



COVID-19 and Religion: Croatia

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General presentation

The first case of Covid-19 infection was confirmed in Zagreb on February 25, 2020. The Croatian Minister of Health declared an epidemic of COVID-19 disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the Republic of Croatia on the same day the World Health Organization declared a pandemic (March 11, 2020). There were four waves of infection by the end of May 2022, with a total of 1,136,500 confirmed cases and 15,997 deaths.¹ According to the number of deaths (3,994 per 1 million), Croatia ranked 8th in the world.² In the absence of scientific analyses of such a high share of deaths, it could be hypothesised that this happened due to the inefficiency of the health system (the first ten countries according to deaths are mainly neighbouring post-communist countries) and the fact of very liberal measures imposed. Restrictions were quite strict during the first wave of infection but much more relaxed after that. However, even these liberal measures were questioned in public debates. Citizens did not fully accept vaccination, and the authorities did not invest enough to gain the citizens' trust in the benefits of vaccination. Only 54.98% of the whole population was fully vaccinated by June 4, 2022.³

Public debates on religion in the context of the pandemic had started already during the first infection wave. They were mainly triggered by the Civil Protection Headquarters decision to allow the pre-Easter public procession on the island of Hvar (April 2020). The Headquarters justified its decision by stating that the procession has centuries of tradition and is included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural List, and by imposing strict epidemiological measures. However, as that happened at a time of high restrictions (e.g. even public parks were closed at that time), the decision was criticised as evidence of permissive attitude toward religion. Also, there were some cases when priests did not want to respect the ban on religious gatherings on church premises, although religious communities in general respected measures imposed by the Civil Protection Headquarters.

According to our best knowledge, there is no research on the impact of Covid-19 on religion. There are just a few articles published so far, and not fully confined to a sociological area, which partly touch on the role of religion. Examples are the paper discussing the conspiracy theories in

¹ ECDC data, accessed on June 4, 2022: <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea>

² Worldometers data, accessed on June 4, 2022: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>

³ Our World, accessed on June 6, 2022: https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=OWID_WRL

relation to vaccination (Kelam and Dilica 2021), the paper analysing attitudes toward Covid-19 and vaccination on a small convenience sample (Tadić, Brezovec and Tadić 2022), or the paper discussing the role of the Catholic Church in respond to the pandemic, though based on the “research method of the pastoral judgment” (Jurić 2021).

Legal aspect

A legal norm in Croatia regulated potential situations related to the spread of infectious diseases. The Law on Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases from 2009 was amended in 2018, after the declaration of the pandemic in 2020 and in 2021.⁴ Additionally, the Civil Protection System Act was also amended in 2020.⁵ The legislator authorised the Croatian Civil Protection Headquarters to take measures to restrict citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms to protect life and health from infectious disease COVID-19.⁶

During the first wave of infection, all religious communities followed measures imposed by the Civil Protection Headquarters. The Croatian Bishops' Conference (HBK) passed the Decision on March 20, 2020, specifying that all religious gatherings were cancelled.⁷ Other religious communities passed similar decisions.⁸ However, as public debates increased during the following waves and concentrated on the necessity of strict measures, that was also reflected in how religious communities perceived such measures. The Decision of the Civil Protection Headquarters from November 2020 recommended that Mass celebrations be broadcast whenever possible through radio and television so that believers could attend Mass without coming to religious facilities. The Croatian Bishops' Conference (HBK) announced that such a restriction could put Catholics in an unequal position as it did not consider the area of the space in which the religious gatherings occur. Therefore, the subsequent decision from December 2020 exceptionally allowed Mass celebrations on December 24 and 25, following special recommendations and instructions of the Croatian Institute of Public Health. They stipulate that during the Mass rites, the number of faithful presents depends on the inner surface of the church, regardless of the general restriction of the assembly up to 25 people. The ombudswoman warned of unequal treatment of members of different Christian denominations, as it did not include believers of the Orthodox faith who also celebrated Christmas.⁹ Therefore, she suggested to the headquarters that, to avoid discrimination based on religion, restrictions and their exceptions apply in the same way to all who celebrate Christmas in the specified period, which was done promptly by amending the decision.

⁴ Narodne novine no. 114/2018, 47/2020, 134/20, 143/21, accessed on June 7, 2022: <https://www.zakon.hr/z/1067/Zakon-o-za%C5%A1titi-pu%C4%8Danstva-od-zaraznih-bolesti>

⁵ Narodne novine no. 31/2020, 105/20, accessed on June 7, 2022: <https://www.zakon.hr/z/809/Zakon-o-sustavu-civilne-za%C5%A1tite>

⁶ Civil Protection System Act, Article 22.a

⁷ Croatian Bishops' Conference provisions regarding the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 disease, accessed on June 7, 2022: <http://hbk.hr/odredbe-biskupa-hbk-u-vezi-sa-sprjecavanjem-sirenja-bolesti-covid-19/>

⁸ Instructions from the Islamic community to the Majlis regarding the corona virus (accessed on June 7, 2022:

⁹ The Ombudswoman's report for 2020, accessed on June 7, 2022: <https://www.ombudsman.hr/hr/download/izvjesce-pucke-pravobraniteljice-za-2020-godinu/?wpdmdl=10845&refresh=629f0296271471654588054>

On the other hand, allowing religious gatherings, even in limited circumstances, has provoked the displeasure of the citizens who thought that there were inconsistencies in the choice of facilities that had to be closed to combat the epidemic. Namely, although limited, religious gatherings were allowed, while by the same decision sports and recreational facilities were completely closed. To protest against these types of measures, there was a performance in the Church of St. Mother of Freedom in Zagreb, where the exercise props were brought. A group of citizens reacted sharply. They launched an online petition believing it was about vandalising the space of worship and public incitement to intolerance toward Catholics.

Sociological aspect

There are no sociological analyses or reliable data on how the pandemic has influenced collective religious life. The most obvious influence was during the first infection wave with the strict measures imposed, and the most spread alternative was the broadcasting of the Mass celebration. However, due to its dominance, the national broadcasting was predominantly provided for the Catholic Church. It is unknown how and if small religious communities worked on any alternatives, particularly in the light of evidence that the same pandemic measure affects differently different religious communities and indeed tend to reinforce existing social inequalities among citizens and religious communities (Kołodziejska 2022). The question of whether the newly acquired online possibilities of participating in collective religious life will contribute to the lower level of participation should be examined in the following period. Still, there are signs that this can happen to a certain degree.¹⁰

The same could be hypothesised about marriage rates. The COVID measures affected the number of marriages: marriage rate in Croatia in 2020 was 3.8 (per 1,000 inhabitants), which represents a decrease compared to 2019 when it was 4.9. More recent data confirm that the number of marriages from March 2020 to April 2022 decreased by 12.4% compared to the five-year average for the same period.¹¹

The interesting fact is that restrictions triggered some exciting innovations in very traditional collective life patterns. The Catholic priest who invited parish members to step out of their homes, and who did the Easter food blessing from a car is an isolated but interesting example. Other innovations are based on the instructions of the Pope Francis and relate to increased online activities of the priests and lay believers (for example via You Tube channels), as well as some other ideas that enable believers to maintain their sacramental practices in isolation (like perfect repentance and spiritual communion).

References

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¹⁰ Pew Research Center, accessed on June 8, 2022: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall/>

¹¹ Bureau of Statistics, accessed on June 8, 2022: <https://web.dzs.hr/Hrv/Covid-19/stanovnistvo-brakovi.html>

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