facets of her pre-COVID life. Her father had to take care of the children alone for the first time. They both, however, were preoccupied with worries about Asya: "I did not take a picture of my sad face, because it would not have illustrated a truthful situation in our family", Alina explained. "Not I but Asya was the focus of our attention at the time. We were terrified for her life".

As photographs provide evidence, the camera makes what one is experiencing real (Sontag 1977, 3). A selfie (Figure 6) taken on the day Alina was delivering supplies to the hospital where her sister was receiving treatment was not an ordinary self-portrait. Taking a selfie was "a way of certifying the



Figure 5. Day two: Asya is leaving for a hospital.



Figure 6. Day three: Alina's masked self-portrait taken on her way to visit Asya in the hospital.

experience” of what her family was enduring (*ibid.*, 6). By capturing the moment with her phone camera, at home, at the moment before she went to the hospital, Alina took control of the situation in which she felt out of place. She marked the event as significant for her. The face mask worn in the photograph came to symbolize this experience. Although masks are designed to provide safety and protection from viruses, the mask in the photograph indicated the opposite. It represented the unsafe pandemic environment where contamination and the risks of sickness were present. Paradoxically, the presence of masks and other protective items (e.g., hand sanitizers, gloves) made the environment appear dangerous, whereas the mask-free social environment would seem safe (Van Gorp 2021, 125).

After Asya was taken to a hospital, and a good one at that, the situation in Alina's family slightly improved. There was a sigh of relief in the family, as Alina and her father were convinced that Asya would recover. However, since neither Alina's mother nor her sister, whom she shared her room with, were home anymore, the place soon started to feel empty. Alina took a picture of her parents' bedroom (Figure 7) to capture an intimate moment of her reflection on family relationships while her mother was still in the hospital:



Figure 7. Day four: Empty parents' room.

I was looking into the empty room trying to imagine what would happen if my mum never came back home. In everyday life, all these warm feelings can be easily forgotten, especially with family conflicts drawing all of the attention to them. One begins to appreciate what they have only when the situation is *na grani* ["on the verge of something terrible happening"]. When I took this picture, I was feeling a lot of things that were unsaid between me and my mother, and I remembered all the feelings that I wasn't used to sharing and all the things that I wasn't used to feeling every day. Events like this open up your eyes and allow you to take a look inside yourself.

The photo was taken from outside the room, at a distance. The physical barrier in the form of a door between Alina and the room represented how alienated and distant Alina felt from her mother while the latter was in the hospital. The room no longer appears cosy and inhabited in this photograph. It is dark and cold, and the only items that remind Alina of her mother are her mother's bathrobe and slippers that were left by the bed.

Figure 8. Day four: Lemons gifted by Alina's family friends and delivered when the mother was away at the hospital.



When Alina's mother began to exhibit early symptoms of the disease, her colleagues showed their support by sending items that could help her get better. Since the mother was already at the hospital, it was Alina and her father who received the gift. The lemons (Figure 8) became a symbol of other people's care and kindness towards the family, as Alina mentioned in the interview. Alina took the image on the same day she looked at the empty parents' room to help herself remember the brighter moments that were still present during this difficult time. In the photograph's bottom left corner, there is a plate with a smiley face (cropped) that Alina created out of citruses, which embodied the support and uplifting feelings the gifted lemons brought to Alina's family:

I took a picture of those lemons because it was something that constantly reminded us of people who cared about our family. Because we were not alone in this situation. [...] We had lemons everywhere; we had tea with the lemons, made lemonade with them, and ate the lemons with sugar.

In the course of the project, I noticed that it is not only the content of the photographs that carries meaning, but also how frequently a certain object appears in the photographs. While two family members were staying in the hospital, Alina was still quarantined, which affected her daily routine. Since her sister, with whom she shared a room and communicated daily, was not present, Alina was now spending the majority of her time working on the computer. It had become her primary source of socialization and entertainment, and the photographs reflect this change. There was a total of seven photographs that Alina took of her table (e.g., Figures 9 and 15). Some were taken on different days and at different times of day, from different perspectives, but they all appeared nearly identical:

These are the things I see every day. Something in the world is constantly changing, but it all looks the same to me. Same empty table without Asya's belongings, the same computer, same coffee mug. [...] Today I drink coffee at this table, tomorrow I drink tea there, but overall, everything remains the same.

Most photographs were dark, with the objects barely distinguishable from the shadowed background. Through these images, Alina was seeking to convey the tiring sameness of her surroundings, not any unusual or noteworthy objects: "It is difficult to distinguish anything in the photo because nothing distinctive was happening those days, there was nothing interesting to look at". The perspective from which the table photographs were taken, however, varied. Some images displayed the table from a distance (e.g., Figure 9), indicating Alina's tiredness or boredom as she was walking around the room trying to find a different activity with which to entertain herself. In other cases, Alina was sitting at the table and working on her course project, which was reflected in the table up close (e.g., Figure 15). The proximity of the table in the photographs, therefore, represented Alina's change of mood and activities during the quarantine, such as staying motivated and working on a project, or getting bored and losing inspiration.

Feelings of Nostalgia and Melancholy

Another key component of the quarantine that was discovered during the interview was the appreciation for things previously taken for granted. Several photographs displayed what seemed to be ordinary objects: a perfume Alina's

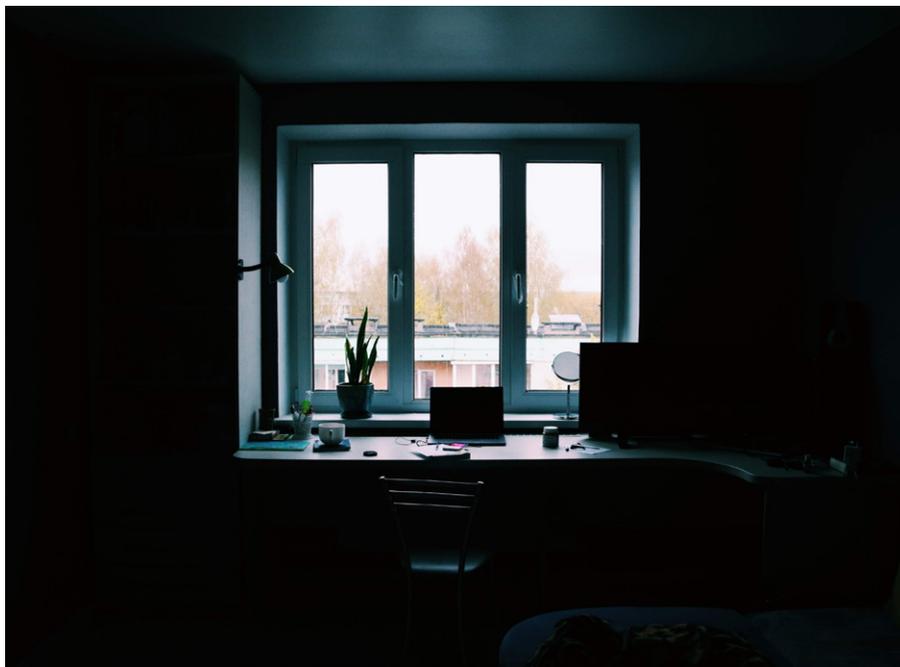


Figure 9. Day five: Alina's computer table, shown in a dark room.

boyfriend brought from India, Alina's sneakers (Figure 10), and Alina's phone with an open chat with her boyfriend (Figure 11). All of these objects were miniatures of Alina's bygone reality, physical relics of memories that helped her recall what life had been like before the quarantine. Often, to photograph something one values is to "confer importance" to it (Sontag 1977, 28). In this case, Alina photographed a discussion with her boyfriend on her phone, as it was "the only thing left of normal existence" to her. Capturing it with another device was an act of appreciation and nostalgia that brought comfort back into the situation of uncertainty. A photograph of Alina's sneakers also revealed the melancholic features of the isolation: "These were my favourite sneakers. I adore them. And I love walking in them. I dreamed of wearing them all winter, and I ended up wearing them just once to the hospital".



Figure 10. Day six: Alina's favourite sneakers that she did not get to wear during the quarantine.

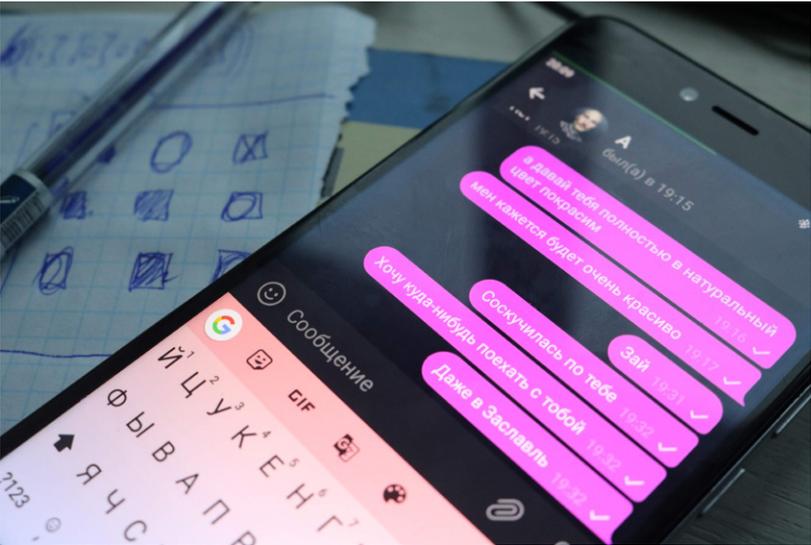


Figure 11. Day six: Alina's chat with her boyfriend.

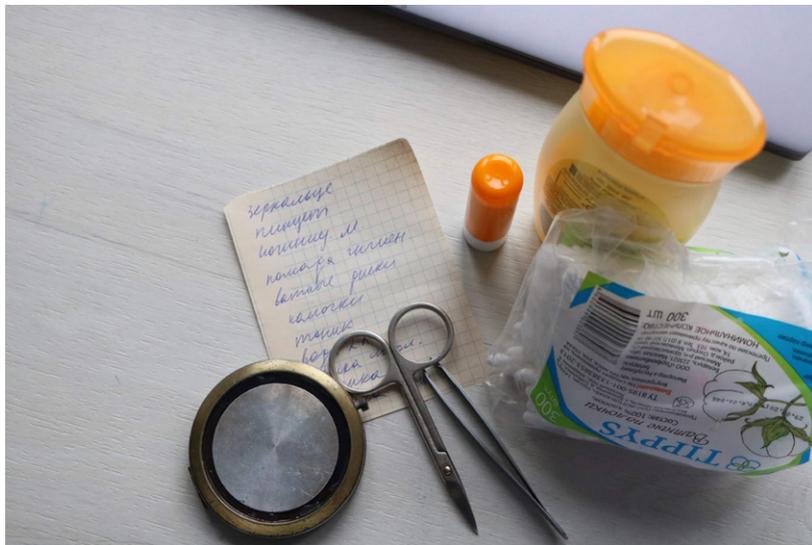


Figure 12. Day six: Items that Alina’s mother requested to bring to her to the hospital.

Finally: Better News and Gradual Improvement in the Situation

A significant change in Alina’s family came with a call from her mother, who asked her to bring a few items to the hospital (Figure 12):

My mum asked me to bring her a small mirror, face toner, eyebrow clippers, nail scissors, lip balm, and cotton swaps. These are not the things that you use if you are not feeling well. Hearing that my mom wanted me to bring all of these beauty products meant a great deal to me. The senses of taste and smell were coming back to my mom, she was trying to look pretty, and this is how I knew she was finally recovering.

This photograph signalled the start of the “lighter” period, as seen by Alina’s subsequent photos. Alina’s family was no longer terrified; everyone believed that the worst part was over. As the isolation continued, looking out the window was once again adapted as one of the means of staying connected to the outside



Figure 13. Day seven: Alina's neighbour on the balcony with his grandchildren.

social world. “I never really paid attention to my neighbour and his family before the quarantine. [...] I wanted to take a picture of him because it was the first time that I saw him smiling, with his grandchildren around”, Alina said, referring to the photo of an old man living in the building across the street (Figure 13). He reminded Alina of life outside the room and connected her back to society. I noticed something interesting about the composition of this picture. What happens outside the window is visible, as if there was no barrier between Alina and her neighbour, but there is a portion of the plastic window in the photo that partially obstructs the view. It is there perhaps to show that Alina is still in her room, isolated from the world outside.

The interview was almost over when I realized that Alina had not mentioned her fear of the virus until the moment she displayed the next photo (Figure 14). It was shot on the day the physicians came to collect swabs from family members to confirm the virus. Alina recollected this event through the peculiar behaviour of her father:



Figure 14. Day seven: Supposedly contaminated chairs that Alina’s father left in the hallway to avoid contracting the virus after the doctor’s visit.

I did not want to get sick, but I was not scared either. My dad, on the other hand, after everything that happened to our family, still believed he didn’t have the virus. He was frightened of catching it from the doctors or their “dirty” equipment; therefore, he wouldn’t let them come into our apartment. He even lied to the doctors by saying that they must not enter it because there is a very angry dog in our family [*laughing*].

The two chairs in the photograph are the ones that Alina’s dad took to the stairwell after he persuaded the doctors to take the samples outside of their apartment. “When the act was over, my dad even left the chairs out in the hallway for 24 hours, so the bacteria and virus would die out. That was funny”, Alina said, laughing at her father’s denial of the family’s already existing exposure to the virus. These chairs thus represented and materialized the invisible: the contamination, the virus, and the father’s rising consciousness – due to the pandemic – of germs.



Figure 15. Day seven: Alina's table on a sunny day.

The images that were discussed at the end of the interview significantly differed from those shown at the beginning. The photographed objects on the table (e.g., computer, mirror) remained the same (e.g., Figure 15), but the colours of the photographs became brighter as the contrasts were subdued and the shadows were less prominent. Presented with this much lighter series of images, I concluded that the photographs reflected the family's hope for recovery and return to their pre-COVID routine. The interview discussion, however, revealed that the images were not so much about the uplifting hopeful message as they were meant to convey the acceptance of the situation and the calmness that came with it. Alina's perception of home and her room once again changed. Having perceived her home as a place of confinement at the beginning of quarantine, Alina has gradually accepted it as the new world that replaced everything outside:

I feel calm when I look at these photographs. I accepted that I had to stay home, and it stopped being something sad like you could see in the first photographs



Figure 16. Day eight, first day after the quarantine: Alina's neighbours outside on the street.

[Figure 1] where Asya is looking out the window with some sort of sorrow. You can still see the monotony of those days, but at the same time this monotony has stopped causing this sense of protest inside of me; it stopped “strangling” me. [...] My room is my new world now.

The second picture of Alina's neighbours presented in this essay (Figure 16) was taken one day after the end of Alina's quarantine. It is comparable to the previously discussed photograph in that it also shows her neighbours, but this image differs in one significant way. Unlike the neighbour shot discussed earlier (Figure 13), this one shows no visible barrier between Alina and the outside world, as if the photo was taken outside rather than through a window. Alina was feeling much better about the situation in her family on that day. Her quarantine had come to an end, and it showed in the way she began to capture the world beyond her room.

Slightly Positive Notes on the Quarantine Experience

Although Alina's family will not miss the quarantine experience, the last two photos (Figures 17 and 18) depict the pandemic's positive impact on Alina's daily life. During the interview, Alina mentioned that she and her family had moved to a new apartment shortly before the quarantine began. She was still getting used to her room at the time of the project. When we were discussing the photograph of the room wall and a tiny ray of sunlight on it (Figure 17), she mentioned that the quarantine had made her realize that she finally felt at home in her family's new apartment:

I realized that I genuinely liked my new room. Regardless of whether I feel depressed or I'm in a good mood, my room's colours always reflect exactly how I feel. [...] When I am sad, the blue colour of my walls matches what I am feeling, and when the day is nice and sunny, as at the time the picture was taken, the walls look bright and nice too.

The second positive impact that quarantine had on Alina's family was that it allowed her family to rearrange, although temporarily, how each member of the family was integrated into the household routine. For the first time in the family's life, Alina's father was compelled to do the majority of the housework that had previously been done by Alina's mother. A new passion he discovered was cooking: "During quarantine, Dad discovered his new talent. He started to make pancakes for me every day. [...] Everyone now knows that Papa cooks very well" (Figure 18). While this temporary shift in responsibilities around the house will most likely not become permanent, the crisis's major impact on the organization of the social world and its individuals cannot be ignored. Given that the structure of the household in Alina's family has undergone a significant change (i.e., all childcare responsibilities fell on the father in the family), there is hope that Alina's and potentially other families' housework will continue to be more fairly divided, even after the pandemic is over. There is a chance that such a shift prompted by the pandemic will also undermine the social norms that currently lead to disparities in the hours that fathers and mothers spend on housework (Alon et al. 2020, 17). Alina, on the other hand, does not believe that years of her family's uneven distribution of household duties will be subverted by a few weeks of the temporary reversal of roles due to rather unusual circumstances. She admits, however, that she did enjoy her



Figure 17. Day seven: Photograph of the wall in Alina's room with a ray of sunlight on it.



Figure 18. Day eight, first day after the quarantine: Breakfast *syrniki* ("cottage cheese pancakes") that Alina's father cooked for her.

father being more proactive with the family cooking, even though this change is most likely to end with the quarantine and her family will return to its usual order of things.

Discussion

This essay presents empirical evidence of a direct correlation between photographs and the changes in the social world and individual people's lives. The analysis of the form and content of the photographs taken by a quarantined participant (Alina) demonstrates that the changes in the family's perception of home, family relationships, routines, and personal emotions of the family members were a response to the changes brought about by the isolation process. Additionally, the photographs revealed five different stages of isolation.

The first stage, or the beginning of quarantine (Figure 1), was characterized by an intense feeling of sorrow when the family was confined in the apartment. The second (Figures 2 and 3) displayed the unpredictability of the pandemic situation and fear, but also unusual excitement associated with the novelty of the quarantine events. The third stage (Figures 4–5) was marked by concerns for the family members' well-being, fear, and care. The fourth period (Figures 7–11) was unstable and tense. It encompassed family worries as well as nostalgic feelings over objects, spaces, and memories that brought familiar comfort and security to the unpredictable and frightening situation. The fifth stage (Figures 12–18) showed the acceptance of quarantine, comfort at home, and the elevated mood that came with the lifting of the quarantine measures. It is worth mentioning, however, that the real-life situation did not necessarily mirror the linear progression of the events and changes in the family's sentiments that the essay's analysis presents (i.e., the photographs' colour scheme seemingly going from a "dark" period into the "light", matching the photos' content and, presumably, a life situation). The participant could often feel uneasy, frustrated, or sad even when the period's brighter photographs were taken.

When looking at the photographs from various stages, it becomes visible that the home setting was displayed differently during each period of isolation. It went from being seen as a safe space prior to quarantine to a place of confinement amid the isolation, to a replacement for the outside world. Several invisible markers of the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., isolation, virus, contamination, fear of bacteria) were visualized by the photographs as symbolic aspects of objects and spaces from the participant's pandemic home – masks, closed prison-like plastic

windows, empty parents' room, and supposedly contaminated furniture. With family members away at the hospital, Alina established a new daily routine that prioritized computer time as the only source of entertainment and social life. Family dynamics were also affected by the changes. The family household routine and childcare became the responsibility of the father. After the participant's mother was admitted to the hospital, Alina began to give more appreciation to her relationship with the mother. This family's home and household thus became the extension and the evidence of the relations altered by the pandemic social environment.

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