

# Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion

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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.

Pandemic in Estonia was observed in two waves. The first wave was from March 2020 to May 2020, and the second wave from November 2020 to June 2021.

Restrictions during the two waves differed.

During the first wave, the Government of the Republic of Estonia decided on 12 March 2020 to declare a situation of emergency. During the second wave, no situation of emergency was declared. During the first wave, restrictions applied to all public activities, during the second wave an exception was made for religious association.

During the first wave, in March 2020, emergency instructions were given to congregations stating that all religious public organised events, including public worship services, church concerts and other gatherings, were postponed or cancelled until new instructions, or emergency situations were completed. The statement emphasised that the religious freedom of all Estonians was guaranteed even in an emergency, but that considerations of the protection of human health also had to be taken into account. Private religious services (pastoral conversations, worship and communion) were still allowed. However, they had to be organised in such a way as to exclude the risk of infecting other people. The Estonian government allowed the churches and other places of worship to remain open in order to meet people's personal religious needs.<sup>1</sup> Although in most cases churches remained opened, the Estonian Islamic Center in Tallinn closed its doors completely. As it was the time of Ramadan, members of the centre organised a food aid to frontline workers and those in need.<sup>2</sup>

The state offered its assistance in broadcasting services, and on the proposal of the Minister of Population, a Sunday service was included in the Estonian Television programme schedule from March 22. Minister Solman emphasised that the State

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.siseministeerium.ee/et/uudised/solman-rahvakogunemistest-tuleb-hoiduda-ning-jumalateenistused-voimalusel-veebiulekande> Solman: rahvakogunemistest tuleb hoiduda ning jumalateenistused võimalusel veebiülekanne vahendusel korraldada, 13.03.2020.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.err.ee/1083372/islami-keskus-valmistas-eesliinitootajatele-ja-abivajajatele-toitu> Islami keskus valmistab eesliinitöötajatele ja abivajajatele toitu, 28.4.2020.

understood the inconvenience caused by the emergency, but said that it was in the interests of protecting the health of people living in Estonia.<sup>3</sup>

Through the Ministry of Social Affairs, the chaplaincy for pastoral care started working on making emergency pastoral care available and a telephone counselling was launched on 17 March 2020, through which medical institutions and nursing homes received a personal pastoral worker.<sup>4</sup>

Fearing that members of Christian denominations might violate the national ban on public services, before Easter, the Roman Catholic Bishop Philippe Jourdan, Metropolitan of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church Stefanus and Metropolitan Jevgeni of the Estonian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate urged people in a recorded message not to come to church, and to stay safe at home. A few cases where liturgy was secretly held were reported, but no sanctions followed.

During the second wave in November 2020, the spread of the virus in Northern and Eastern Estonia was particularly rapid and extensive. Therefore, as of December 12, the government decided to close all entertainment in Eastern Estonia. The same restrictions were applied to the capital region in Northern Estonia – Harju County – from 28 December. Between 14 December to 31 December, all schools in Estonia had to be closed, so the Christmas holidays began a week earlier.<sup>5</sup>

Places for religious worship, on the other hand, remained open and services could continue. During the first wave of the virus in spring 2020 all public services had been suspended, although the churches had been kept open for private prayer. On 29 November 2020, Minister of Population Riina Solman sent a letter to religious associations reminding them of the importance of following the rules established to prevent the virus. During the service people had to wear a mask, follow “two plus two” rule and the possibility of disinfecting hands and surfaces had to be made possible. Items used in the services had to be disinfected after each use. The Minister of Population paid special attention to the behaviour of clergy as an example. High-risk activities, such as singing, had to be avoided. If the choir singing could not be given up, the number of choir members had to be limited. In view of the forthcoming Advent period, when churches were more crowded than usual, Solman emphasised that no more than 400 people should gather in places of religious worship with stationary seating. This number was reduced in Northern and Eastern Estonia, where occupancy was set to 50% of all seats or the normal total occupancy of a room. Up to 250 people could meet in rooms with no seats.<sup>6</sup>

The decision to keep places of religious worship open and to allow them to hold services remained in place even after the decision to close the schools in December. Churches and other places of worship remained open even in Eastern Estonia, where all other public places except grocery stores were closed.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://ekn.ee/inc.uudis.php?id=441> ETV2 programmis on riikliku eriolukorra ajal pühapäevased jumalateenistused, 17.03.2020.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.err.ee/1075817/kristlik-maailm-tahistab-kristuse-surmapaeva> Kristlik maailm tähistab Kristuse surmapäeva, 10.04.2020.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.kriis.ee/sites/default/files/eriolukord/vv\\_20429k.pdf](https://www.kriis.ee/sites/default/files/eriolukord/vv_20429k.pdf) ; see also <https://www.err.ee/1201306/valitsus-paneb-uest-nadalast-koik-koolid-alates-1-klassist-kinni-erandkorras-sailib-kaugope>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.siseministeerium.ee/et/uudised/rahvastikuminister-paneb-kirikutele-sudamele-ohutusnouete-taitmise-vajalikkust-viiruse>

The situation in Estonia deteriorated steadily in the early months of 2021 and as a result, the government decided to ban all public meetings, public events, including conferences, theatre performances, concerts and cinema screenings, public worship services and other public services in places with or without fixed seats.<sup>7</sup> Several other activities were also banned. At the same time, from March 1, for example, study in grades 1–4 was allowed, and shopping malls were still open. Competitions and training for professional and young top athletes and people with disabilities were also allowed. The decision entered into force on 1 March 2021 and the restrictions were laid down from 3 March to 28 March included.

Several other changes and clarifications were made in March. For example, it was made clearer from 11 March that only public meetings, including public services and other public religious services, were allowed outdoors, provided that no one would be present between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. and the number of participants would not exceed 10. No contact with other people was allowed. The distance, the availability of disinfectants and compliance with disinfection requirements still had to be ensured. By comparison, museums for example were required to have an outdoor occupancy rate of no more than 25%. It was forbidden to be in shopping malls, except for the purchase of food or the provision of courier and transport services, when compliance with the 25% occupancy requirement was ensured.<sup>8</sup> The order came into force on March 11.

As in 2020, the Government started to ease restrictions in May 2021. From 3 May, people were again allowed to stay and move indoors in museums and exhibitions, public worship services and other public religious services, provided that scattering was ensured and that they were not present indoors between 19 p.m. and 6 a.m.. It was also necessary to ensure that the number of people did not exceed 25% of the entire capacity of a room. In outdoor conditions, these activities were allowed if it was assured that the number of participants did not exceed 10 persons in a group and the total number of participants did not exceed 150 persons, and that people were not present at these places between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m..<sup>9</sup>

On 21 April 2021, the Estonian Council of Churches sent a request to the Government of the Republic of Estonia to open the churches one day earlier than promised, i.e. on May 2, for the Orthodox Easter celebration.<sup>10</sup> On April 26, representatives of the member churches of the Estonian Church Council met with Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, and during the meeting, in addition to the general virus situation and the religious activities of religious associations, the question of the earlier lifting of restrictions was raised.<sup>11</sup> Prime Minister Kallas did not promise anything definite at the meeting, and at the cabinet meeting the government decided not to support the proposal of the Council of Churches.

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<sup>7</sup> Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 26. veebruar 2021 nr 97 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmise“.

<sup>8</sup> Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 9. märts 2021 nr 111 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmise“.

<sup>9</sup> Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 22. aprill 2021 nr 146 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmise“.

<sup>10</sup> <http://ekn.ee/inc.uudis.php?id=526>.

<sup>11</sup> <http://ekn.ee/inc.uudis.php?id=527>.

Restrictions were soon eased on state level. From 31 May, indoor public meetings were allowed, and again public events, including conferences, theatre performances, concerts and cinema screenings, were allowed. The presence and movement of persons at public worship services and other public religious services were permitted, provided that the number of people did not exceed 50% per room, and the total number of participants was no more than 200.<sup>12</sup>

Gradually, restrictions were further relaxed. From 11 June, indoor public meetings, public events, including the presence and movement of persons at public worship services and other public religious services were allowed, provided that the requirement for dispersal was met, the occupancy was no more than 50% per room and the number of participants was no more than 600 in total.<sup>13</sup> As of June 23, 2021, the Government of the Republic of Estonia decided to abolish the 50% requirement for room occupancy.<sup>14</sup>

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

At first the religious associations and their leaders adapted nicely to the new situation, however, in April 2020 first critical speeches and writings about restrictions were published. The intensity of public debates increased by the end of April. At first dominantly in social media, the discussion went on in Estonian main newspapers and media platforms. The criticism was especially sharp among the conservative circles and their news channels. Often, similar statements from Europe were cited.

In mid-April 2020, the conservative online magazine 'Our Church' asked whether the church should obediently obey state orders or whether it should listen to the word of God rather than the word of man, referring to the New Testament Book of Acts (Acts 5:29). The author of the article, Veiko Vihuri, declared that the secular authorities did not have the right to order the church not to hold services. He called it a tyrannical abuse of power.

He also criticised church leaders and clergy who had been more obedient to worldly powers than God's command: "When the church closes its doors and ceases its services, it is no longer a church." Vihuri mentioned a comparison between the situation of the early church and the modern pandemic, when the gathering for worship was for several periods illegal and the will of the state authorities was ignored or defied. "God also has his demands", Vihuri concluded.

The understanding that the status of churches was different from that of cafes, football matches, or other public places and events was more and more heard in April and May, especially when the gradual opening of the society was starting to be discussed.

At the end of April, the Archbishop of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Urmas Viilma, demanded that the restrictions on the churches be eased. On April 22, he prepared a series of proposals, which were approved one day later by the Estonian Council of Churches. They were also presented to the Prime Minister and Head of the

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<sup>12</sup> Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 28. mai 2021 nr 213 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmine“.

<sup>13</sup> Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 10. juuni 2021 nr 223 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmine“.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.kriis.ee/et/uudised/alates-homsest-kaob-covid-19-piirangutest-ruumitaitumuse-noue>.

emergency board, Jüri Ratas. Among other things, Viilma justified his claim by the fact that representatives of other organisations in various fields also turned to the Government with proposals to ease restrictions. According to the proposal, worship had to be restored under certain conditions. Conditions included limiting the number of people in the service, installing disinfectants and keeping a two-meter distance. Separate rules were established for the clergy to use personal protective equipment and to avoid physical contact. The Council of Churches wanted the relief to take effect on May 1, 2020, and in an island Saaremaa, which witnessed a severe infection rate, from May 15, 2020.<sup>15</sup>

As no decision followed, Viilma considered his right to publicly signal to the representatives of the state that the church wished to resume worship services. On the 3rd of May, he announced in media that he invites clergy to ring church bells on Monday, Wednesday and Friday of the upcoming week. This decision reflected the disappointment that the churches could not open their doors from 1 May. Although Viilma explained that his aim was to signal that the churches were ready to open their doors, it was interpreted in political circles as a rebellion against the state authorities. This was characterised by the statement of Helle-Moonika Helme, Deputy Chairman of the Estonian Parliament (*Riigikogu*) faction of the Estonian Conservative People's Party, claiming that Viilma was already engaged in politics before the elections and was still doing politics. Helme regretted this because it was a public health issue. Helme also referred to state support, which was intended to compensate for the loss of income during the service.<sup>16</sup> Conservative circles in the Lutheran Church were critical of Helme's views and asked if the shopping malls would really be opened before the churches.<sup>17</sup> According to the Minister of Population Riina Solman, the ban on public services was going to be lifted when the Government was going to decide to relax other restrictions as well. She did not criticise Viilma's call, but recommended that, as long as indoor services were prohibited, services be provided outdoors.<sup>18</sup>

On 5 May 2020 the Government of the Republic decided that the restriction on public gatherings would not apply to religious services from 10 May 2020. A demand for keeping a distance of two metres stayed in place. Congregations also had to ensure that disinfectants were available.<sup>19</sup> As the situation eased already in May and the

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<sup>15</sup> [https://www.meiekirik.net/index.php/uudised/1275-eesti-kirikute-noukogu-palus-valitsuselt-leevendusi-kirikuelu-piirangutele?fbclid=IwAR2ElqJvUBZHLcMgWwpKKio9imAv6Gcq1sEtO3\\_itoPDkjimrBK4-AifDY](https://www.meiekirik.net/index.php/uudised/1275-eesti-kirikute-noukogu-palus-valitsuselt-leevendusi-kirikuelu-piirangutele?fbclid=IwAR2ElqJvUBZHLcMgWwpKKio9imAv6Gcq1sEtO3_itoPDkjimrBK4-AifDY) Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu palus valitsuselt leevendusi kirikuelu piirangutele, 28.04.2020.

<sup>16</sup> [https://poliitika.postimees.ee/6964847/helle-moonika-helme-viilma-tegeles-poliitikaga-juba-enne-eelmisi-valimisi?\\_ga=2.115253380.2088989615.1574872261-1065101235.1513146244&fbclid=IwAR0oeHNVMHJBPAo5yR\\_DOWqNPINCZevedoCNols7qlzy7\\_wo4ktSVJNPY-w](https://poliitika.postimees.ee/6964847/helle-moonika-helme-viilma-tegeles-poliitikaga-juba-enne-eelmisi-valimisi?_ga=2.115253380.2088989615.1574872261-1065101235.1513146244&fbclid=IwAR0oeHNVMHJBPAo5yR_DOWqNPINCZevedoCNols7qlzy7_wo4ktSVJNPY-w) Helle-Moonika Helme: Viilma tegeles poliitikaga juba enne valimisi, 04.05.2020.

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.meiekirik.net/index.php/uudised/1283-kas-kaubanduskeskused-laehevad-enne-lahti-kui-kirikud?fbclid=IwAR3A-a15TCKVD-en84Ap7jLpzbrycYNnErOedW1QJ5olbrOP\\_nMHphusFGY](https://www.meiekirik.net/index.php/uudised/1283-kas-kaubanduskeskused-laehevad-enne-lahti-kui-kirikud?fbclid=IwAR3A-a15TCKVD-en84Ap7jLpzbrycYNnErOedW1QJ5olbrOP_nMHphusFGY) Kas kaubanduskeskused lähevad enne lahti kui kirikud?, 04.05.2020.

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.postimees.ee/6964873/solman-kuidas-saab-urmas-viilma-uleskutset-pidada-vastuhakuks?\\_ga=2.215058583.1249562622.1601785480-266391430.1595954275](https://www.postimees.ee/6964873/solman-kuidas-saab-urmas-viilma-uleskutset-pidada-vastuhakuks?_ga=2.215058583.1249562622.1601785480-266391430.1595954275) Solman: Kuidas saab Viilma üleskutset pidada vastuhakuks?, 04.05.2020.

<https://epl.delfi.ee/arvamus/riina-solman-vastuseks-peapiiskop-viilma-uleskutsele-vabaohuteenistused-peavad-olema-lubatud?id=89743051> Riina Solman vastuseks peapiiskop Viilma üleskutsele: vabaõhuteenistused peavad olema lubatud, 02.05.2020.

<sup>19</sup> <http://ekn.ee/inc.uudis.php?id=459> Rahvastikuminister Riina Solmani selgitused avalike jumalateenistuste osas kehtinud piirangute lõpetamise osas, 06.05.2020.

restrictions were proportionally lifted, there were no complaints from religious associations to courts in Estonia.

After the restrictions were lifted, Prime Minister Jüri Ratas sent a letter of thanks to the Estonian Council of Churches and thanked the council for the help they provided in fighting the virus.<sup>20</sup>

On 16 May 2020, a service was held, where the victims of the virus were commemorated and thanks were given by the Council of Churches to those who had made a significant contribution in fighting the virus. Among others, the Minister of Population Riina Solman and the Chief Medical Officer of the Health Board, Dr. Arkadi Popov, spoke and received the honours.<sup>21</sup>

During the second wave, starting from November 2020, the decision of the government to close schools but leave the churches open was met with mixed reactions from the public. On the one hand, the decision was criticised: for example, Marina Kaljurand, a Social Democrat member of the European Parliament, said she did not understand how leaving churches open would save the older people, who were more vulnerable. It was especially problematic, because Christmas is the only time of the year when the churches are full.<sup>22</sup> The representatives of the Estonian Conservative People's Party claimed that the closure of churches expresses the anger of the left.<sup>23</sup> The issue of closing churches had become part of a political struggle, because during the second wave of the corona virus the conservative government had decided to hold a referendum, whether marriage should be only between a man and a woman or whether same-sex couples should also be allowed to marry.

According to Urmas Viilma, Archbishop of the Lutheran Church, speaking about the virus and the restrictions, said that not so much attention has been paid to the issue of religious freedom in Estonia, because so far everything had been satisfactory and the freedom had been respected. However, compared to other activities, such as entertainment or sports, which may give the impression to an average person that they are very similar to religious activities, they were in fact not universal human rights. Mentioning the Jews celebrating Hanukkah and the Estonian pagan native believers, who were waiting for the winter solstice, Viilma said that it was not just a central issue of the Lutheran Church, as it may have seemed from the Estonian public coverage.<sup>24</sup>

There was a reaction from the public and the churches when from 11 March 2021 new restrictions were imposed, because the situation became worse. The government stated that only public meetings, including public services and other public religious services, were allowed outdoors, provided that no one would be present between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., the number of participants would not exceed 10, and no contact with any other person was allowed. The distance, the availability of disinfectants and

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<sup>20</sup> <http://ekn.ee/inc.uudis.php?id=464> Peaminister Jüri Ratase tänukiri Eesti Kirikute Nõukogule, 11.05.2020.

<sup>21</sup> <http://ekn.ee/inc.uudis.php?id=472> Kirikute nõukogu mälestas jumalateenistusel koroonaviiruse ohvreid, 18.06.2020.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.postimees.ee/7132459/marina-kaljurand-piirangute-kehtestamine-naib-soltuvat-sellest-kes-kovemini-karjub>

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.meiekirik.net/index.php/uudislood/1610-martin-helme-mis-kius-see-on-et-kirikuid-tahetakse-sulgeda?fbclid=IwAR2a4gfOOLtxi4AAKN9BNZeUBua\\_7a4q109RX-qghmqohC5kNWK3s5j2Z2o](https://www.meiekirik.net/index.php/uudislood/1610-martin-helme-mis-kius-see-on-et-kirikuid-tahetakse-sulgeda?fbclid=IwAR2a4gfOOLtxi4AAKN9BNZeUBua_7a4q109RX-qghmqohC5kNWK3s5j2Z2o)

<sup>24</sup> <https://e-kirik.eel.ee/2020/peapiiskop-urmas-viilma-vastab-miks-on-kirikud-avatud/>

compliance with disinfection requirements still had to be ensured. By comparison, museums, for example, were required to have an outdoor occupancy rate of no more than 25%. It was forbidden to be in shopping malls, except for the purchase of food or the provision of courier and transport services, when compliance with the 25% occupancy requirement was ensured.<sup>25</sup> The order came into force on March 11.

Prior to the introduction of the new restrictions, a new Government led by Kaja Kallas had taken office. Instead of two conservative parties and a liberal party, the government now united two liberal parties - the Reform and the Centre Party. The leaders of the religious associations were disappointed that the new government had not communicated with them before the restrictions were imposed. It was also disappointing that initially the shopping centres were left open when a ban was imposed on public religious services.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the Chief Chaplain of the Ministry of Social Affairs Ove Sander wrote that people should be attentive and loving towards each other and realise that restrictions would not remain in place forever.<sup>27</sup>

- [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.](#)

Surveys measuring the impact of Covid-19 on religion have not been made by state authorities. I think it is partly because of the Russian aggression and war in Ukraine that the topic of Covid lost the dominant status in the society. The only information about the needs of religious associations can be found from the applications, which the associations submitted in 2020, when the Republic of Estonia gave financial support to religious associations.

There are three articles (all in Estonian with English abstracts) published that concern religion in Estonia during Covid 19:

- 1) Olga Schihalejev, Kaido Soom. Pastoral Counselling During the Period of Emergency. – *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*, 2/2020 (78), pp 41–62.

[https://usuteadus.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020\\_2%20%2878%29/UA-2020-2-Soom%2C%20Schihalejev.pdf? t=1629145439](https://usuteadus.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020_2%20%2878%29/UA-2020-2-Soom%2C%20Schihalejev.pdf? t=1629145439)

- 2) Jakob Remmel, Meego Remmel. On pre- and post-covid crisis (free) church life developments in Estonia. – *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*, 1/2021, pp 78–124.

[https://usuteadus.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021\\_1%20%2879%29/US-2021-Remmel%2C%20Remmel.pdf? t=1629148827](https://usuteadus.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021_1%20%2879%29/US-2021-Remmel%2C%20Remmel.pdf? t=1629148827)

- 3) Merilin Kiviorg, Priit Rohtmets. Freedom of Religion or Belief as a Litmustest of Fundamental Rights Protection in the Context of COVID-19. – *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*, 2/2021, pp 94–138.

[https://usuteadus.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021\\_2%20%2880%29/Kiviorg%2C%20Rohtmets.pdf? t=1644066734](https://usuteadus.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021_2%20%2880%29/Kiviorg%2C%20Rohtmets.pdf? t=1644066734)

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<sup>25</sup> Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 9. märts 2021 nr 111 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmine“.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.err.ee/1608124255/urmas-viilma-las-saada-supermarketitest-pealegi-siis-kirik>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.err.ee/1608133732/ove-sander-piirangutest-ja-paastumisest>.

#### 4) Legal aspect:

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

Only in a broad sense. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia (§ 40) “Everyone is free to practise his or her religion, alone or in community with others, in public or in private, unless this is detrimental to public order, **public health** or public morality”.<sup>28</sup>

According to the Emergency Act (§ 19) the Government had the right to “declare an emergency situation for resolving an emergency caused by a natural disaster, catastrophe or spread of a communicable disease if it is not possible to resolve the emergency without implementing the command organisation or measures provided for in this Chapter”.<sup>29</sup>

No special regulation for religious life was not implemented before the pandemic and there is no specific regulation after the pandemic either.

- 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 Government of the Republic of Estonia decided on 12 March 2020 to declare a situation of emergency. Initially, it was meant to last until 1 May, but in April it was extended and lasted until 17 May 2020. Among other restrictions all public gatherings (including religious services) were prohibited.<sup>30</sup>

As for the second wave of the virus starting in November 2020, no Emergency situation was declared, because the parliament passed amendments to the Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Act, which allowed to implement necessary restrictions without the emergency situation.<sup>31</sup> It managed to cause a debate in Estonian society about the role limited role of parliament during the Covid crisis, because all major decisions were made by the government, yet Estonia is a parliamentary country.

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

On 16 March 2020, the Minister of Population specified that, as crowded gatherings were prohibited, restrictions also applied to important family events, such as weddings, funerals and birthdays. When coming from abroad for a funeral, it was possible to apply for a visa to enter the country as an exception.<sup>32</sup>

- 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

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530102013003/consolide>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/516052020003/consolide>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.kriis.ee/en/news/government-declared-emergency-situation-estonia-until-1-may> The government declared an emergency situation in Estonia until 1 May, 12.03.2020.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/529122020001/consolide/current>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.siseministeerium.ee/et/uudised/solman-tahtsad-perekondlikud-sundmused-sealhulgas-abiellumine-ja-matused-tuleb-pidada-kitsas> Solman: tähtsad perekondlikud sündmused, sealhulgas abiellumine ja matused tuleb pidada kitsas ringis, 16.03.2020.



been made and by whom? Decisions of the courts, if any, on this issue; possible religious discrimination.

The violation of religious rights was raised only in the broadest level, when on the one hand Government representatives during the second wave of the virus claimed that the freedom of religion was respected and therefore the churches and other sacred places remained open. On the other hand, criticism, which was made, was also based on vaguely described violation of religious freedom. In the Estonian context, where is a relatively liberal religious legislation, it was to certain extent a shock that the state decided to interfere to religious affairs, but as religion was among other parts of the society, no major criticism occurred. In the end, criticism came mostly from a few priests and religious leaders remained calm and cooperative. There were no court cases in Estonia related to religion.

### **5) 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.).

As there is no exact data, it is hard to say, how church attendance was affected. Based on answers given by priests the number of church attendance decreased considerably, and has not recovered after the virus. This especially applies to elderly people.

Digitalization was at first the major priority and as Estonia is a fairly digitalized country, it was taken in a positive way. No major discussion took place concerning the possibility to have eucharist online (it wasn't delivered during the time of pandemic). The state helped to financially support the broadcasting of liturgies in National Television, and helped religious associations to get state support to buy the equipment for online services.

- How has the pandemic influenced people's religiosity? - secularization or desecularization; changes in religious behavior regarding funerals, commemoration, 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?

Again, unfortunately there is no data. The only data is related with pastoral care, and there the pandemic brought about a rise. This is hardly a surprise, as people had to deal with all sorts of psychological problems. Pastoral help was financed by the state and was done online and using a phone.

- 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?

Generally, the relationship between the state and religious associations was cooperative and collaborative, with only a few examples that took place in a form of public protests (ringing of bells and criticism in newspapers and social media). Even, when criticism was heard, religious groups facilitated the adherence to public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus.