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THE ROLE OF OPEN PUBLIC SPACES IN SOCIAL LIFE DURING THE PANDEMIC (COVID-19): CASE STUDY IN KOSOVO

Besim GOLLOPENI

University "Isa Boletini" in Mitrovica, Faculty of Education, Ukshin Kovačica. 40 000, Kosovo
e-mail: besim.gollopeni@umib.net

Vlora ALIU*

University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina", Faculty of Architecture, George Bush, 31, 10 000, Kosovo
e-mail: vlora.aliu@gmail.com

Modest GASHI

UN-HABITAT, 40 000, Office in North Mitrovica, Kosovo
e-mail: modi.gashi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Kosovo increased citizens' need to use open public spaces. This paper aims to investigate the importance of open public spaces in social life, and how much citizens in Kosovo used them before and during the pandemic. The study is conducted during the quarantine period (2020), through a questionnaire (N = 549) with the use of the Microsoft Forms online tool, and it involved citizens over 18 years old, from over 58 percent of municipalities from all over Kosovo. The results of the study show that during the quarantine period only 20.5% of citizens frequented public spaces every day, and that citizens mostly used them for recreation (26%), meeting with relatives or friends (31%), sports activities (23%), work and other purposes (20%). However, the fear of COVID-19 and the observance of restrictions on movement meant that 24% of citizens did not use open public spaces. Being in open public spaces gave citizens feelings of satisfaction, curiosity, optimism, and calm, and strengthened their self-confidence. Quarantine significantly increased the awareness of citizens about the lack of open public spaces in their neighbourhoods.

Keywords: COVID-19, public spaces, social life, quarantine, Kosovo

IL RUOLO DEGLI SPAZI PUBBLICI APERTI NELLA VITA SOCIALE DURANTE LA PANDEMIA (COVID-19): CASO STUDIO IN KOSOVO

SINTESI

Lo scoppio della pandemia di COVID-19 in Kosovo ha aumentato la necessità dei cittadini di utilizzare gli spazi pubblici aperti. Questo articolo si propone di indagare l'importanza degli spazi pubblici aperti nella vita sociale e quanto i cittadini in Kosovo li usassero prima e durante la pandemia. Lo studio è condotto durante il periodo di quarantena (2020), attraverso un questionario (N = 549) con l'utilizzo dello strumento online Microsoft Forms. Nello studio sono coinvolti cittadini di età superiore ai 18 anni, oltre il 58 per cento dei comuni di tutto il Kosovo. I risultati dello studio mostrano che durante il periodo di quarantena solo il 20,5% dei cittadini frequenta quotidianamente gli spazi pubblici, e che i cittadini li utilizzano per lo più per svago (26%), incontro con parenti o amici (31%), attività sportive (23%), lavoro e altri scopi (20%). Tuttavia, la paura del COVID-19 e il rispetto delle restrizioni alla circolazione hanno fatto sì che il 24% dei cittadini non usufruisse degli spazi pubblici aperti. Stare in spazi pubblici aperti ha dato ai cittadini sentimenti di soddisfazione, curiosità, ottimismo e calma e ha rafforzato la loro fiducia in se stessi. La quarantena ha notevolmente aumentato la consapevolezza dei cittadini sulla mancanza di spazi pubblici aperti nei loro quartieri.

Parole chiave: COVID-19, spazi pubblici, vita sociale, quarantena, Kosovo

* Corresponding author: Vlora Aliu.

INTRODUCTION

Public spaces are places where people and different social groups join together; they provide an opportunity for sharing thoughts and information through the formation of social networks. In addition, public spaces are more than just experiences of a space (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001). Open public spaces are areas that are open and accessible to all citizens regardless of gender, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level. They may be squares, promenades, parks, green spaces, pavements or streets, and they define the character of the residential block, neighbourhood or city as a whole. The connectivity of open public spaces among themselves increases the quality of life, mobility and functionality of the city. Good design and consistent maintenance of open public spaces offer numerous opportunities for various activities, such as: cultural, entertainment, educational, social and political ones while strengthening the community.

Different types of urban space are associated with specific activities of different social groups. If people do not use public spaces, or the space does not have a social destination, then this is often a reflection of its physical form. For example poorly organized transport, parking and other physical barriers reduce its usability and attractiveness. Conversely to the aforementioned example, human activities need high quality and clearly defined public spaces (Silaci & Vitkova, 2017). In addition, good planning of public spaces also impacts the economic growth of a city. Businesses are increasingly drawn to well-designed open public spaces. For a better quality of life, there has been an increased interest in settlements of houses that provide appropriate public spaces, along with other social services. This increase of local economy is a result of the increase in the price of houses i.e., the houses that are close to open public spaces.

Safe, well-maintained, attractive and inclusive open public spaces encourage citizens to be more active, and this helps the community in many ways. Regular walking, as an active movement, directly affects the reduction of risks such as heart attacks (Pretty *et al.*, 2003) and diabetes (Colberg *et al.*, 2016). Various physical activities or sports, in addition to reducing the risk of disease, also affect socialization. One of the most important aspects of public spaces is that they create essential opportunities for social interactions, i.e., when people interact with others, they feel a stronger bond with their society and the space. Open public spaces, with a special emphasis on green spaces, have a positive impact on the mental health and well-being of residents. "Individuals have less mental distress, less anxiety and depression, greater well-being

and healthier cortisol profiles when living in urban areas with more green space compared to less green space" (Barton & Rogerson, 2017). Open public spaces are places in which children can socialize with each other through play. The quality of people's life in urban areas is the outcome of their interaction with the urban environment (Das, 2008). Social distancing measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kosovo limited access to public spaces which significantly restricted social and physical activities outside home. However, in certain periods (with the reduction of the number of infected citizens) the institutions allowed the movement of citizens in public spaces, but respecting the social distance. The (in) adequacies of public spaces in Kosovo, as well as the role, and the importance of using those public spaces for the needs of citizens where much better understood in times of pandemic.

Citizens did not rationally use open public spaces in Kosovo before the pandemic, i.e., these citizens had not performed any social, cultural, sports, recreational activities for the benefit of their health. This was a consequence of the lack of adaptation or proper planning of public spaces according to the demands of citizens, then dynamic life, ownership of houses and yards with large areas (especially in rural areas), , fear, mentality, etc. However, social isolation during the pandemic has caused citizens to increase their interest in visiting public spaces more than before.

This study investigates the degree of open public spaces usage, before and during the pandemic in Kosovo, social categories that use public spaces, the purpose(s) the citizens use open public spaces and the impact they have on civic life.

PLANNING OF OPEN PUBLIC SPACE IN KOSOVO

There is not a good history of spatial planning in Kosovo. Kosovo's spatial planning is characterized by conventional planning that was implemented after the Second World War, and continued until 1999. This was centralized and rigid planning, which produced the General Urban Plan (GUP) for Kosovo's municipalities that did not address policies for the growth of the quality of life and well-being of families. Public spaces in Kosovo's municipalities, such as squares (in the city centres) and parks were mainly the legacy of earlier periods. Some cities (such as Peja, Gjakova and Prizren) have managed to save their bazaars, while other cities have undergone changes over time.

After 1999, Kosovo was in a period of transition: uncontrolled construction gained momentum because of the need for housing but also for profit. To meet the need for legal regulation, Law on Spatial



Image 1: Part of the city centre of Peja centre – 3D visualization (Municipality of Peja, 2010).

Planning (no. 2003/14) transformed conventional planning into strategic and comprehensive planning. This law does not address public spaces with any special provision. Some municipalities began to take action to address public spaces. Their actions were based on spatial plans but without any real strategy for treating open public spaces as a whole, so all these new public spaces remained as “islands”, unrelated to each other. Architects and urban planners, as creators of public space, must take into account the different human activities that need public space and the different ways in which public space affects social life (Silaci & Vitkova, 2017). In the absence of such strategies or plans today, the area of open public spaces in Kosovo

is not exactly known nowadays. Moreover, there is no legal categorization of open public spaces. The only official data is from the Municipality of Peja which (Municipality of Peja, 2016, 15) has identified 4.28m² per inhabitant of open public space in the urban area, and has set a target of 11m² per inhabitant. In addition to the World Health Organization recommendations that public green space should be part of the planning process, and it has set a standard depending on the city (World Health Organization, 2010). For example, in Italy 9m² of public green space is required for new settlements (BibLus-net, 2016).

Many studies show that open public space is an important element of the urban environment



Image 2: Part of Lipjan (Municipality of Lipjan, 2022).

(Shirvani, 1985) and makes a positive contribution to quality of life (Madanipour, 1999). Open public spaces are potentially important for all categories of society as they offer opportunities for socializing, entertainment, and / or recreation. The lack of open public spaces is a concern for many citizens in Kosovo. Some municipalities have started drafting documents for the maintenance and enhancement of public spaces (17 municipalities), not only in urban areas but also in rural areas, although much work remains to be done.

In order to be usable, open public space must at least meet some basic requirements of citizens, such as: social desirability caused by interactions, safety, psychological and physiological comfort, and accessibility for all.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An open public space is an outdoor space with free access for people (Jacobs, 1961; Madanipour, 1999), such as cafes, retail, bazaars, parks, streets and pedestrian paths (Achmad & Wahyuni, 2012). Public open space is one important element in an urban environment (Shirvani, 1985). Public open space is successful while it becomes a conducive place for social interaction (Danisworo, 1989; Whyte, 1980), attracts many visitors to do their activities in there (Danisworo, 1989; Whyte, 1985), with a wide range of activities occurring (Rivlin, 1994; CABE & DETR, 2001), individual or group (Rossi, 1982; Gehl, 2002), informal and suitable

for recreation (Whyte, 1980), democratic and non-discriminative (Carr et al., 1992), accessible for all class and age of people, including disabled people and informal sector (Gehl, 2002; CABE & DETR, 2001; cited in Achmad & Wahyuni, 2012).

Many studies show that open public space relates to quality of life aspects, such as physical and psychological health, social interaction, crime rates and the economic value of property (Achmad & Wahyuni, 2012). Young people were negatively affected by the introduced changes and restrictions in access to public spaces. The absence of daily contacts with friends during visits to bars, gyms, parks and swimming pools was a distressing experience which had a negative impact on the respondents' social lives and social interactions (Szczepańska, et al., 2021).

Research carried out by Cattell et al. (2008) shows that a wide range of everyday public open spaces were perceived as having a positive influence on both individual well-being and community life (Achmad & Wahyuni, 2012). The restrictions enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a significant decline in the mood, psychological well-being and quality of life of young adults (Liu et al., 2020; Parola et al., 2020; Beam & Kim, 2020; Volk et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020; Shanahan, 2000).

The other works show how public open space relates to physical and psychological health (Chiesura, 2004; Harlan et al., 2006; Hansmann et al., 2007; Song et al., 2007), social interaction and

cohesion (Cohen *et al.*, 2008; Kweon *et al.*, 1998; Ravenscroft & Markwell, 2000; Sugihara & Evans, 2000), criminality rate (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001) and the economic value of property (Lutzenhisher, 2001; Irwin, 2001; Jim & Wendy, 2007, quoted in Achmad & Wahyuni, 2012).

The first research evidence related to public space and COVID-19 appeared in a study called “Public Space & Public Life during COVID-19” by Gehl (2020, April). Based on field observations, the study documented people’s use of public space in four Danish communities during April 2020 when lockdowns were in place. Researchers found that residents actually engaged in more outdoor play and recreation than usual. But did so by remaining very close to home and using neighbourhood public spaces, sometimes in resourceful ways if there was not existing exercise or play equipment.

So, while there is some early evidence that people used public space in different ways, there is a gap in research about the social activities or communicative processes that occurred as people sought to support each other during the pandemic (Carey, 2021). Also, there is a lack of studies showing whether people have increased their interest in using public spaces during the pandemic related to using public spaces before the pandemic, the purpose of using public spaces and the impact of public spaces has on people’s lives during the pandemic.

Based on this fact, our study focuses on questions such as:

1. Did citizens use public spaces more before or during the pandemic?
2. Which categories of society (male or female) use public spaces more?
3. For what purpose did citizens use open public spaces?
4. Has the use of public spaces influenced the psychological and social aspects of the citizens?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study involved a diagnostic survey. The data were collected through survey (N = 549) by the research authors. This research method was used to collect quantitative data. The survey was composed on demographic questions (age, sex, type of education) and questions about the use of open public spaces before the pandemic, as well as questions about the quarantine period.

The inclusion criteria were citizens over 18 years old. Among the participants, 56.8% were female and 43.2% were male, 58% from urban area, and 42% from rural area. The ages ranged from 18

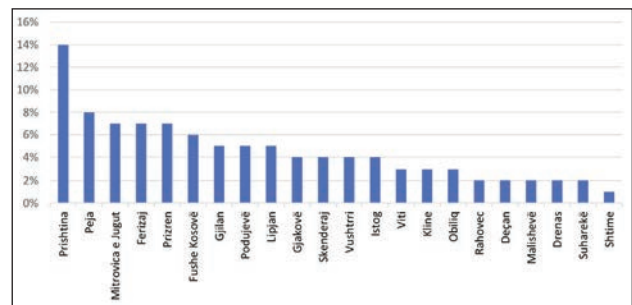


Chart 1: Distribution of the sample by municipalities of Kosovo.

to 69 years old. By age group, 44.4% were 18-24 years old, 15.8% were 25-29 years old, 21.8% were 30-39 years old, 12.6% were 40-49 years old, 3.8% were 50-59 years old and 1.6% were in the age group 60-69 years old. Regarding the participants’ level of education, 53.6% were with bachelor level, 33.9% master’s level, 2.7% PhD, 6.5% secondary education, and 3.3% unfinished primary education. According to employment status, 55.2% of the respondents were employed at the time, 36% students, 6.6% unemployed, 1.6% looked after the house and 0.5% self-employed. Looking at marital status, 39.3% were single, 42.1% married, 17.5% engaged, and 1.6% divorced. In terms of housing, 45.4% lived in individual houses, 31.7% in block of flats, 14.2% in individual shared houses, 4.9% in rented apartments, 3.8% in double houses (with two entrances), and 3.3% in individual rented houses.

Regarding the distribution of the sample, the sample was random and included respondents from 22 municipalities or 58% from total number of municipalities of Kosovo (see Chart 1).

The survey was divided into three categories of questions: the first category included questions and the respondents had to choose one of the given alternatives; in the second category the answer was given on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 was “a little” and 10 was “a lot”), such as for the question, “Tell me, how scared are you of the COVID-19 pandemic?”; and in third category the respondents had to write the response themselves. At the end of the questionnaire there were concluding questions that allowed the respondents to add something from their experience, which served to give us additional information and increase our knowledge of the topic.

The study was conducted between 22 April and 12 May 2020 when strict self-isolation and social distancing requirements were in place. Due to social distancing requirements, the respondents were surveyed remotely with the use of the Microsoft Forms online tool.

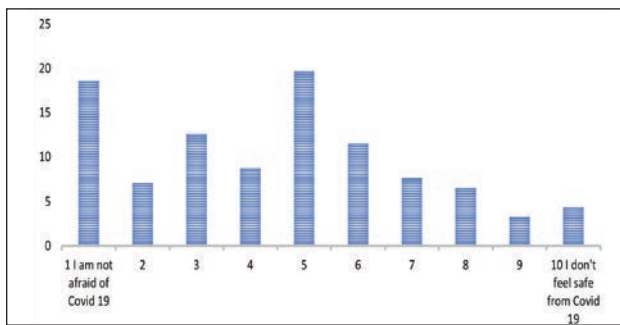


Chart 2: How concerned are citizens about COVID-19?

RESULTS

How much do citizens know and are they afraid of the COVID-19

To most of the citizens involved in the study, the spread of the pandemic was something new and unknown. In fact, knowledge about the pandemic was very limited and almost they did not take into account the dangers that could arise. In Kosovo, “the media had a great influence and role in informing and raising awareness of citizens on the global pandemic situation (COVID-19)” (Kamberi & Gollopeni, 2020, 3001-3009).

The current study show that 98% of citizens did not believe that COVID-19 would reach Kosovo within three months. What made citizen's think that such a situation could not happen in Kosovo was the distance from China to Kosovo. That is, due the geographical distance, 58% of citizens thought that the virus could not reach Kosovo, 15% were not interested in this issue, 12% were concerned about the rapid spread of the virus but did not believe that it would reach Kosovo within three months, 8% were convinced that developed countries would find a cure to prevent the further spread of the virus before this situation occurred in Kosovo, whereas 7% of the responders considered this issue as an “economic conspiracy of developed countries”.

The unknown situation of COVID-19 on the one hand, and the fragile social and economic situation in Kosovo on the other, are the driving factors that led to the concern of Kosovar citizens.

Social and physical distance during the pandemic and public spaces

With the introduction of the first strict measures against the pandemic, which prohibited free movement, or allowed it only at certain times, citizens began to mobilize towards a new order of social life. Many institutions started working remotely (working from home), schools and universities closed and started learning online remotely, with various online platforms (Zoom, Google Meet, etc.). This new social

order caused fear, anxiety and panic for many citizens because there was no knowledge of how long this situation would last. The study shows that 56% of citizens accepted calmly this new ‘pandemic’ situation, 32% had difficulties in accepting it, and 12% of the citizens considered it as a stressful situation or were stressed. Regarding the types of housing and the pandemic, the assessment of the situation by the citizens in quarantine depended on the type of housing, and differed between citizens who lived in individual houses and citizens who lived in flats (collective housing). Coping with the situation was more difficult for citizens living in collective housing (flats) than for those living in homes (78% of whom accepted the situation calmly and 15% with difficulties, and 7% of whom found it stressful). For citizens living in collective housing, the results of the study show that 36% of citizens accepted this situation calmly, 49% had difficulties accepting the pandemic situation, and for 15% of the responders, the situation was stressful.

The ways in which citizens living in individual houses and those living in flats tried to remove the difficulties and stress created by quarantine were different. In fact, 43% of citizens living in individual houses found physical activities challenging, while 52% of citizens living in flats considered that they needed physical activities during the quarantine period. The results of the study show that, 33.33% of citizens living in individual homes needed to spend time with their families, friends, or other people in their houses or yards, while only 12% of citizens who lived in apartments had this need. The latter came to the fore as a result of the lack of living space and the fear of infection with COVID-19. Both those living in houses (23.67%) and those living in flats (36%), preferred to stay in open public spaces.

The study reveals that going to open public spaces enabled relaxation (for 41% of the respondents), for 32% of citizens it helped with self-confidence and for 27% of the responders it helped to relieve stress.

In addition, the study reveals that, before the quarantine period, only 24% of the citizens living in flats spent time on their balconies, while during the quarantine period 89% of them used their balconies for various activities. This difference over time came as a result of staying inside the apartment for hours, with restrictions on freedom of movement and rest.

In the quarantine period, the balconies were used, in addition to sitting out (57%), for activities such as flower maintenance (18%), physical activity (3%), online work (12%) and various activities with family members (10%). This use of balconies is a new initiative in this type of housing during the quarantine period; in the pre-pandemic period the results of the study show that 35% of citizens used their balconies for smoking, 51% for placing various

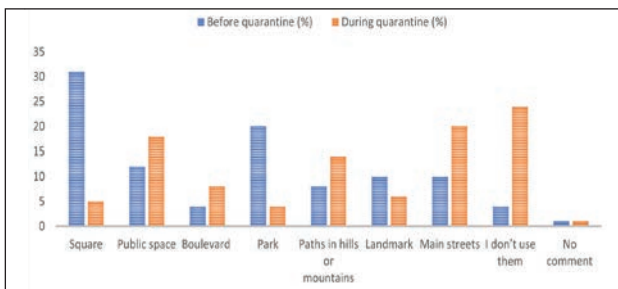


Chart 3: Use of open public spaces before and during the quarantine period (%).

items there, 9% for ventilation, and 5% for receiving sunlight. The results show that the lack of interest in using the balconies before the pandemic period was, for 51% of citizens, because they were busy, for 27% because of dust and gases produced by vehicles, and for 11% because of noise pollution.

Having an individual house made it easier for citizens to deal with this situation, as they had the opportunity to spend time in their yards and gardens. It is worth mentioning that during the quarantine period “urban-farming” began to develop as a result of the need for physical activity but also due to the “risk” of lack of food. 23% of citizens started to grow flowers in their gardens while 16% of citizens started to grow various fruits and vegetables. 61% of citizens used their gardens for physical activities, sitting and socializing with their neighbours while respecting the physical distance rules. The movement of citizens who lived in individual houses was more disciplined because they did not need to take physical activity outside their gardens while they went in the neighbourhood for supplies and purchases (46%) and to follow the movement schedule (54%) as permitted by responsible local institutions.

However, in addition to the positive phenomenon of social distancing, negative phenomena such as rising unemployment, an economic crisis, and domestic violence also began to appear. About half (46%) of employment citizens feared of losing their jobs, while 18% began to work remotely (online). The highest concerns were in the category of the self-employed, because of their inability to fulfil their obligations to other parties, and some of them were forced to close their businesses and lay off employees work. The economic data show that the state budget had a decrease of about 14.6% of revenues from January to May 2020 compared to January to May 2019 (Ministry of Finance, Labor & Transfers, 2021). According to the World Bank, Kosovo was on the course to have the largest growth in the region for 2020 (at 4.1%), while the reality showed a decrease of -4.5%, and the worst-case scenario was expected at -11.3% (World Bank, 2020).

During the pandemic period, antisocial behaviour such as domestic violence was manifested in Kosovo society. Domestic violence in Kosovo during March to July 2020 was 19.75% greater than in the same months of 2019. It is worth noting that during these months violence between men increased while violence against women decreased slightly (Gollopenni & Kamberi, 2020).

The use of open public spaces at certain times forced citizens to be more attentive, to be more disciplined, and to avoid contact with others. 49.7% of citizens completely stopped activities in public spaces which they had performed before quarantine, and used these spaces only for physical activities – walking. 24% stopped activities as much as possible, and avoided unnecessary outings to open public spaces. 23.5% partially stopped their activities in public spaces, 1.8% did not stop their activities in open public spaces and 1% found it difficult to assess the change in their use of open public spaces before and during quarantine.

The study shows that the citizens of Kosovo were active in the use of public spaces before the quarantine period i.e., 31% of the use was in city squares, city parks at 20%, other open public spaces at 12%. It is worth noting that 4% of citizens did not use open public spaces at all.

During the quarantine period, the citizens of Kosovo changed their interest in using public spaces. This occurred as a result of the awareness of the need to reduce unnecessary outings to open public spaces, as well as the impact of measures against COVID-19 measures to restrict free movement. 5% of citizens used squares, 8% promenades, 14% paths on hills or mountains and 20% main roads (see Chart 3).

Problems with respecting physical distance, according to the results of the study, were encountered for young children. The data show that 80% of couples with children aged from 1 to 5 years old, despite their care, found it impossible to stop their children from playing with other children. Stopping play between young children was an impossible mission for parents, especially in open public spaces where there were no toy playgrounds for children. 84% of citizens raised a concern about the lack of toy corners in neighbourhoods or settlements. Contact between children who were not wearing gloves or masks during play was something that could transmit COVID-19. Whereas 20% of the citizens did not take their children aged 1 to 5 years to play in public spaces at all.

Those who were most disciplined in the use of open public spaces were the elderly. The study data show that this category of society had a higher awareness of respecting physical distance, even refusing to touch other people or to use urban furniture. 92.1% of older people preferred to go for a walk in an open public space alone (unaccompanied), while 7.9% preferred to walk with

Table 1: Utilization of open public spaces before and during the pandemic.

	Every day		Once week		Several times a week		I do not use them at all	
	Before	During Covid-19	Before	During Covid-19	Before	During Covid-19	Before	During Covid-19
Recreation	18.30%	26%	50.40%	16%	7.60%	34%	23.70%	24%
Meetings with family, friends or other people	35.50%	14%	29%	27%	27%	33%	8.50%	24%
Sports activities	12%	19%	38.50%	18%	18%	33%	31.50%	24%
Other purposes (work)	20%	23%	23%	18.30%	18.30%	32%	38.70%	24%

their relatives. 76.4% of older people preferred to sit on the grass and not use urban furniture, while 14.8% used the urban furniture and 8.8% preferred not to sit down when using public spaces.

Use of open public spaces before and during the pandemic in Kosovo

The use of public spaces before and during the pandemic has changed in increasing intensity, as well as the purpose of their use. The use of public spaces every day during the pandemic increased (7.7% for recreation), while it has decreased for meetings with family, friends and other people (21.5%). The situation with COVID-19 influenced the reduction of contacts with family members, friends and other people. During the pandemic, citizens were forced to restrict their movement in the cities as a result of government measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The implementation of measures to restrict the use of open public spaces was felt more by citizens who had used these spaces before the quarantine period and citizens residing in collective housing. Citizens who had often used these spaces also suffered a negative impact. Unlike the pre-quarantine period, the results show that the restriction of movement had a negative impact on the use of open public spaces for meetings with family, friends, or other people, meetings for work, sports activities, while in transit to another place and other uses. Also, the use of public spaces several times a week for recreational purposes increased (26.4%) and other activities (see table 1).

The citizens used open public spaces in Kosovo for recreation, for meetings with their family members or other people, for work, for sports activities, when in transit to reach another place, and for other

activities. Spending time in open public spaces and experiencing them differs from one place to another, and it also differs between different categories of society. The results of the study show that 25.60% of citizens felt satisfaction while spending time in open public spaces, while 11.10% of citizens felt dissatisfaction (see Chart 4).

Before the quarantine period, walking in open public spaces was preferred, i.e., 37.3% of citizens preferred to walk to reach a public space. In the cities in which urban public transport operates (Prishtina, Prizren, and Gjakova), 12.5% of citizens used public transport to reach open public spaces, while in other cities 25.6% of citizens used private vehicles. 9.9% of citizens preferred to use a taxi in certain cases to reach open public spaces, 9.8% of citizens used bicycles as a means of transportation and, 1.6% of citizens used motorcycles as a means of transportation while 2.2% of citizens used other means of transport such as electric scooters and hoverboards (see Chart 5).

Regarding the feeling of security in open public spaces in the late evening (after 22:00), the results show that 75.5% of citizens felt safe. However, the feeling of safety between females and males differed significantly. 98% of men considered open public spaces safe to walk through the open public space alone after 22:00, while only 54% of women considered open public spaces safe after 22:00. Women safety is therefore manifested as a problem in the absence of public lighting. As far as males were concerned, their only concern in public spaces after 22:00 was stray dogs. The study shows that, for both sexes, after 22:00 they would not want to go into a city park alone. If accompanied by others, they again recommended avoiding the use of the park after 22:00.

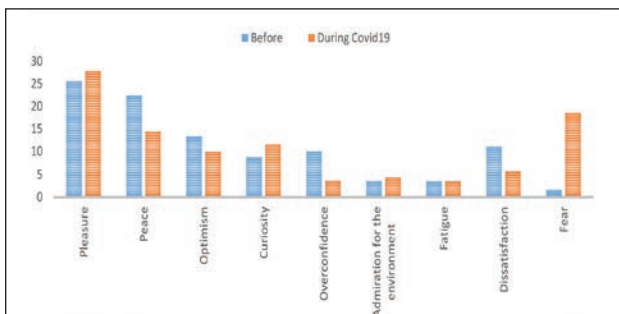


Chart 4: Experience of open public spaces before and during the COVID-19 (%).

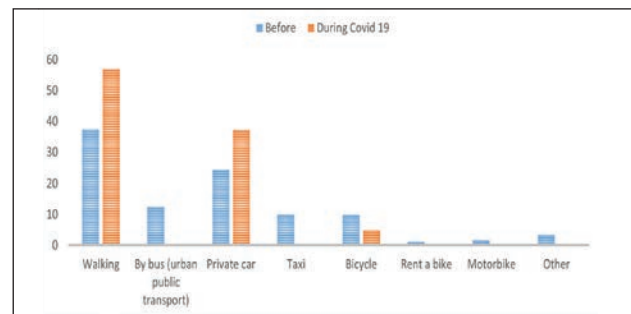


Chart 5: Means of transport to reach public spaces before and during the COVID-19.

Government-imposed measures to restrict free movement also affected mobility in the cities. Under the rules, the use of vehicles was initially prohibited, and then private vehicles were only allowed with one person. Urban public transport and taxis were banned from circulation. Walking was mostly used for movement, with public spaces being used to reach the desired place. 8% of citizens frequented open public spaces every day in transit to another place (87% of these using them more than once a day and 13% only once a day). 22% of citizens used open public spaces once a week in transit to another place. 8% used them several times a week, while 62% did not use public spaces at all as transit to another place.

Citizens' feelings about using public spaces during the quarantine period were significantly different compared to the pre-pandemic period.

In addition to the use of open public spaces, many citizens felt that there was a lack of public spaces in their neighbourhood. According to the study, 32% of citizens have open public spaces in the neighbourhood where they live, while 68% of them have no public spaces. Of the open public spaces, only 16% have toy corners for children while 84% are only for walking.

It is worth mentioning that, in certain cases and due to the lack of open public spaces, citizens used the car parks of private companies for recreation, meeting with friends, or private activities. Those who tried, 92% had no problem using them, while 8% were prevented from using these private spaces.

The way of reaching open public spaces during the quarantine period changed significantly compared to the period before the quarantine. Walking remained the preferred alternative for movement, while a large number of the citizens preferred not to travel. 56.9% of the citizens preferred walking to reach an open public space, 37.2% travelled by private vehicle while public transport and taxis were not available for transport, 4.8% of the citi-

zens used bicycles to go to an open public space, and motorcycles were used by 1.1% of citizens (see Chart 7).

The results show that the open public spaces frequented by citizens did not meet the conditions for respecting social distance. The width of the paths in some public spaces did not exceed 90 cm, or there was a lack of urban furniture for sitting down in the public space. The results show that for 63% of citizens the urban design of public spaces did not meet the conditions of respect for social distance in the quarantine period, and 15% considered that even if the urban design had met the conditions, the public spaces were not well maintained. On the other hand, 15% of the citizens used the parks because this enabled them to respect the physical distance rules, and 7% of the citizens considered the urban design was good for respecting distance in those open public spaces that they frequented (see Table 3).

Regarding the feeling of security in open public spaces before the pandemic period late at night, 75% of citizens felt safe walking alone (50% male and 25% female). However, during the quarantine period, only 55% of citizens felt safe (53% of males and 2% of females felt safe walking alone after 22:00). The insecurity among women was because of the fear of a robbery attack or of stray dogs, which are numerous everywhere. As for men, during the quarantine period they felt safe to walk alone after 22:00 but preferred not to go out unnecessarily in the late evening. Also present in males was the fear of stray dogs and cor-naphobia (Alisha *et al.*, 2020).

In addition to the safety of open public spaces, the study shows that a new fear emerged among citizens, namely fear about maintaining physical distance in public spaces. Thus, 88% of citizens adhered to the strict rules on physical distance in open public spaces, 1.6% did not distance while sitting in open public spaces, 5.5% tried to do so, and 4.9% did not deem this issue to be important and were focused on making the best use of their stay in those open public space.

Table 2: Obstacles to free movement in open public spaces during the pandemic.

	Obstacles to free movement (%)
Occupancy of public spaces by goods, gastronomy	44
Occupancy of public spaces by illegal parking	18
Urban furniture unsuitable for free movement (placement of seats, baskets, containers, street lighting)	9
Urban design not suitable for movement	22
Non-maintenance of public spaces	7

The spread of the virus in an uncontrolled manner had an impact on citizens, who in certain cases gave up their activities because of the large number of people in open public spaces. The results of the study show that 77% of citizens changed their activities, 11.4% sometimes changed their activities, 7.3% had not given much importance to this issue and 4.3% did not change their activities even if a large number of citizens were present in an open public space.

The lack of regular maintenance of open public spaces during the quarantine period increased the insecurity felt by citizens about their use. The study shows that 66% of citizens preferred not to sit down in open public spaces because the urban furniture was considered unhygienic, 15.1% did not use the urban furniture often, 15.1% used the urban furniture because they thought that the virus by its nature did not remain for long, and 3.8% had other responses.

In addition to the aforementioned data, the study also reveals that, after the end of the pandemic, 48.6% of citizens planned to return to their activities and behaviours of the pre-pandemic period, while 19.4% thought that the behaviour and activities of citizens had changed and would not be the same as in the pre-pandemic period.

CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that after the outbreak of COVID-19 coronavirus in Wuhan (China), the citizens' of Kosovo awareness about its potential consequences was minimal. This comes as a result of not being well informed as well as the rapid dissemination of fake news on various conspiracies. With the declaration of the state of emergency and the beginning of quarantine (social isolation), the citizens of Kosovo began to reorganize their lives. However, not everyone was prepared for this situation. Many citizens accepted this situation calmly, others with difficulties and others considered the

situation at least to be very stressful. The use of public spaces for recreation during the pandemic has increased, but contact with their family members and friends decreased. Recreation and physical activities had a positive impact on relieving stress in citizens. The need for physical activities varied between citizens living in individual homes and those living in collective housing (flats). However, in both cases, they preferred to spend time in open public spaces during quarantine. Among the citizens who lived in flats, spending time in open public spaces offered them relaxation, improved their self-confidence, and relieved their stress. However, this feeling was weaker among citizens who lived in individual houses and owned gardens. This is due to the fact that they spent most of their time in their backyards and gardens engaging in various activities, while in collective flats the only open spaces were balconies. In addition to the pandemic issue, during their time in quarantine, the citizens of Kosovo were concerned about the economic aspects, that is, the loss of their job, while domestic violence increased.

In general, the use of open public spaces was greater before the pandemic (95%) than during the quarantine period (75%). This change is a clear indication that during the pandemic citizens were afraid to use open public spaces because of the possibility of infection with COVID-19, but also because of prohibitions introduced by institutions as preventive measures against the spread of COVID-19.

The use of open public spaces before the pandemic was mostly preferred for meetings with family and friends (35.5%), while during quarantine this interest was halved (14%). It is worth noting that open public spaces were used for other issues and work more during the quarantine period than before the pandemic. The use of open public spaces for recreation was more evident during the quarantine period than before the pandemic.

The experience of using open public spaces has changed due to the pandemic situation. During their time in open public spaces in the quarantine period, citizens experienced pleasure, while 25.60% did so before the pandemic. Also, dissatisfaction while spending time in an open public space significantly decreased during the quarantine period compared to before the pandemic. The situation created by the pandemic meant that citizens spending time in open public spaces during the quarantine period felt less at peace, because the time available for free movement was limited. The immediate spread of COVID-19 and the increased number of infected people greatly increased the fear and anxiety about spending time in open public spaces. This is supported by the fact that citizens felt a kind of fear or anxiety when spending time in an open public space during the quarantine period.

The use of open public spaces in the late evening, during the quarantine was significantly lower as a result of the increased feeling of insecurity. Only 55% of citizens felt safe using open public spaces, compared to 75% before the pandemic. This change was the result of insufficient public lighting, the number of stray dogs, the lack of other people walking around, dark spaces with the possibility of attackers being able to hide, fear of sexual harassment,

and coronaphobia. However, after the end of the quarantine, citizens thought that they would return to the same activities and behaviours in open public spaces as before the pandemic.

To conclude, the pandemic era has changed the approach towards open public spaces that were used, and are still being used, for various social activities that have huge impact in every person's life. Although these spaces provide opportunities for people to interact, and promote socialization, these spaces also help person's physical and mental development for all social categories, living in houses or in flats, young and old, male or female. As all other citizens, Kosovar citizens faced fear, panic, unawareness of the pandemic era with its restrictions, but also willingness to make this pandemic era more adapting and adopting. As such, even after the pandemic these citizens became more aware of the need of these spaces and sought to conduct their previous open public space activities, more free, less stressful and more environmentally-healthier gatherings, i.e., 'Covid free' environment.

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VLOGA ODPRTIH JAVNIH PROSTOROV V DRUŽBENEM ŽIVLJENJU V ČASU PANDEMIJE (COVID-19): ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA NA KOSOVU

Besim GOLLOPENI

Univerza "Isa Boletini" v Mitrovici, Pedagoška Fakulteta, Ukshin Kovačica. 40 000, Kosovo
e-mail: besim.gollopeni@umib.net

Vlora ALIU

Univerza v Prištini "Hasan Priština", Fakulteta za arhitekturo, George Bush, 31, 10 000, Kosovo
e-mail: vlora.aliu@gmail.com

Modest GASHI

UN-HABITAT, 40 000, pisarna v Severni Mitrovici, Kosovo
e-mail: modi.gashi@gmail.com

POVZETEK

Ukrepi socialnega distanciranja, ki so bili v veljavi med pandemijo COVID-19 na Kosovu, so omejili dostop do javnih prostorov, kar je znatno omejilo družabne in fizične dejavnosti zunaj doma. Prispevek obravnava stopnjo uporabe odprtih javnih prostorov pred in med pandemijo na Kosovu, družbene kategorije, ki uporabljajo javne prostore, namen(-e), za katere so občani uporabljali odprte javne prostore, in vpliv, ki ga je to imelo na vsakdanje življenje. Podatke so avtorji zbrali z anketo (N = 549). Kriteriji za vključitev so bili posamezniki, starejši od 18 let. Med udeleženci je bilo 56,8 % žensk, 58 % anketirancev je prihajalo iz mestnih območij. Starost je bila od 18 do 69 let. Vzorec je bil naključen in je vključeval anketirance iz 22 občin ali 58 % od skupnega števila občin na Kosovu. Rezultati kažejo, da so občani, ki so živeli v stanovanjih, težje obvladovali situacijo kot tisti, ki so živeli v hiši (78 % jih je situacijo sprejelo mirno, 15 % s težavo, 7 % pa stresno). Za državljane, ki živijo v večstanovanjskih stavbah, rezultati raziskave kažejo, da je 36 % ljudi situacijo sprejelo mirno, 49 % se jih je težko spopadalo s pandemično situacijo, za 15 % anketirancev pa je bila situacija stresna. Študija tudi kaže, da je pred obdobjem karantene le 24 % državljanov, ki živijo v stanovanjih, preživljalo čas na svojih balkonih, medtem ko jih je v času karantene balkone uporabljalo 89 %. Rezultati raziskave kažejo, da je v času karantene le 20,5 % anketirancev vsak dan obiskovalo javne prostore in da so jih večinoma uporabljali za rekreacijo (26 %), srečanja s sorodniki ali prijatelji (31 %), športne aktivnosti (23 %), delo in druge namene (20 %). Strah pred COVID-19 in upoštevanje omejitev gibanja sta povzročila, da 24 % anketirancev ni uporabljalo odprtih javnih površin. Na splošno je bila uporaba odprtih javnih površin pričakovano večja pred pandemijo (95 %), kot v času karantene (75 %). Uporaba odprtih javnih površin za rekreacijo je bila v času karantene bolj izrazita kot pred pandemijo. Pri tem se je samo 55 % anketirancev počutilo varno pri uporabi odprtih javnih prostorov v primerjavi s 75 % pred pandemijo.

Ključne besede: COVID-19, javni prostori, družabno življenje, karantena, Kosovo

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