



Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion in Bulgaria

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1. General presentation

- General data regarding the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on religion: restrictions, main events related to the topic, statistical data (if any) etc.

The Bulgarian state did not require the closure of churches, mosques, or prayer houses during the pandemic. Some religious minorities, mainly Evangelicals, however, were fined for their religious gatherings during the pandemic.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church did not provide information about sick bishops, priests, monks, and nuns. Still, some religion-related websites provided such information, though in a non-systematic fashion.

- The density and scale of public debates on religion in the context of the pandemic, main points of interest in the debate.

The public debates on religion-related issues in the context of the pandemic were very intensive during the first wave of the coronavirus crisis, but almost disappeared afterward. The debates involved all religious communities and the secular parts of Bulgarian society. As a rule, they were provoked by the sanitary measures imposed on various spheres of public life and their applicability to and eventual negative effects on specific religious practices. The most debatable were customs and sacraments of the religious majority religion Eastern Orthodoxy (the use of the same communion spoon, the customs of kissing icons and the hands of clergy, etc.). As the churches and prayer houses were not closed during the pandemic, this issue was generally neglected. There were, however, some reactions to the closure of Orthodox churches in neighbouring Orthodox countries, especially in Greece.

The second row of debates was triggered when the mass vaccination against Covid-19 started. These debates were especially intensive during the second half of 2021, when a Public Council on Vaccination (PVC) was set up for the popularisation of the vaccination and for combating the anti-vaccine fakes. The PVC had invited all religious communities to send their representatives as its members. Only the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the biggest religious organisation in the country, refused to do it and did not take part in the PVC's work.

- The interest of researchers or state institutions to measure the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion reflected in publications, articles, studies, surveys, conferences, etc.

The encounter of religion with the Covid-19 pandemic did not provoke special scientific interest in the country. Among the few reflections on the subject are several Orthodox theological overviews about experiences with pandemics which have been published in religious blogs. They paid special attention to alternative forms of communion that do not require the use of a common spoon. There were also many texts that defended an opposite point of view. They claim that the true faith and the current form of communion by a common spoon are the best means of preventing the coronavirus disease.

2. Legal aspect

- Was there already legislation in place to regulate religious life in the event of a pandemic/natural disaster?

There are no specific regulations on religion during the Covid epidemic. The major normative acts consist of orders and instructions issued by the Ministry of Public Health. They follow the sanitary norms in national legislation which contain no reference to religion.

- Main legal texts, drawn up to fight the pandemic, which have affected religious life. Are legislative changes related to religious life temporary or permanent? What restrictions have most affected religious life?

The restrictions include physical distance, wearing face masks in the temples. Some traditional customs and rites were temporarily ceased or cancelled during the coronavirus epidemic. They had an effect on such rites as the kissing of holy objects, the distribution of blessed willow branches on Palm Sunday at Orthodox churches, the Holy Fire from Jerusalem, etc. They also brought about a reduction of believers in mosques and prayer houses.

- Regulations concerning specific areas of religious life, including hospitals (chaplains and rights of ministers of religion) and funerals.

Religious chaplaincy is not developed in Bulgaria. There are no military chaplains. There have been some abortive attempts to introduce chaplains at hospitals. The institution of the chaplaincy has been developed mostly at prisons.

The Covid epidemic brought about restrictions on the number of attendees at wedding ceremonies and funerals.

Concerning public rites with the participation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as the representative of the majority religion, the most important is the blessing of the military flags on Epiphany (6 January) and blessing of the Army on St. George Day (6 May). Both rites are performed in open areas. So they were not cancelled but the public attendance was significantly reduced.

The major religious holiday – the Orthodox Easter was performed in a modified fashion. No state leaders, politicians, and public figures were present inside the churches during the liturgy but attended the public sermons at midnight, which were read in front of the churches.

- What religious rights are claimed to have been violated and by whom (state, religious groups), and who issued such claim? What challenges or appeals have been made and by whom? Decisions of the courts, if any, on this issue; possible religious discrimination.

Evangelicals became the major victims of restrictions of their rights during the pandemic.

In April 2020, Bulgarian state/municipal authorities penalised the evangelical church in the Roma district of the town of Samokov because of a collective prayer, held in its yard on Palm Sunday. It was punished despite the observance of the sanitary requirements: the believers had medical masks and kept 2-meter distance between themselves during the prayer. In response, the United Evangelical Churches referred to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Prosecutor General, and the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs with a request to clarify the rights of the believers under the lockdown. In his letter, the UEC's Chairman pointed out that the Bulgarian Constitution (Article 57 § 3) does not envision any restriction of religious rights in the case of emergency.

In June 2020, journalists announced the contamination of several pastors with Covid-19 after a religious meeting in a small Bulgarian town. On this occasion, the UEC sent a letter of protest to the Minister of Health and the Chief State Health Inspector. It was stressed that in no other case media had commented on the religious identity of the infected people. It was also mentioned that the multiple publications about sick pastors created an impression that the disease affected only Evangelicals. Finally, it was pointed out that the data collection and announcements about the religious identity of contaminated people contradict to the World Health Organisation's requirements for respect for religious freedoms.

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3. Sociological Aspect

- How was collective religious life affected during the pandemic? - church attendance, pilgrimages, major religious holidays, etc. Importance and modalities of digital use (videoconferencing, etc.).

Catholic minority used videoconferencing actively, while the church services were conducted behind closed doors with the sole participation of clerics.

The prayers at mosques were attended by a decreased number of believers.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church continued to appeal believers to take the same spoon communion as a guarantee for salvation. Orthodox pilgrimages to monasteries and holy places in the country continued and the sanitary measures were not properly observed.

In 2021, when the vaccines became available the Bulgarian Orthodox Church refused to appeal to its believers to get the vaccination. Unofficially, some of its representatives claimed that vaccines are not good for human health. Bulgarian media reported that many Roma evangelical communities refuse to get the vaccine because it would harm the fertility of their members. Meanwhile, the religious minorities took an active part in the public pro-vaccination campaign. The highest rate of vaccination was registered among the Jewish community. The Catholic Church was another active promoter of the vaccination. Its episcopate, clerics, and nuns got it and appealed to their flock to follow their example. In general, the Muslim religious leadership showed a positive attitude to the vaccine and declared that many of the muftis and imams had got it.

- How has the pandemic influenced people's religiosity? - secularisation or secularisation; changes in religious behaviour regarding funerals, commemorations, marriage, baptism, etc. Some religious practices (ritual gestures, dietary practices, etc.) had to be modified because of the pandemic. Have the

changes brought about by the pandemic situation lasted or have they been temporary?

The pandemic reduced the visibility of religion. Some religious rites like weddings and baptisms attended by fewer people than usual. Some people chose to postpone their weddings and preferred to conduct such rites between the epidemic waves.

The traditional form of burial was replaced by the wider use of the crematorium. The Orthodox Church is generally against crematoria but did not protest.

- How can the relation between religious groups and the state during Covid-19 pandemic be described? - collaboration, confrontation, neutrality? Did religious groups facilitate or hinder the adherence to public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus?

A specific mode of collaboration was established between the BOC and the State during the government of Boyko Borisov (4 May 2017 – 12 May 2021). The state authorities made a series of concessions to the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Patriarchate and accepted the requirement of the latter for the Orthodox churches to stay open (with the observance of the sanitary requirements for physical distance and regular hygiene measures).

4. References (publications, reports, surveys...)

Kalkandjieva, Daniela, "Global and local in the response of Orthodox Churches to the First Wave of the Coronavirus Pandemic: With a special focus on the case of Bulgaria" in: Frank Cibulka & Zachary T. Irwin (eds.), *Liberals, Conservatives, and Mavericks: On Christian Churches of Eastern Europe Since 1980 (A Festschrift for Sabrina P. Ramet)*, CEU University Press, September 2022.