

## Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion in Latvia

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### 1. General presentation

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

When the World Health Organisation declared public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020, there were no Covid-19 cases in Latvia. The rapid spread of infection raised worldwide concerns. Therefore, Latvia followed suit of other countries and also developed strict restrictive measures to protect public health. Initially, the spread of Covid-19 in Latvia was related to the intensive mobility between countries which led to the first case of Covid-19 being confirmed on 2 March 2020. To contain the spread of the Covid-19 infection, the Latvian government declared national emergency on 12 March 2020 and introduced restrictions concerning crossing the state border and public assembly: classroom education was discontinued in all educational institutions and public events, including the religious ones, were prohibited.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the state of emergency in Latvia was declared from 12 March to 9 June 2020, from 9 November 2020 to 7 February 2021 and from 21 October to 15 November 2021. In Latvia, the pandemic reached the critical threshold during its third wave: the health care system was overloaded, there were more than 3000 cases of new infections per day and mortality increased notably.<sup>1</sup> From March to May 2020, 828 077 people out of 1.8 million Latvia's population had had Covid-19 and 5823 people had died.<sup>2</sup> Overall, 46% of the population have been more or less affected by the infection. The state of emergency declared due to the spread of Covid-19 was lifted on 1 March 2022, and many epidemiological safety requirements were also eased on the same date, although new cases of the infection have still been detected (at the time of writing this report, there were 2353 active infection cases on 28 May 2022).<sup>3</sup>

During the Covid-19 pandemic, neither religious leaders nor the mass media in Latvia have mentioned the World Health Organisation's practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the

<sup>1</sup> Covid-19 pandēmija. <https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/65477-Covid-19-pand%C4%93mija> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Covid 19 statistika. <https://www.spkc.gov.lv/lv/covid-19-statistika> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

context of COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> Overall, religious organisations did not contest the state-imposed regulations restricting public events and showed understanding towards these regulations and assumed responsibility for complying with them. Websites of congregations or blogs by clergy called on people to be responsible during the pandemic and explained the restrictive measures concerning religious events in the church more clearly than government documents, e.g. the website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church published the following call: "First, please remember that the Covid-19 threat is real. People fall ill and die. Congregation members and pastors fall ill. People become infected in the church during a service. Unfortunately, it was in our congregations that the most recent case of infection occurred. We cannot say anymore that infection does not spread in churches. Let this mobilise us for responsible attitude and serious action."<sup>5</sup> This call was followed by clear itemised rules to be complied with in the church and during religious events.

Although religious organisations called on their members to comply with the epidemiological security requirements introduced in the country, the restrictive rules were often violated. During the Covid-19 pandemic, police initiated several investigations of administrative offences concerning failure to satisfy the epidemiological security requirements by religious organisations. The highest number of infringements was found in the "New Generation" Church of Evangelical Christians. In the period up to March 2021, 18 investigations of administrative offences were commenced in relation to the infringements identified in the above Church.<sup>6</sup>

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

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the public debate in Latvia focused on the restrictions to be complied with in cultural institutions, whereas the public did not pay particular attention to the restrictions targeted at religious organisations. The media, upon receiving information from people about infringements on the part of religious organisations, focused on these infringements, thus causing social resonance.

Following Easter of 2020, discussions raised in Liepāja (population of approx. 67 thousand) where 19 cases of Covid-19 were confirmed. The local newspaper *Kurzemes Vārds* came into possession of a video of around 45 people leaving the Evangelical Lutheran Church under the cover of night. The newspaper publication fuelled discussions on non-compliance by believers with gathering restrictions imposed by the state, since emergency was declared in Latvia during which public

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<sup>4</sup> Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19. [https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19?gclid=CjwKCAjws8yUBhA1EiwAi\\_tpEcv4om64XcSymN1A5qGSswi45DSpQtD1ggl-hbSrG8-y\\_PCp0jZWuRoCtiYQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19?gclid=CjwKCAjws8yUBhA1EiwAi_tpEcv4om64XcSymN1A5qGSswi45DSpQtD1ggl-hbSrG8-y_PCp0jZWuRoCtiYQAvD_BwE) Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Kas jāievēro draudzēm COVID-19 pandēmijas laikā. <https://www.luterakatedrale.lv/b/kas-jaievero-draudzem-covid-19-pandemijas-laika> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Policija sākusi 18 administratīvo pārkāpumu procesus par Covid-19 ierobežojumu neievērošanu "Jaunajā paaudzē". <https://degpunkta.tv3.lv/degpunkta-dazadi/kada-baznica-riga-regulari-parkapi-epidemiologiskas-drosibas-prasibas/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

services were prohibited and believers were asked to pray at home. However, it was allowed to attend church individually provided that the rules were followed: no more than 25 people could be present in the church at any one time keeping a distance of two metres between each other. Although the pastor of the congregation was aware that the restrictions had to be respected, he explained that "the church is practically open, and nobody is asked to leave after entering it. But no services to which the congregation has been invited take place. Another thing is that we ask those who have come to prayer and have received the sacrament to leave. The flow of people is like this: you enter the church through one door and leave it through the side door."<sup>7</sup> The Latvian Radio found that the mayor of Liepāja had also attended the church. He confessed that approx. 50 people were present during the service. The mayor's explanation for his presence during the service was as follows: "My prayer to God is private when I pray for people of Liepāja, Liepāja itself and the country at this time of the pandemic."<sup>8</sup> The Latvian Radio commented that according to the mayor praying together is the best weapon to fight the virus.<sup>9</sup> Following the publication of the information in the newspaper *Kurzemes Vārds*, the pastor was indignant about it and pointed out that the journalist would not escape divine judgement. Legal entities were subject to a fine of up to 5000 EUR for the breach of restrictions.

In November 2021, when Latvia was hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, the "New Generation" Church of Evangelical Christians appeared in the view of the State Police. The "New Generation" contrary to the restrictions imposed by the state and police warnings continued defying the epidemiological security requirements by organising religious face-to-face events and failing to take account of the maximum number of people. Since spring, police had warned both the community leader Aleksejs Ledjajevs and other responsible persons several times, inviting them to comply with the epidemiological restrictions, but the "New Generation" did not show any understanding and continued to violate the rules.<sup>10</sup>

The breaches of restrictions during the funeral of a catholic priest in November 2021 were found when a funeral video was placed on the social network FB by a participant of the event. The local television ReTV prepared a story about the breaches.<sup>11</sup> According to the restrictions, funerals were allowed to be held outdoors only with participation of a maximum of 20 mourners. Therefore, journalists urged police to commence investigation on the matter since the priest's funeral was organised in church with participation of approx. 60 people, and some clergymen were not wearing face masks. When explaining the position of the Roman Catholic Church, Viktors Skulpins, President of the Bishops' Conference of

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<sup>7</sup> Baznīca Liepājā ar mērijas klātbūtni turpina rīkot dievkalpojumus; mācītājs attālinātas lūgšanas salīdzina ar gumijas sievieti. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/baznica-liepaja-ar-merijas-klatbutni-turpina-rikot-dievkalpojumu-macitajs-attalinatas-lugšanas-salidzina-ar-gumijas-sievieti.a356206/> Accessed 28 May 2022. (The translation is by the author here and onwards.)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Reliģiskā organizācija "Jaunā paaudze" kārtējo reizi neievēro Covid-19 ierobežojumus. <https://www.tvnet.lv/7376173/religiska-organizacija-jauna-paaudze-kartejo-reizi-neievero-covid-19-ierobejojumu> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>11</sup> ReTV: Pulcēšanās kardināla Pujata brāļa bērēs. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=468546931255940> Accessed 28 May 2022.

Latvia, stated: "Each congregation as a legal entity is responsible for complying with these restrictions. We believe that clergymen will try their best to apply these rules and will also encourage believers to do so. In the case of an infringement the respective clergymen should be talked to."<sup>12</sup> The public debate on social media revealed that priests' attitude towards the nationally imposed restrictions varied. The comments made on FB show that some of them did not participate in the funeral due to the stringent restrictions introduced to contain the spread of Covid-19, but others praised those who found the courage to disregard the restrictions and attend the funeral.

Sometimes the issue of the permissive approach towards religious organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic taken by the Ministry of Justice of Latvia came to the fore during the public debate. When the mass media brought the issue of the breaches at the Catholic priest's funeral to public attention, a representative of the Ministry of Justice tried to justify clergymen's actions in an indirect manner. The issue that provoked public debate was the extension of the "green" and "red" regimes to religious organisations: the Minister of Justice invited the government to allow clergymen to perform their duties without having the vaccination or recovery certificate and to allow believers to attend services also during the "red" regime<sup>13</sup>, although the government had taken a decision stating that as of 15 December 2021 all those engaged in the provision of face-to-face services had to be vaccinated against Covid-19, including the entire staff of religious organisations who get into direct contact with customers, i.e. services had to take place in the "green" regime only.

### 1.3. 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 Latvian Council of Science launched a call for proposals within the framework of the National Research Programme "Reducing the Covid-19 Effects". The programme was aimed at limiting the spread of the Covid-19 infection and protecting the population through the implementation of innovative properly designed projects to get economic activity back on track and restore socially active day-to-day life. Three thematic areas were defined in accordance with the aim of the programme: (1) health care and public health; (2) engineering solutions; (3) the economy and public well-being. The projects that received funding as a result of the call for proposals were not aimed at investigating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion. Since the only way to get funding for research in Latvia is participation in calls for proposals, researchers of Latvia have not succeeded in raising funds for studying the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion.

Researchers of Rīga Stradiņš University had touched upon the aspect of religion indirectly in the project "The Impact of Covid-19 on the Health Care System; Experience and Future Solutions" within the National Research Programme. The study concludes that the management of medical institutions appreciated and

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> «Re:Check» pēta Covid-19 mirstības uzskaiti un Bordāna domu maiņu par sertifikātu mācītājiem. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/zinu-analize/recheck-peta-covid-19-mirstibas-uzskaiti-un-bordana-domu-mainu-par-sertifikatu-macitajiem.a434182/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

sought to enhance the psychosocial support provided by hospital chaplains to medical staff during the pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Legal aspect:

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

Latvia has no legislation directly regulating activities of religious organisations during a pandemic or a natural disaster.

### 2.2. 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?

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, the *Saeima* (Parliament) of the Republic of Latvia adopted the Law on the Management of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection<sup>15</sup>, which stipulates that the Cabinet, for the epidemiological safety purposes, can determine the conditions for the operation of sites for the performance of cultural and religious activities, entertainment, sports, and other recreational sites. As we can see, religious organisations were put on the same footing as cultural, sports and entertainment institutions. Another law important for religious institutions was the Law on the Suppression of Consequences of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection.<sup>16</sup> This law specified the deadline for submission of the annual report to the State Revenue Service (Section 23) by religious organisations and allowed “the transfer of the movable property (personal protective equipment, medical devices, and disinfectants) of a public person without compensation into the ownership of a religious association (church) for implementation of the epidemiological safety measures” (Section 54). The law stipulated that “donations by phone of religious associations (churches) arranged during the emergency situation may be maintained also after revocation of the emergency situation, until 30 June 2021” (Section 40).

The key legal documents laying down the epidemiological safety requirements were as follows: Cabinet Regulation No. 720 "On Declaring the State of Emergency" of 9 October 2021<sup>17</sup> and Cabinet Regulation No. 662/No. 360 "Epidemiological Safety Measures for the Containment of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection."<sup>18</sup> The two regulations referred to the pandemic period only, and they did not sustain due to regular amendments depending on incidence rates. The Regulations applied to several aspects of religious practices: they restricted the

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<sup>14</sup> Behmane, D., Bikava, I. et al. COVID-19 ietekme uz veselības aprūpes sistēmu; pieredze un nākotnes risinājumi. [https://lzp.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/1\\_darba\\_paka\\_gala\\_zinojums.pdf](https://lzp.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/1_darba_paka_gala_zinojums.pdf) Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Covid-19 infekcijas izplatības pārvaldības likums. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/315278-covid-19-infekcijas-izplatibas-parvaldibas-likums> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Covid-19 infekcijas izplatības pārvaldības likums. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/315287-covid-19-infekcijas-izplatibas-seku-parvaresanas-likums> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Ministru kabineta 2021. gada 9. oktobra rīkojums Nr. 720 "Par ārkārtējās situācijas izsludināšanu". <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/326729-par-arkartejas-situacijas-izsludinasanu> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Epidemiological Safety Measures for the Containment of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/326513-epidemiologiskas-drosibas-pasakumi-covid-19-infekcijas-izplatibas-ierobezosana>; <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/315304-epidemiologiskas-drosibas-pasakumi-covid-19-infekcijas-izplatibas-ierobezosana> Accessed 28 May 2022.

number of people attending services, indirectly encouraged to change church rituals and restricted access to religious services.

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

Legislation relating to various aspects of religious life was changed on a regular basis during the pandemic, and it was difficult to keep track of it. Therefore, the explanatory information available in congregations had an important role to play. To provide an insight into the national epidemiological safety requirements to be satisfied by religious organisations and their members, a brief description of restrictions before and after vaccination follows below.

Prior to the vaccination campaign in Latvia, the regulations concerning Covid-19 cancelled and prohibited all face-to-face public events. No more than 25 people could gather outdoors, everyone had to follow the principle of 2 + 2 (the distance of two metres between no more than two persons) in their day-to-day lives. The regulations banned private events and private gatherings, except the events organised within one household. The use of a mouth and nose cover on public premises and public transport was mandatory. Funerals were allowed outdoors only with participation of no more than 10 people at one time (except the persons directly involved in funeral arrangements). The baptism ritual was allowed only in cases of absolute urgency with participation of no more than 10 people at one time (except the persons directly involved in baptism arrangements). Wedding was allowed in the presence of the persons who wanted to marry and two adult witnesses. Churches could fulfil their mission from 6.00 am to 8.00 pm, except Christmas Eve on 24 December and Orthodox Christmas Eve on 6 January when churches could be open for visitors until 11.00 pm. A limited number of people were allowed at places of religious activity, and it had to be ensured that attendees arrived individually only, except members of one household. Churches had to ensure a one-way flow of people and provide 10 m<sup>2</sup> of the available space per person. A maximum of 20% of the total possible number of people, whom the available premises and infrastructure could accommodate, were allowed in a church at a time.<sup>19</sup>

When a certain number of people were vaccinated, the regulatory provisions concerning Covid-19 became more complex, since the requirements in relation to vaccinated persons, those who had had the virus and the unvaccinated persons varied, i.e. the "green" and "red" regimes were introduced. In its meeting of 9 November 2021, the Cabinet laid down the common principles to be respected by all religious organisations. They stated that religious life could be practised in two ways: (1) by participating in publicly announced services and other religious events in the "green", i.e. epidemiologically safe regime (only the vaccinated persons and those who had had the virus and their children up to 12 years of age); (2) by attending the church individually in the "red" regime (e.g. upon prior agreement with a priest to confess sins and to receive Communion) for up to 15 minutes at a time.

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<sup>19</sup> Kā apturēt Covid-19 izplatību svētku laikā. Ierobežojumi no 21. decembra. <https://lvportals.lv/skaidrojumi/323086-ka-apturet-covid-19-izplatibu-svetku-laika-ierobezojumi-no-21-decembra-2020> Accessed 28 May 2022.

The most stringent restrictions were introduced during the third wave of the pandemic in Latvia. During the lockdown from 21 October to 14 November 2021, churches were open for individual prayers from 9.00 am to 6 pm every day, but they were closed during services and half an hour before them. Services were held without the presence of believers. A priest was available for individual confessions and receiving Communion in the church, but an appointment for performing the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick had to be made in advance by phone.<sup>20</sup>

As of 15 November 2021, wedding ceremonies were allowed in the "green" regime or epidemiologically safe environment if all wedding guests were vaccinated or they had had Covid-19. Wedding ceremonies could be organised indoors where everyone had to wear a face mask, respect the distance of two metres and a minimum of 15 m<sup>2</sup> of the publicly available indoor space had to be ensured per person. The maximum number of people could be calculated based on the area of the church space. Wedding ceremonies could be organised outdoors where everyone had to wear a face mask and respect the distance of two metres. The number of people was not limited. To receive a religious service in the "red" regime or epidemiologically unsafe environment, people had to abide by more severe restrictions (if any of the participants of the event was not vaccinated against Covid-19 or had not had Covid-19). Wedding ceremonies could be organised indoors only in the presence of both persons to be married, two witnesses and a clergyman, and all of them had to wear a face mask, respect the distance of two metres and a minimum of 15 m<sup>2</sup> of the publicly available indoor space had to be ensured per person. Wedding ceremonies could be organised outdoors only in the presence of both persons to be married, two witnesses and a clergyman, and all of them had to wear a face mask and respect the distance of two metres. At the same time, the Ministry of Justice emphasised that a wedding ceremony is a public service, and therefore it has to be distinguished from a wedding event as a private event. A maximum of 10 people were allowed to participate in a private event, i.e. wedding celebrations, funeral and baptism ceremonies, held indoors and no more than 20 people outdoors. All of them had to wear a face mask (both indoors and outdoors) and respect the distance.<sup>21</sup>

During the Covid-19 pandemic, hospital chaplains were allowed to visit the Covid-19 patients who wanted to receive a religious service or just meet the chaplain. Respecting the epidemiological safety measures, chaplains visited the sick who wished to pray together, asked to hold their hand since they had difficulties to breathe and therefore they were seized by fear, asked to call their relatives and pass on a message as they found it difficult to speak on the phone.<sup>22</sup> According to observations by a female chaplain who has an experience of 16 years of service, "In fact, those people who cultivate their spiritual lives, their relationship with God, they talk more about these eternity themes. But those people who haven't cultivated their spiritual lives, they address practical, temporal things. Inheritance

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<sup>20</sup> Priestera Ilmāra Tolstova blogs. <http://www.tolstovs.lv/2021/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Ministru kabineta 2021. gada 9. oktobra rīkojums Nr. 720 "Par ārkārtējās situācijas izsludināšanu". <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/326729-par-arkartejas-situacijas-izsludinasanu> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Kapelāne: Covid-19 pacients lūdz vien paturēt roku. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/kapelane-covid-19-pacients-ludz-vien-paturet-roku.a428121/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

matters, what has been done and what hasn't been done. That is also very good."<sup>23</sup> Importantly, chaplains also provided support to staff of medical institutions during the pandemic, since they needed psychosocial support: during the state of emergency, stress, fear, agitation, alarm and uncertainty of medical personnel followed an upward path. Previously, such support was not available in all medical institutions. However, the heads of medical institutions tried to ensure assistance by a psychologist and chaplain during the pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

2.4. 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.

The Prosecutor General, in response to public accusations by the State Police against the "New Generation", instructed the relevant staff in November 2021 to commence investigation concerning the compliance of the "New Generation's" activities with the requirements of laws and regulations. Following the investigation, the Prosecutor General applied to the court requesting it to terminate activities of the "New Generation", but the court dismissed the Prosecutor General's application.<sup>25</sup>

Religious organisations and their individual members have not applied to law enforcement authorities. The applications addressed to the Ombudsman are indirectly linked with the field of religion. They contained concerns of Latvia's population about the decision taken by the Ethics Commission of the Latvian Medical Association. It states that in the event of a crisis arising during the Covid-19 pandemic it is ethically acceptable not to treat people over 75 having chronic diseases and the patients who are severely ill, using whatever available means may be necessary. This approach would allow a larger number of young people and those who are not seriously ill to access the therapy that might save their lives.<sup>26</sup>

The minister Edgars Rinkēvičs, a representative of Latvia who participated in the ministerial session on religious freedom dedicated to enhancement of freedom of religion and belief during the pandemic, called upon everyone not to use the Covid-19 crisis as a cover for promotion of prejudices and discriminatory treatment based on religion or belief. He reminded that all restrictions on freedom of religion or belief have to be prescribed by law, they have to be legitimate and proportionate. The minister explained that Latvia has supported several international initiatives aimed at strengthening religious freedom worldwide and at eradicating persecution related to religion or belief. To mitigate the adverse effects of the

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<sup>23</sup> «Darīt šo pasauli labāku ir mūsu dzīves jēga» – saruna ar Austrumu slimnīcas kapelāni Inesi Lūsi <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/dzive--stils/sarunas/darit-so-pasauli-labaku-ir-musu-dzives-jega--saruna-ar-austrumu-slimnicas-kapelani-inesi-lusi.a435954/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Behmane, D., Bikava, I. et al. COVID-19 ietekme uz veselības aprūpes sistēmu; pieredze un nākotnes risinājumi. [https://lzp.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/1\\_darba\\_paka\\_gala\\_zinojums.pdf](https://lzp.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/1_darba_paka_gala_zinojums.pdf) Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Ģenerālprokurors tiesā prasa izbeigt "Jaunās paaudzes" darbību. <https://zinas.tv3.lv/latvija/sabiedriba/generalprokurors-tiesa-prasa-izbeigt-jaunas-paaudzes-darbibu/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Pacientu šķirošana COVID-19 pandēmijas laikā. <https://www.tiesibsargs.lv/news/lv/pacientu-skirosana-covid-19-pandemijas-laika> Accessed 28 May 2022.



pandemic on religious organisations, the government of Latvia has granted financial assistance to clergymen and employees of religious orders.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Sociological aspect:

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

People who were not able to attend the church could participate in services remotely already before the pandemic occurred: a channel of the public television broadcasts a service held by a Christian denomination each Sunday, the Latvian Christian Radio, Radio Maria and the Latgalian Radio broadcast services on a daily basis. During the Covid-19 pandemic, live broadcasts from churches on YouTube provided an extra option for remote participation in services. People's attitude towards participation in services in the on-line regime varied: some congregations broadcast services on a regular basis but others did not provide an opportunity for believers to take part in services remotely. A clergyman's skills to employ new technologies and his willingness or otherwise determined their use, e.g. a pastor of an Evangelical Lutheran congregation compared on-line services with rubber women or non-alcoholic beer.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church encouraged the faithful to participate in services remotely and to release the following believers from the obligation to take part in the Saint Mass (Code of Canon Law: Cann. 87 1§, Cann. 1245 and Cann. 1248 2§): the elderly, those with symptoms of the infection, contact persons of the sick and people who fear of getting the infection.<sup>29</sup>

During the pandemic, the number of pilgrims who made their way to the principal sacred place of the Roman Catholic Church in Aglona to participate in celebration of Our Lady of the Assumption Feast Day decreased significantly. In the year prior to the pandemic, around 50 000 pilgrims<sup>30</sup> took part in the services on 15 August, but epidemiological safety regulations severely limited the number of participants in 2020: up to 3000 people<sup>31</sup> were allowed to participate in the service held on the square next to the basilica (but only around 1700 people arrived<sup>32</sup>) subject to the

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<sup>27</sup> E. Rinkēvičs: Covid-19 krīze nedrīkst būt aizsēgs aizspriedumu un diskriminācijas veicināšanai reliģijas brīvības jomā. [https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/e-rinkevics-covid-19-krize-nedrikst-aizsegs-aizspriedumu-un-diskriminācijas-veicināšanai-reliģijas-brīvības-joma?utm\\_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.lv%2F](https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/e-rinkevics-covid-19-krize-nedrikst-aizsegs-aizspriedumu-un-diskriminācijas-veicināšanai-reliģijas-brīvības-joma?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.lv%2F) Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Baznīca Liepājā ar mērijas klātbūtni turpina rīkot dievkalpojumus; mācītājs attālinātas lūgšanas salīdzina ar gumijas sievieti. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/baznica-liepaja-ar-merijas-klatbutni-turpina-rikot-dievkalpojumus-macitajs-attalinatas-lugšanas-salidzina-ar-gumijas-sievieti.a356206/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Jaunākais Latvijas bīskapu paziņojums saistībā ar situāciju valstī. <https://www.jelgavaskatedrale.lv/index.php/41-raksti/2020/315-jaunakais-latvijas-biskapu-pazinojums-saistiba-ar-situaciju-valsti> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Vissvētākās Jaunavas Marijas Debesīs uzņemšanas svētkus apmeklējuši aptuveni 50 000 cilvēku. <https://zinas.tv3.lv/latvija/sabiedriba/vissvetakas-jaunavas-marijas-debesis-uznemsanas-svetkus-apseklejusi-aptuveni-50-000-cilveku/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Viņķele aicina apsvērt iespēju Aglonas svētkos dievkalpojumus organizēt attālināti. <https://jauns.lv/raksts/par-veselibu/395364-vinkele-aicina-apsvert-iespeju-aglonas-svetkos-dievkalpojumus-organizet-attalinati> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Aglonas svētki 2020 – attālināti un klātienē. <https://tuvuma.lv/aglonas-svetki-2020-attalinati-un-klatiene-teksta-tiesraide/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

presentation of a Covid-19 certificate or a negative test result. Since pilgrims were not allowed to enter the basilica's premises, the customary procession past the Our Lady of Aglona icon did not take place. It was not only the number of pilgrims that fell but also the number of pilgrim groups organised by congregations. In 2019, 33 pilgrim groups arrived in Aglona<sup>33</sup>, but their number decreased to only 17 in 2021.<sup>34</sup>

3.2. 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?

More extensive data-based studies on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on secularisation or desecularisation processes in Latvia should be carried out. Examining the reports on activities of religious organisations in 2019 and 2020 (no data on 2021 are available yet) drawn up by the Ministry of Justice, it can be concluded that the number of marriages has decreased in all largest denominations of Latvia: from 748 to 589 in congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, from 719 to 559 in congregations of the Roman Catholic Church, from 118 to 96 in the Union of Baptist Churches in Latvia and from 77 to 43 in congregations of the Latvian Orthodox Church.<sup>35</sup>

In Latvia, a funeral feast, organised by Latvians either at the home of the deceased or in catering establishments (cafés or restaurants), usually follows the funeral. By contrast, Russians honour the deceased by having a light meal at the cemetery or close to it. Until the outbreak of the pandemic, Latvians considered this tradition as unacceptable and alien to their culture, while during the Covid-19 pandemic when everyone had to comply with the epidemiological restrictions Latvians borrowed this tradition from Russians. The pandemic has introduced new elements in the Latvian cemetery environment, i.e. a wooden table, benches and a shelter next to the cemetery gate so that mourners could stay for a while, commemorate the deceased and have some snacks.

The pandemic has also changed the course of religious rites, e.g. Catholics put aside the sharing of peace by shaking hands practised during services. However, despite the risk of contracting the virus the Roman Catholic Church of Latvia introduced no changes in the ritual of Holy Communion, i.e. priests continued to put Communion on the tongue of the faithful rather than in the palm of the hand.

3.3. 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?

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<sup>33</sup> Aglonas bazilikas svētki 2019. <http://www.aglona.lv/aktualitates/aglonas-bazilikas-svetki-2019-2/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Aglonā reģistrējušās 17 svētceļnieku grupas; arhibīskaps aicina svētceļniekus turpināt Meinarda misiju Latvijā. <https://katolis.lv/2021/08/aglona-registrejusas-17-svetcelnieku-grupas-arhibiskaps-aicina-svetcelniekus-turpinat-meinarda-misiju-latvija/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Ziņojums par Tieslietu ministrijā iesniegtajiem reliģisko organizāciju pārskatiem par darbību 2020.gadā. <https://www.tm.gov.lv/lv/2020-gada-publiskie-parskati> Accessed 28 May 2022.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted society's mixed attitude towards various denominations and religious groups. Police closely monitored activities of the "New Generation" congregations, since people informed police on their infringements on a regular basis. Therefore, a significant number of investigations of administrative offences were initiated against this church. Meanwhile, the breaches were not taken that seriously by congregations in eastern Latvia dominated by Catholicism. As shown by the example of the Roman Catholic priest's funeral, police had to respond to the story broadcast by a local TV channel about the failure to satisfy the epidemiological security requirements. However, there was an underlying assumption concerning the attitude towards the infringement that the funeral of the priest, who had served for the congregation for many years and who was highly respected, was an exceptional case. At the time of writing this report, the case was not examined yet, and according to the comments provided by a representative of a local authority during individual correspondence "police are on the side of the people."

The attitude of Latvia's religious organisations towards the epidemiological safety requirements imposed by the state and towards vaccination did not differ much, and none of them delivered their official position. By contrast, individual clergymen demonstrated a diametrically opposite attitude. Different individual attitudes were present even within one religious organisation and congregation. Determinants of the different positions were individual motives and persuasions of congregation members, but the individual position by spiritual leaders played a major role. The divergent positions of spiritual leaders led to equally diverse positions of congregation members within one religious organisation, e.g. Cardinal Emeritus (91 years old) of the Roman Catholic Church was against vaccination, since he had heard that cells of aborted embryos were used to make vaccines.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, the Riga Archbishop of the Latvian Roman Catholic Church (66 years old) was vaccinated, and he publicly called on congregation members to get vaccinated, in response to the Vatican's recommendations. The Catholic antivaccers, whose position was strong, did not change it even when two Catholic priests who were prominent public figures, respected by their congregations, active and quite young (53 and 42 years of age) died from Covid-19.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Arhibīskaps Stankevičs vakcinējies pret Covid-19; kardināls Pujats sevi potēt neļaušot. <https://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/arhibiskaps-stankevics-vaccinejies-pret-covid-19-kardinals-pujats-sevi-potet-nelausot.d?id=53108715> Accessed 28 May 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Miris Saldus katoļu priesteris un eksorcists Gatis Mārtiņš Bezdelīga. <https://jauns.lv/raksts/zinas/435030-miris-saldus-katolu-priesteris-un-eksorcists-gatis-martins-bezdeliga> Mūžībā devies priesteris Mihails Sivickis. <https://katolis.lv/2021/10/muziba-devies-priesteris-mihails-sivickis/> Accessed 28 May 2022.

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