Krisztina Racz

“We will settle in this state of emergency, I feel I already am. And I am so happy I can do it, because it means I am home.”

Serbia, a village in Vojvodina, 12 March – 28 June

I am a semi-anthropologist with interdisciplinary education from humanities and social sciences. I have an MA in sociology and social anthropology from CEU in Budapest and a PhD from Balkan Studies from the University of Ljubljana. I am currently a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Oslo, working on issues related to multilingualism in East Central Europe. I am an ethnic Hungarian from Serbia, I grew up in the town Zrenjanin and have a house in a village called Mali Iđoš (Kishegyes in Hungarian). After a week of visiting my mom and my dog Wanda, I travelled back to Oslo on 11 March, only to learn the next day that the campus is closing the following day. After 3 and a half days in Norway in, as I learned the day after my arrival, quarantine because I had arrived from abroad, I decided to return to Serbia, to my house where my mother and Wanda had been living.

March 12 9:23 AM

I arrived to Oslo last night, and started panicking the moment I got from my village house to Belgrade Airport. In an attempt to calm myself, I decided to write a sort of a blog. So here it starts, a long read and sloppy writing, and no idea when and how it will end.

One of the many dreams I had, other than being a detective, was to be a war reporter. (I don’t want to go there how I ended up being a precarious academic…). I was fascinated by my father’s stories, who, as part of the reporting crew of RTV Vojvodina, to be precise RTV Novi Sad then, went to Timisoara at the time of the

Romanian revolution. I remember how he was saying that children were hiding under the piano (I have learned since then that it is one of the greatest middle-class tropes of war, maybe my father never told me that but I saw it in a film), how they gave some kids there bananas and that the kids hardly knew what that was (I have learned since that it is one of the biggest orientalist tropes, and that my father probably wanted to induce some gratefulness into me for eating bananas whenever I wanted to) and how it was hard for women to get sanitary napkins in Ceausescu's Romania (I learned since that it is an important thing indeed). These three stories I remember. I was much more fascinated with my father's colleagues though who went to far-away war-stricken places and whom I imagined wore bulletproof wests – that in particular impressed me. With the wars in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, and with the news from there I had reasons to give up on this dream of mine.
Then the bombings happened, and as a teenager I was sent by my parents to Hungary where my sister lived at the time. I see it now as an attempt to both calm my sister who felt isolated from the rest of us even though only a few dozen kilometers away, and to have me safe. Probably more the first reason. I remember my father asking me if I want to enroll to school there – I was near the end of the 3rd grade of high school, and me firmly saying no. Funny to think of it now, my father being so naively liberal and asking me this; other kids were simply enrolled by their parents. As all people of approximately my age from Serbia know, it was a long summer that started in March of 1999. I lived in a village next to Szeged with my sister and would sometimes go into town to meet friends I knew from before, all of them from Vojvodina. Then I moved to my god-parents' to the town and together with their daughter we went to work to a factory owned by a man from our home-town. Together with other teenagers from Vojvodina, all of whom except me had emigrated to Hungary at the beginning of the 90s, we were folding huge pieces of plastic 8 hours a day – the factory was producing plastic tunnels. To tell the truth, we had our own kids-of-the-friends-of-the-owner table and were probably much less productive than the real workers, but still the owner would come sometimes and shout at us for being slow – including his own son who was in our group.

But I liked the days when my sister and I went back to Serbia – as women, we were allowed to travel. The bus was sometimes so crowded we would sit on the stairs, and sometimes there was no bus. We always arrived somehow, I don't remember how – a friend of a friend knew someone who was driving and took us or we changed 4 buses to get 100 km away. Then I would visit my friends who were having the time of their lives in a town that "wasn't even bombed" – that's how we used to put it. I envied them but also didn't really understand them, how they were not afraid even a least bit. I was scared as shit when I heard the sirens. I have learned since that of course they were afraid. It puzzled me so much that many years later I wrote an MA thesis on this, and later co-edited a special issue of a journal.
I feel these experiences are somehow connected to the Corona panic I am seeing now, in very different shapes though, in both Serbia and Norway, so I need to share them before I get to the main story. Even though of course I don't even have a story, just some impressions.

> "I am not afraid of being infected, but of the isolation."

March 12 3:13 PM

The bus I took from Mali Iđoš to Belgrade was a regular one from Subotica. Just like the previous days I spent in the village, the everyday reality seemed completely detached from the news I had been reading. The women waiting for the bus with me were talking about their children abroad – typical. I bought a ticket to Zemun, and everything was just ordinary in the bus. The first sign of the emergency situation was

when I entered a drugstore to by Nivea hand creme in a tube (hard to find those in Norway), an elderly lady was asking for antibacterial wet wipes. When the shop assistant said they didn't have it anymore, the lady felt the need to explain that she wasn't looking for them "because of the situation" but because she used them otherwise too. But then I had a quick coffee, people were sitting on the terrace, there was some construction work in the main street of Zemun, I got into a taxi, there was a minor traffic jam, and I arrived to the airport. Then I was shocked to see a different reality: a number of passengers wearing masks. After some people-watching I observed that they keep putting them on and taking them off, they were obviously bothered by them. Almost all the airport staff wore masks too, and almost all of them took them off when speaking. I have a bad feeling when I talk to people in masks, as does everyone I guess, because I don't see their facial expressions. I realized at the gate that the plane won't be full, as it normally is, and indeed, it turned out that around half of the seats were empty. That made me regret my decision: I felt only people who were going "home" were on the plane, no one else was crazy like to go. A young woman sitting next to me cleaned everything around her with an antibacterial wipe, and then crossed herself, just to be on the safe side. On the other hand, no one of the Norwegian crew was wearing masks, and the flight attendants didn't seem bothered by the situation, or at least they were trained not to show it. When arriving, Oslo airport was basically empty. It was a late flight, but not the last one, and the airport seemed like a ghost town. I was on the verge of crying. I am not afraid of being infected, but of the isolation. The only reason I made myself carry on with this postdoc, which is a great opportunity, provides good infrastructure and salary but involves a lot of travel and the feeling of uprootedness, is the knowledge that I can go see my dog, my family and friends back home whenever I want to. This (illusory) freedom seemed to be falling apart.
The streets of Oslo seemed empty and scary. I had to remind myself that it was 11 pm on a Wednesday and that maybe I was imagining it. I paced the flat up and down, got into bed and after quite some time managed to fall asleep. I woke up at 7 knowing it would be a tough day.

Krisztina Racz

"When I woke up, I was completely aware of everything and felt fully in control to do what's needed."

March 16 12:02 PM

I am back in Serbia. I have a strong need to write, not because I think I have anything smart to say but because of my own well-being: I realized I am a person who likes to and needs to write and speak. I completely understand those who judge me for coming home – if I am infected, I might have infected someone in Oslo on the way from and to the airport and also here in Serbia. They recommend self-isolation here as well, and I am doing my best, but I had to go to the exchange office, the pharmacy and the shop because there was no one else to do that and I feared that that by the time the recommended isolation period ends there will be no supplies. So I kept reminding people at the exchange office and in the line in front of the pharmacy to stay far away from me, which they did, probably thinking I am an arrogant bitch, but that's OK.

So let's start from the moment I arrived to Serbia. I will probably write about the 3 days I spent in Oslo later, but right now it's too traumatic to remember. When I was on the plane and unmuted the group chat of my friends that I couldn't read in Oslo because it hurt so much I was so far from them, I cried. People were staring at me – a lot of people wore masks so I can't say if they smiled or not. My fear was that Serbian border control won't let me in because I only had my Hungarian passport (the Serbian expired and was in my drawer in Mali Iđoš, though I did have a Serbian ID on me), but everything was fine. We had to fill out a form on the plane stating who

we were and where we were coming from, but no one asked for it. They gave me an info sheet staying that I should not be in close contact with people in the next 14 days. I asked my friend Emese if they were afraid of me, she said she saw no chance of not getting into contact with someone potentially infected, and that I could stay at their place. I took a taxi from the airport to the bus station in Belgrade, not letting the driver touch my suitcase and sitting as far as possible from him, got onto a bus to Novi Sad, which luckily was almost completely empty so I could stay far away from people. Another taxi feeling leprous in Novi Sad, than staying as far as possible from Emese and Aca. They fed me and we had a rakija and I went to sleep. It was the 4th night with hardly any sleep, but for a different reason than the previous 3 nights: while in Oslo it was anxiety, in Novi Sad it was fear of waking up and realizing this is just a dream and that I am still stuck in Oslo. We woke up, had breakfast, and left for Kishegyes. Emese continued her way to Budapest, fearing they will close the border before she returns, and Aca drove my mom to Zrenjanin to keep her away from me. I saw her from far away and waved at her. And we talked on the phone – a weird situation.

Wanda, my dog, was happy to see me as usual, though not ecstatic – even though it seemed like 4 months for me, it was in fact 4 days that I left. In the evening she might have felt something, she leaned on my legs like she had never done before. I spent the entire morning and early afternoon rocking in my hammock, half-asleep but answering messages and making phone calls. I took a shower and had a nap inside later, the first normal sleep in 4 days. When I woke up, I was completely aware of everything and felt fully in control to do what's needed. Had a Skype with friends in Vienna and just before a video chat with my sister in London, the news that the state of emergency was introduced in Serbia. I tried to find a Serbian TV channel on my cable, but it seems the cable TV package I have only includes Hungarian ones. This itself would deserve an article, or at least a blog entry. I asked my friend Móni to do the shopping for my mom in Zrenjanin and I went to sleep early, content and prepared for the next day.

Krisztina Racz

“People here know that they cannot expect anything from the state, so if no one else offers to do their shopping, they will just do it themselves despite the regulations.”

March 17

So, I am self-quarantined in a village in the North of Serbia. For those who don’t know, the big majority of the population here are Hungarians, some Serbs, Montenegrins (from the neighboring Montenegrin village, not Montenegro), Roma, and recently Albanians. Life in the village takes place mostly in Hungarian, with some Serbian, but one can basically get by without the state language. Probably this is one of the reasons the elderly people, who take up the majority of the village, didn’t really understand and/or care about the order that they should stay at home: because they only follow Hungarian media. I went out yesterday in the morning hours, trying to keep maximum distance from everyone, and there were a lot of elderly people, but not out of the ordinary. But allegedly in the afternoon, and even in the evening, when it’s usually very empty, streets were full of elderly people. I partly understand them: they didn’t get the info, or even if they did, there are not yet any networks to help them. (I heard today from my mom that my neighbor Jelena in Zrenjanin is already organizing something, kudos to her!) People here know that they cannot expect anything from the state, so if no one else offers to do their shopping, they will just do it themselves despite the regulations. They also know that there are many rules, but few are implemented, so even if they heard that it is forbidden for them to leave

their houses, they probably think it's just yet another meaningless rule. And they probably are right that the state has no capacity to enforce it outside the major cities.

> "We will settle in in this state of emergency, I feel I already am. And I am so happy I can do it, because it means I am home."

Streets are usually pretty empty here anyways. The generation that is 20 to 50 years old are mostly abroad working, even some who are older. So an hour ago I dared to go outside to walk Wanda. I saw a few people, mostly in their cars, and some teenagers hanging out in the park. The river running through the village that is one of the most polluted ones in Serbia seems to be cleaner – or it's just my wishful thinking. Otherwise my friend Gabika brings me the news, together with the shopping, we talk at the gate for a few minutes staying away from each other. We are not the kissing-hugging types anyways, so the only difference is that we don't have a coffee on the terrace. Other friends also stop by my window if its open, they shout my name, and we exchange a few words. I agree that the romantization of the quarantine is a class privilege, but I also know that quarantine is very different in a city and in a Vojvodinian village. It is gardening season, and when my mom returns, we also plan to plant some tomatoes. The market, one of my favorite elements of village life, will probably be banned, so we will have to find out where to buy tomato seedlings. But let that be our biggest concern. I did some yoga yesterday, I made

fusilli Bolognese for lunch today and I am planning to work a bit now. Yesterday it was windy, but today is a beautiful sunny spring day. I am writing an article, but I know that without some resources from the library I will not be able to finish it, so I am not very motivated. Who would have thought that you can't actually write something without relying solely on online stuff? Or maybe you can, you just need to conceptualize it differently. I talk to friends and family a lot, via chat, Skype, phone... "The lines are burning", as one says in Hungarian, but I also learned from the emails from the times of the 1999 NATO bombing that I analyzed for my MA thesis, that it won't always be like this: people will be fed up with all the communication. Or the internet will go down. They won't follow the news so eagerly anymore. I am already not. We will settle in in this state of emergency, I feel I already am. And I am so happy I can do it, because it means I am home.

"Since the pandemic, I keep breaking rules all the time, and I feel almost proud of myself."

March 20 09:06 PM

I have always thought of myself as a law-abiding citizen. I love rules, they make my life easier, and I act according to them to the extent that I irritate myself for being such a "štreber". Then since the pandemic, I keep breaking rules all the time, and I feel almost proud of myself. I was told not to leave Norway, and I did, and I think it was the best decision I could make even though shit will really hit the fan here in Serbia. I was told to keep inside, but I do go out for a walk in the park with Wanda

once a day to stay sane. I also talk to people from a few meters afar, but sometimes inevitably we come around 1 m “close” to each other. I feel guilty and immediately start rationalizing: “c’mon, we all know this rule makes no sense, I am not infected, I would certainly have some symptoms at least by now, and if I am, anyway we will all get infected”.

The rule I broke yesterday was that I organized that my mom comes back to Kishegyes. It was me who sent her to Zrenjanin to keep her away from myself on Sunday, but since they introduced a complete curfew for senior citizens, I had been restless how she would return. Public transport was out of the question (it stopped since then anyway, today at noon), and as a person forbidden to step outside her door, it is in fact illegal for her to get from A to B. She called a taxi driver to arrange it for the next week when my 14 days quarantine expires, but he refused to drive her saying he was afraid to get caught in doing something illegal. As so many times the last week, I felt it was now or never. I called Aca again, and he accepted to take the risk. I was nervous all day, until at 6 pm they arrived. No police, all was fine. A big relief, and accommodation to the new situation again, as so many times in the past week: We keep to our rooms, but we need to use the same kitchen and bathroom. When we meet in the kitchen or in the yard, we keep away. We use separate entrances, we have separate cutlery, glasses and cups, and we don’t eat together. This is how it’s going to be for the foreseeable future. Honestly, it’s not a big a change in our lives, what is strange is that it has an external reason, not simply being cold-hearted Vojvodinians. But we did get closer to each other in one aspect: we are plotting together. I came back from my daily semi-illegal walk with Wanda and asked her if she would like to go outside if she could and she said she didn’t even feel the need anymore. I got scared, and like so many times the past week I decided I need to act. I told her to go take a short walk around the block. “Take Wanda as an alibi”, I told her. And she did, 15 minutes outside in the deserted streets of Kishegyes. “No police?” “No police.” “Have you met anyone?” “Just two people walking their dogs.” “OK, hope they don’t know you and won’t report you.” We plan to do this every day from now on.

Krisztina Racz

> "What I watch in horror though is how the epidemic became the campaign [...] They took over the function of the state, and we just sit on the couch and watch."

March 23 09:35 AM

Serbia was in electoral campaign when coronavirus struck. The first case, a person from a nearby town, was announced on 6 March. I heard some rumors already then that when he was hospitalized, there were already other cases, and while this may have been completely unfounded village hearsay, it could as well be true. Today's big news is that a doctor claims the first case was already on 1 March, then there was a second, and the one announced on the 6 March was the third. No one is really surprised. It could have been the 100th as well, we wouldn't be. The reason, it is speculated, is that the president was abroad, so he couldn't have announced it, and even much smaller scale things are announced by him. More importantly, elections were announced on 4 March (supposed to be held on 26 April but currently on hold), the leading party submitted its list on 5 March for which tens of thousand of signatures were collected in municipality halls and other crowded public institutions. After that, the first case could have been announced. Totally makes sense to me. Then a week later the diaspora started arriving back, many because they had no other options, some, like me, for emotional reasons, and in a country where people working abroad are both a source of envy, despise and revenues, the blame for the spread could be easily put on them. The story fits together perfectly.

Political manipulations like this are completely expectable and I don't even blink at them. What I watch in horror though is how the epidemic became the campaign. What's happening on higher political levels, we all know: a dictatorship is being introduced/strengthened and our dignity is being taken away from us. My mom went on a Sunday shopping reserved for the elderly between 5 and 7 am. Why do people need to be stumbling in the dark like zombies and feel lucky to be able to do that? What I follow with a mixture of interest and disgust is how it happens on local level. I heard that party activists are going from door to door to help the elderly. Here in the village where I live, the Facebook group that most people follow and that has the most updated information is run by the party of Vojvodina Hungarians, which is in alliance with the leading Progressive Party. The local young and not-so-young-anymore activists were fast to adapt as well: while their party elders record calm toned video messages asking people to stay at home, showing what they have done so far and promising to do more, the lower-level cadres post vital information, help the elderly and answer questions. They took over the function of the state, and we just sit on the couch and watch.

> "In the many chats these days my female friends complain about stress and anxiety, my male friends talk about work."

March 26 10:13 AM

This is partly a gender question too. For the first time in my life, the day before yesterday, I was unprepared for my period. So at 8 am I had to break a rule again and

went to the shop to buy tampons. After a week of beautiful spring, we had two days of winter, and that was the first day of it. I hadn't been even near a shop for 8 days, I heard that people are standing in line outside and that they only let a few people in at the same time, but I couldn't imagine it. Well, here it was, two people standing in front of a small shop in the desolate street of a cold winder morning in the village. Not the most cheerful sight. One of the two, an elderly man was banging the door and shouting "what the hell takes you so long?". Me and the other customer just looked at each other in silence. I had a mask that I bought and had delivered by a seamstress from the neighboring village that morning, but I was hesitant to put it on, I felt I can't take more catastrophe film props. After some 10 minutes it was my turn to go in; two customers could be inside at the same time. There were two shop assistants, both wearing masks and gloves but touching everything, products, money, cash register with the same gloves. This glove thing is still unclear to me, how should one use it. I quickly bought the things I had on my list, there was obviously a lesser choice of fruit and vegetables and no yeast whatsoever, that's allegedly the only item that there is a shortage of in Serbia but they started extra production in a factory in the town where I was accidentally born in, so I heard on the radio. I felt I have no right to stay longer inside when people were probably waiting outside for me to exit, and while the shop assistant ladies were nice, the atmosphere was unwelcoming in general. At home, I told my mother that after my quarantine we won't go more often than twice a week to the shop, she on Sunday morning and me in the middle of the week.

So we are a female household, even my dog is female. We quickly adopted to a distribution of labor we usually have in which my mom does 90 per cent of the household chores, while I am the "breadwinner" and (try to) work and earn money. My mom cooks and does most of the cleaning, I only clean my room (the whole house is mine but I keep calling the room where I sleep and work "my room") and wash the dishes occasionally. I take care of Wanda mostly (feeding her, walking her, playing with her, and she sleeps with me in my bed) but she hangs out with my mom

in the kitchen whenever she is doing anything that involves food. So my worries are "only" anxiety about the future, fear of getting sick (not so much because of the sickness itself but because the healthcare is horrible here, they prepared the largest hall of the Belgrade Fair to accommodate people with mild symptoms and it looks like a concentration camp), infecting my mom and lack of motivation to work. But for many women with families, the entire household fell on their shoulders: homeschooling kids, cooking, cleaning, and possibly soon caring for the ill. Plus managing their own and their family members' psychological wellbeing. And of course their own work from home — if they have it. They count on their male partners' help. In the many chats these days my female friends complain about stress and anxiety, my male friends talk about work. I don't know what the distribution on physical and emotional labor in their families are, but I feel many of my male colleagues believe that these are times that if self-disciplined enough, can be used wisely to be productive and get that article/book/proposal finally out. What no one asks is who can afford to be self-disciplined and what is behind it. Support. Knowing, often unconsciously, that the background work will be done, work that is often time and energy consuming and invisible, even to the women who are doing it themselves.

March 30 10:38 AM

I have arrived to the stage that I knew was coming when I don't know what date and what day it is. The only actual work I have done in the past days I am satisfied with has been in the garden. I had always had trouble meditating, but the closest I have come to it has been when I am pulling weed. So I hoed and cleaned a small part of my small garden and planted basil and rucola and replanted some lemongrass I found among the roses. One of the reasons work is not going great when I work from my house in Kishegyes from spring to fall is that the temptation to do gardening instead of intellectual work is too big. The garden is sunny in the mornings, I have my coffee at the veranda and I can't resist to pull out a weed that's been sticking out. And one

weed leads to another, and its noon, and I am hungry, and I make some food, and I eat, and I realize I am tired, and I take a nap, and I need a coffee, and someone calls… and the day is over. This is what happens in normal times (is it how we are going to call the pre-corona times?), and it's even more intensified when one can't leave the house and when one feels no motivation to do the work one is paid for.

Because yes, I am still in quarantine. Or as they call it in Serbia, in self-isolation. Due to some mistranslation, I assume, the Vojvodina Hungarian media calls it "voluntary isolation". I was wrong when I thought the scapegoating of the diaspora who returned to Serbia will slowly cease – it is too precious a resource to let it go. So on my day 13 of quarantine life, the 14-day self-isolation was extended to all to last 28. And while my first 14 were for me a semi-quarantine only because I didn't get a proper decision that people who entered the country the day after I did got, only a so-called health warning leaflet kindly asking me to "reduce contacts with persons in [my] household, workplace or in public places during the next 14 days", nor did the police come check on me as they do with people who came to Serbia on 15 March or later. As I entered with my Hungarian passport and no one took the registration form from the passengers of the plane I came with, I assume I am not in the system. So I was doing Norwegian-style quarantine: staying mostly inside but leaving the house to take Wanda to the park, or meeting people in the street keeping a few meters distance from them. On the first and the last day of my semi-quarantine I even went to the shop and the pharmacy because I didn't want to bother anyone with it, the last time in mask and rubber gloves (amazing how fast one gets accustomed to such things!). But now it's clear I am in self-isolation: the regulation says that everyone who arrived to the country on 14 March or later is. And because I read news that people got arrested and are in detention right now for not found at home even if they didn't get a decision (allegedly they got an "oral decision"), I am afraid. I sneaked out with Wanda for a 10-minute walk just to prove to myself that I am not. The person about whom I read was arrested was an artist criticizing the government, so it was probably not random. I am not an artist, and I don't consider my Facebook

posts anything more than a personal vent, but even while writing this it crossed my mind that maybe I shouldn't. At the moment though I am more afraid of becoming paranoid than of getting arrested, so I am leaving my posts on breaking the quarantine rule visible.

So right now and in the next 13 days my mom is in a better position than I am: she can leave the house to go to the shops on Sundays at dawn. As the president announced that he is considering a 24-hour long lockdown for everyone (right now non-elderly and non-self-isolated people can leave the house from 5 am to 5 pm and on weekends until 3 pm, but there are no restrictions as to the number of people in groups or anything of that sort) with only one shopping opportunity per week, my big fear is that the earth I ordered to fill my new garden boxes will not arrive.

> "I know who to turn to, where to look, whom to ask – and in a country like Serbia where institutions have gone from bad to worse in the past weeks this is a matter of survival."

April 3 10:25 PM

I am good at managing things. I do logistics, I organize. I have always been good at these. I have organized several conferences, dozens of trips (I am still in charge of finding bus connections to my mother's and my sister's travels), the delivery of a loan to a friend from thousands of kilometers away that involved my mother, a friend and

a friend's husband, a village and two cities, a car and a bus, in a timeframe of less than 24 hours. As a friend told me when I came back from Oslo: "you are in a place where you know how things work". For good or bad, I do. I know who to turn to, where to look, whom to ask – and in a country like Serbia where institutions have gone from bad to worse in the past weeks this is a matter of survival. I am in my element, but I also started to feel tired: everything is a task. When I don't work and I don't agonize over the fact that I don't work, I either read the news and analysis of the news or I do tasks: consult my mom, make a list, ask a friend to bring groceries from a shop, disinfect the groceries, call X to get the number of Y, order vegetables from Y, order a garden box, order earth in the garden box, disinfect the door handles when every delivery for the day has been done. In the meantime, wash hands million times and worry that I still got infected.

> "I would trade ten chats or videocalls for one conversation."

I used to be good at communicating with people, making and keeping friends. Being single and living alone most of my life, I think I am a kind of person who is there for others. I listen about awful exes after breakups, I agree that they said and did horrible things (and if the relationship is restarted, I bite my tongue, but I do it again next time), I wash the dishes if I sleep over, I chose presents carefully and I do my best to prepare food even if I am a bad cook when I have friends over for dinner (OK, there are guests whom I gladly let take over the kitchen). But since the pandemic started, I feel I am not doing enough. Having moved around so much and having friends all over the world, a lot of my friendships and most of my family connections

have been online, and already before this, I started to feel uneasy about it. With the exception of my teenage years where I could and did talk to my friends for hours on the phone, even playing songs to the receiver to each other, I have never liked talking on the phone. For me, the phone serves to ask something quickly or to arrange a live meeting. So in the last few years, I started to feel the same about chats and videocalls: they serve to arrange a live meeting. And now, that all my friendships (except a few friends here in the village whom I meet standing at my gate for a few minutes almost every day) and family (except my mom who is here with me) has moved online, plus a lot of them are reaching out to talk, I miss hanging out with people live. I miss conversations in which several people talk at the same time, when you can just sit and listen and don't feel creepy about it, when you can touch the other, accidentally or on purpose, when you are hanging out with people while (you are supposed to be) doing something else (working, cooking, washing the dishes, walking the dog, travelling, etc. I would trade ten chats or videocalls for one conversation like that.

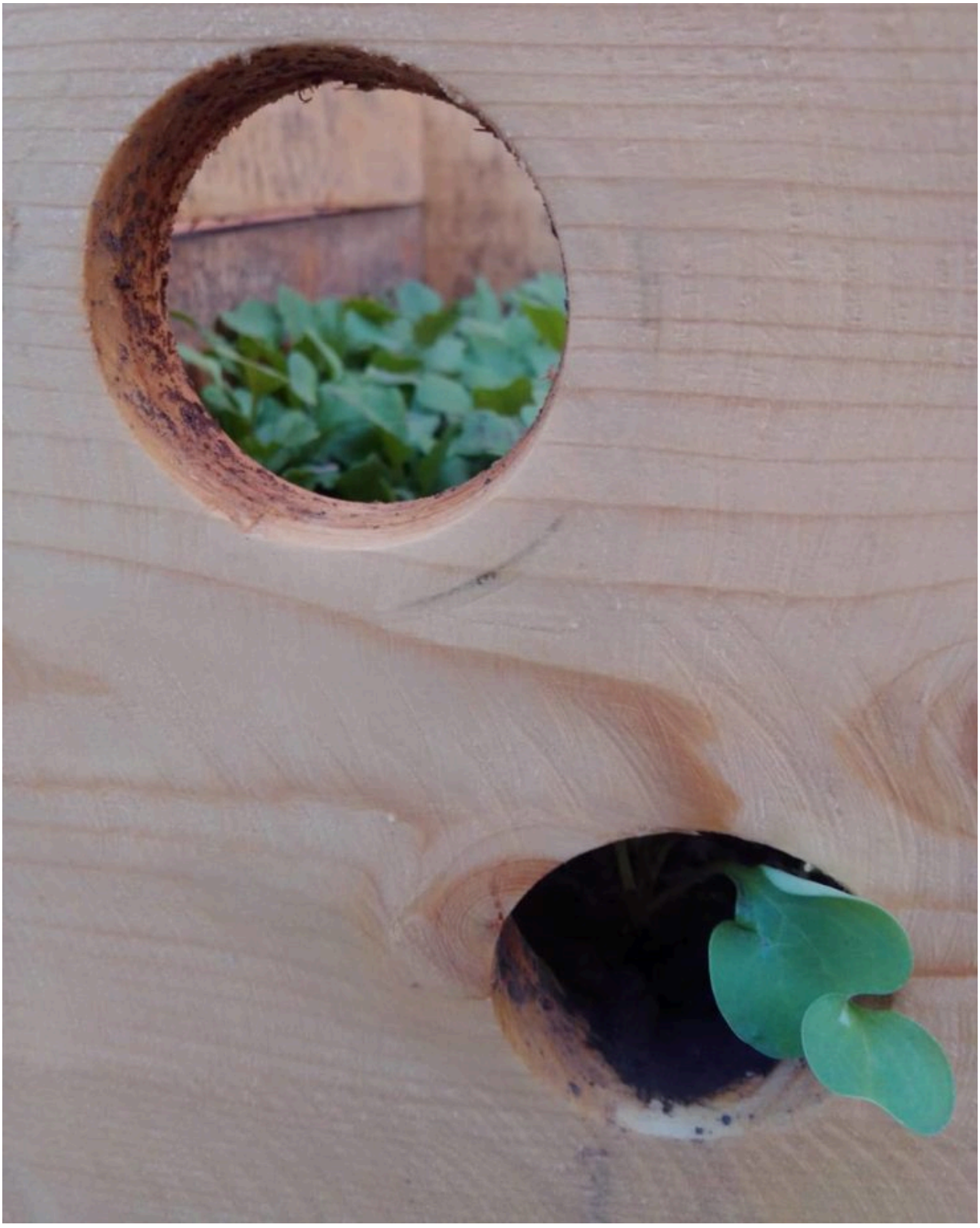
> "And while the medical part became a concern, the anger I feel towards the political aspect didn't diminish."

April 7 4:06 PM

Days keep blending into each other. There was a complete curfew in the whole country from Saturday 1 pm to Monday 5 am, so basically a day and a half. As I am quarantined, it did not make a big difference to me other than that I haven't seen any

of my friends even for the few minutes we usually meet at my gate. Yesterday friends of mine came over, we sat on the veranda socially distant and had some wine, everything was like before but it wasn't. I was trying to avoid the topic of corona, and I think they did too, but it kept coming back being basically the only thing we could speak of. When they left, I read the news that the first case of corona infection has been registered in our municipality – the smallest in Serbia, consisting of 3 villages. While before I was indignant at people who kept asking for the identity of the infected, the first thing that came into my mind was in which of the three villages and if in Mali Iđoš, who is it.

Krisztina Racz



“We will settle in this state of emergency, I feel I already am. And I am so happy I can do it, because it means I am home.”
https://boasblogs.org/de/curarecoronadiaries/we-will-settle-in-this/

Photo by author.

I admit that I became more scared than before. Of course I knew the virus will eventually get to this village too because people are mobile and it's inevitable, I was doing all the mask and glove wearing (that one time I went out), making my mom do the same, disinfecting the groceries brought into the house, cleaning the tables, door handles, etc. but it was still a distant thing, a precaution rather than fear from something real. And deep down I hoped that maybe we will be lucky and we will escape it. But now the issue became a medical question too, not only a political, social and economic one. Now I could see that for all my friends and family in cities it has been all this at once. And it's a lot. And while the medical part became a concern, the anger I feel towards the political aspect didn't diminish. And I know most people think the same, and we still just do nothing about it. We proudly post photos of plants we planted, food we prepared, kids we play with, pets we entertain ourselves with, yoga poses we strike, funny memes we found and a to the point articles we read. Make no mistake, I do feel that it is completely necessary to do these to keep mentally sane as much as possible. While I am planting flowers or herbs, or the one occasion I made pizza, I enjoyed it tons, but I am fully aware that it is a distraction and I am embracing it as such.

> "I was hopeful that while it is not the time to act now, people will want changes after this is over. But I am not sure anymore."

A distraction from the fact that I am locked up for 28 days for no medical reason,

that elderly people are even more humiliated by being locked in for 24/7 with the exception of the zombie hour when they can go shopping (no, not for walks, but shopping), that basically all the actions that the government of this country has taken is medically illogical: not closing down factories where people work standing next to each other without adequate protection but forbidding walks even if a person is alone after 5 pm and for the entire weekend or completely if the person is elderly, complete curfew for the weekend, creating a crowd in shops on Friday and Saturday morning, threatening with complete lockdown but not being able to organize life if it was implemented, advising wearing masks and gloves but not providing them, not testing enough but isolating those unfortunate ones who are positive but with no or mild symptoms they "find" in makeshift hospitals with no adequate infrastructure, etc. All the anger is making me tired, and I am afraid I am not the only one. Just a few days ago I was hopeful that while it is not the time to act now, people will want changes after this is over. But I am not sure anymore. I think by the time this ends, they will be so worn out they will be happy they had survived. But let's hope I will be proven wrong.

April 11 8:59 PM

Yesterday was 3 years since I got my PhD. The logistics of the whole event was kind of symbolic: my scholarship running out 4 years into the program, taking on odd jobs and fellowships to support myself, which also meant I was not able to concentrate fully on my dissertation, it took me 7 years to finish it. Six, plus the administrative procedure longer than the usual (long) process. I went to Ljubljana with a car-share a day before the defense, slept at a friend's place, I remember even borrowing stockings from her because I realized in the morning I didn't bring any. I had amazing friends attending the defense, from Ljubljana but even from further, went for burgers and beers after and hang out at a friend's flat as an afterparty. I slept over in my friend's daughter's bed, picked up my stuff in the morning and left back with a

car-sharing. I have been living in insecurity since I decided to abandon my original profession, that of an English teacher and try to do a PhD. I have lived in Serbia (Zrenjanin, Mali Iđoš, Belgrade), Slovenia (Ljubljana), Austria (Vienna and Graz) and Hungary (Budapest) in those 7 years for periods between 4 to 10 months. When I got the postdoc in Oslo, I told myself that at least it's 2.5 years, and if I do a mobility (God, how I hate that word!) then 3. I was travelling a lot for fieldwork to Romania and for fieldwork and holidays in Serbia, but most of the times I knew where I was going to be in the next 2 months. Then 1.5 years into the postdoc, this happened. With Norway re-opening (because: capitalism) slowly after Easter, I am dreading that I will have to go back to Oslo. And I simply can't imagine life as it was when I am a middle of a chaos here, with barely existing health care, shooting numbers of infected and dead, a complete curfew for my mom and restricted movement for myself. And even if I don't have to go back, I will soon have to pretend everything is normal. But it's not.

> "We act as if insecurity is not causing psychological damage."

This performative part of the crisis is one that's the hardest on me. We pretend that we work full-time, we act as if insecurity is not causing psychological damage, we fake that the emotional labor and the time and energy we spend to organize, to care, to manage ourselves and others is just nothing. I read an article in which they called this productivity porn. And that's what it is: a performance that we know is false but it still affects our standards. And I am so angry at myself for being complicit. A week or so ago a friend complained that at the institution where she works, she is the only

one who didn't report working regular hours from home. Don't worry, your colleagues are lying, I told her. And I meant it. But then a few days after I felt bad for sending an article 4 days later than I promised to my boss before the pandemic. I struggle with motivation and concentration, and I know my anyway slim academic job market chances will be even slimmer after this, but I am still doing it. For the salary, yes, but also because I have been disciplined into doing it. And if there is one thing I should use this quarantine to work on myself, it shall be learning to resist this.

> "And the sad thing is, I don't have another place where I belong to. And in fact, I do want to belong here."

April 12 6:19 PM

It was fucking hard, I won't lie. For several reasons. Knowing that making people stay in their houses for 28 days doesn't have a medical reason but a political one: punishing the returnee diaspora and instigating hatred towards us as the alleged main source of infection. The president doesn't miss a chance to make this point. At his daily speech today he also said that there are new towns with a high number of infected, "those where a large number of Serbian citizens returned from abroad". I have lived my life as an ethnic minority, and I always thought the best way to keep off discrimination is not to pay attention to it, and I was raised by being told that only stupid people think like that and I am smarter than that to be provoked. But now as an adult to feel that a large number of the country where you were born, where you speak the language, where you know how things work, where you,

however clichéd it sounds, belong is of the opinion that you shouldn't have come back, that you are spreading a virus and you want to parasite on the health care system, is a terrible feeling. It makes you isolate yourself even more in your micro-universe of like-minded people, and all of a sudden I understand my parents who in the 90s did the same. I used to think my father became a nationalist for hanging out almost exclusively with Hungarians during the 90s but now I think I realize what was his motivation. Just like I assume he didn't feel like proving all the time that he is Hungarian but not a Greater Hungary supporter, I don't feel like having to explain that I came back from Norway but didn't infect anyone. And the sad thing is, I don't have another place where I belong to. And in fact, I do want to belong here.

Second, just the feeling that you can't have something makes you want that thing. It is hard to control the urge to go for a walk when you are forbidden. Though now I can admit that I did break the self-isolation almost every day. In the first 13 days, I kept to the instruction on the flyer I got at the airport that asked me to minimize contacts with people. So I did go for a walk with Wanda every day to the park and I met people from afar in the street. I did what is considered quarantine in Norway, and in many other countries too. On the 14th day, the news of the extension reached me that were more precise: self-isolation means not leaving your house. Already the second day I felt the choice was to go mad or risk being caught, arrested and sentenced for 3 years prison. Big stake, but I didn't see much chance of it happening – even though it did happen to some people. So I went for a walk with Wanda to the park, just like every following day, around 4:30 pm for half an hour. My reasoning was that if the police somehow finds out I exist and comes to check on me, they would not do it half an hour before the curfew starts but before. Of course, I know these things very often lack any logic, so there was a risk every day. I even thought about my Facebook posts, what if the police are reading it and want to take revenge on me and arrest me. But I kept convincing myself that I am not that important, I am not some sort of a public enemy – though even some very regular people got arrested. My heart was beating fast every time when I was returning from my

clandestine walks with Wanda, especially when turning into my street: is there a police car in front of my house or not. It was also a courage training; learning not to be intimidated by authorities and listening to my own judgement and common sense. A childhood friend of mine had a group of friends in her neighborhood. They were doing “scary” things such as going to the park at night or climbing on the roof of the highest building in our town. They were called Courageous Company (Hrabro društvo). So for 28 days, Wanda and I were the Courageous Company.

April 19 9:28 PM

The Krivaja River that runs through the village stinks again. Things are getting back to normal, they say. I am skeptical. It is true that my days seem normal. I work a lot, procrastinate a lot, do some gardening, sunbath in the morning in my hammock, walk my dog, watch some Netflix, meet some friends, mostly online – though not as often as in the beginning of the pandemic, and some even live, sitting in yards 2 meters from each other. But that’s not much different than before. The only big difference is when I go shopping and running errands, once a week. I feel like in a science fiction movie: gloves, mask, keeping away from everyone, being worried that I still went too close to someone or rather that someone came too close to me. If someone coughs, I hold my breath, my nose itches but I can’t scratch it, I stand in line in front of the shop, the pharmacy, the exchange office, the butcher… I disinfect everything when I get home, throw away the gloves, put the mask and the bag into the washing machine, change my clothes, disinfect the knob and worry that I missed a step in this ritual. I am so tired I take a nap after all this and on these days I am usually good for nothing else.

I don’t read the news as often as before, and they make even less sense then they used to. Today is Orthodox Easter and it’s the longest curfew: 84 hours. It was introduced to prevent people from going to church, but after a long battle between the president and the clergy, they arrived to a kind of a compromise: while the state

officially didn't grant the possibility to break the curfew and go to church, priests said they were going to have a service and won't send believers home if they show up. As I read, many did, and the police turned a blind eye. Few of the attendees wore masks, they stood close to each other and kissed the same icons one after another. I am afraid what this will have bad results in a few days. In the meantime, most probably pressured by the government's worsening public rating, growing impatience among citizens, greed for money, pressure from EU and mirroring Western countries, Serbia promised loosening the measures after Orthodox Easter. Similarly to the previous steps, the whole thing seems to lack any strategy. From Tuesday, the daily curfew will start one hour later than before, the elderly will get a chance to take a 30 minute-walk 300 meters from their houses during the curfew, between 6 pm and 1 am (so another zombie walk), but already next week they will be able to do it every day, children with disabilities and their parents can already take a walk whenever they want but only 200 meters from their houses (of course no one is checking it, neither is there any sort of official permit for this), small shops will reopen next week, then the industry (if it stopped at all), then hairdressers, beauticians and gyms, but only if they use adequate protective equipment (of which there is a shortage and that are too expensive for many citizens), then public transport will start again and eventually the borders will be open. Kids will end the school year online, in the beginning of June. In the past week, the media discourse has changed immensely: from the threats that graveyards will be full and text messages warning us that the situation is dramatic, we have arrived to messages full of optimism and promises, while numbers of new cases are equally high in the past days (between 300 and 400). There are explanations, they say, the number of testing, the geographical distribution, the number of recovered... But no one can follow the math anymore. We count the days from curfew to curfew, we have hopes rather than plans, we are looking forward to our daily walks and we are happy for the good weather. The only thing I really miss is the market, but since I found I can shop directly from my favorite old lady's house, even that is bearable.

Krisztina Racz

"All of a sudden, we are back to 19th century nation states."

April 29 7:48 PM

I was listening to the presentation of my friend Mariya on the digitalization of higher education, and I wrote her in the chat we exchanged after that at least there is one (but not more) good thing about everything going online: that you can listen and watch seminars you otherwise wouldn't be able to.

A few days ago the Serbian-Hungarian border got open for so-called commuters, people from Serbia living within 50 km from the Serbian side of the border working 50 km from the Hungarian border. These are mostly dual citizens of Hungarian ethnicity working in factories in the industrial belt around Szeged. Being what is called an external Schengen border, that border has never been an easy one, often with long waiting times, so the life of these people who were passing it on a daily basis couldn't have been easy. Then in mid-March the borders closed totally and they couldn't go to work. If they were lucky not to get fired, they took an unpaid leave or holidays. Then on Friday with a lot of political ceremony from both sides of the border, they were allowed to cross and resume commuting to work. However, on their way home, Serbian authorities handed them a decision that they were going to be quarantined for 28 days. It took a few days until the leadership of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians intervened with the government, so their decisions on self-isolation were withdrawn and they could resume work for the second time on Monday. It is not yet clear what will happen to those who have to leave for work or

return home in curfew hours (6 pm to 5 am).

It took similarly lengthy negotiations between various parties and authorities of the two countries to make it possible for high school students from Serbia (also mostly double citizens and Hungarians by ethnicity) who either have attended high school in Hungary and are now back with their parents because of Corona or who plan to pursue higher education in Hungary to attend the graduation exams in Hungary. With special documentation proving the reason of their travel, they will be able to cross the border on foot, and their travel from the border to the assigned dormitories (single rooms) and back on the next day is promised to be organized by the educational institutions. Their parents who will most likely drive them to the border have already been warned that they need to make sure to return home by 6 pm when the curfew (in Serbian: policijski čas, literary police hour) starts as no special arrangements will be made for them.

Such elaborate arrangements for going to work or school were impossible to imagine 2 months ago. 2 months ago it would never cross my mind that I may not be able to return to Serbia every month or month and a half from Oslo to see my dog, family and friends. And while I did feel guilty for flying so often, it was part of my regular postdoc life. Living transnationally was celebrated by some, taken for granted by many. It wasn't even a class privilege, it was the mundane experience of postdocs, factory workers, carers, truck drivers and business people alike. And then all of a sudden we found ourselves amidst closed borders with administrative complications and obstacles we never dreamt of. And all of a sudden the lives we have lived are defined as strange, out of the ordinary and our respective states pretend we don't exist and don't know how to deal with us. All of a sudden, we are back to 19th century nation states. I am waiting for pig smugglers to emerge as a privileged caste of transborder people. Maybe I'll join them, it definitely seems a more lucrative profession than being a social scientist with a PhD.

Krisztina Racz

June 28 3:03 PM

Epilogue

I have stopped writing blog entries approximately when the state of emergency was ended in Serbia, almost 2 months ago. Like most people in Serbia, I equated the end of the state of emergency with the end of the epidemic, even though I knew it was not over. It was a schizophrenic situation: in a way I trusted the government which I was sure manipulated data and never cared about the health of its citizens. It was clear it was all happening because of the elections, held a week ago, on 21 June, but like most of the citizens of Serbia, I played along. So quite soon after public transport was restarted, I took two buses, using masks upon entering the bus but taking it off like most fellow travelers quite soon after finding a seat in a relatively empty vehicle, to my hometown. It was exactly 3 months after I arrived to Mali Iđoš. I never spent so much time not leaving the village. My only excursion was in the last week of my stay to the neighboring village where a friend from Belgrade was staying with his girlfriend and they invited me for dinner. I arrived to Zrenjanin, my hometown, in the early evening hours and a few hours later I was already meeting my friend Móni. “Are we hugging?” I asked, to which she just replied: “Of course we are!” Zrenjanin is a town of some 80,000 inhabitants – that evening compared with Mali Iđoš it felt like New York. We went for pizza (the waiters were not wearing masks, obligatory in Serbia for public transport and for workers in the service industry) and then to a bar. I was a bit dizzy from the crowd, all the familiar and unfamiliar faces. Most conversations started with corona, and ended with something else. Everyone talked a lot, was eager to hang out with friends, have sex, go to places, it was a kind of a frenzy. The evening in the bar was ended by the arrival of the police: there were around 70 people in the place with a huge garden, instead of the allowed maximum 50. Nevertheless, I returned home around 2 am feeling like a teenager who was out in a crazy party.

The weeks that followed will be remembered more because of the heavy rains and unusually cold temperatures, not by corona or by the electoral campaign we were in. The campaign was boring – it was clear the opposition has no chances in competing with the party in government and its coalition partners, which had all the money and blackmailing power and a long campaign behind them. Around half of the adult population went out to vote and the majority of them gave their trust to the party in power. I personally didn't vote: not because I was boycotting as some opposition parties asked their sympathizers to do but because there was no party to my taste. In the past decades, most people I know in Serbia showed bitter disinterest towards politics, and this didn't change now either.

On one hand, life sort of went back to normal: people working abroad came back to visit, people started gathering in larger and larger numbers (the best indicator for that: my friend works in a cake-workshop, and she told me the sizes of the ordered cakes got bigger and bigger), and corona was not the main topic anymore. Plans were still hard to make, but I have pretended I am in control. I made a plan to go to the Adriatic seaside with a friend from Croatia in August, otherwise spend the summer in Serbia and return to Oslo in September. On the other hand, what was expected happened: the number of new infected never went down completely, and already a day after the elections alarms were raised by the government's team of experts that they are rising. There are more and more new infected people reported every day, including members of the government – clearly the pandemic was here all the time. Also, as the expert team doesn't have the trust of the population because their advice has been contradictory, obviously dictated by the economy and politics, and most people were following the measures because of fear of being fined not because of protecting their and others' health, as soon as the measures were relaxed, the infection started to spread again. The number of infected is quite high again and the possibility to plan anything is completely lost again: Croatia re-introduced quarantine for people from Serbia, so at the moment I am not able to go to the Adriatic. Travel restriction to the EU could be re-introduced too. On the other hand,

Krisztina Racz

it's clear that no drastic measures will be re-introduced, neither in the EU nor here, because they cost too much. We have every country doing things their own way: e.g. in Norway I hear things are almost normal again, in the UK people have been under lockdown for more than 3 months now, and in Serbia we, as always, can count only on ourselves and we are pretending we are back to normal, but this new normal is the old bad. What I find especially painful is that we let ourselves so easily be manipulated by some weird form of nationalism: none of us are epidemiologists, but everyone is so certain of their way of protecting against the virus dictated by the government of the countries they live in is the best way, and we so easily speak from a high moral ground of what is right and what is wrong to do. Many times, instead of solidarity, we have moral judgment and a complete uncertainty of what will happen tomorrow. Personally, I feel that just as basically every time in my life, I have to make choices on my own and accept the consequences individually. The choice in this situation seems to be one between my physical and mental health.