



Romania

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion

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1. General presentation:

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

The first confirmed case of coronavirus was announced on February 26, 2020. Officially, in Romania, the pandemic period took place between March 16, 2020, the date on which the state of emergency was established and March 8, 2022, the last day of the state of alert (the state of alert lasted almost 2 years: May 15, 2020 - March 8, 2022). A total of 64,789 deaths were recorded.

According to the legislation issued during the state of emergency and state of alert, in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, a series of fundamental rights and freedoms were restricted: a) free movement; b) the right to intimate, family and private life; c) inviolability of residence; d) the right to education; e) freedom of assembly; f) the right of private property; g) the right to strike; h) labour social protection.

These restrictions, along with express sanitary legislation regarding religious communities, have inevitably affected religious freedom, especially the public expression of religious beliefs. Therefore, a whole range of religious activities, during a period of 2 years, was partially or completely discontinued: physical participation at regular religious services, participation in pilgrimages, organisation of weddings, baptisms, commemorations, funerals, etc.

The main topics related to religious freedom during the pandemic were focused on: limiting access to worship according to the rules of social distancing and observance / failure to comply with these rules by religious institutions/everyday believers; the support / opposition of

religious institutions towards the vaccination campaign; granting the Communion with single-use spoons; restricted access to pilgrimages; syncope in state-church relationship; the prejudice to human dignity brought by some legislation regarding burials.

There were no major surveys regarding church attendance during the pandemics, but because of the restrictions and especially because of the virus itself, it can legitimately be assumed that the church attendance was the lowest in the recent decades.

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

Both central and local media have regularly addressed religious subjects during the pandemic. An increase in the volume of news with religious topics took place around the great religious holidays. Most of them concerned the protest of religious groups towards restrictions, punctual cases of non-compliance with sanitary rules by some clergy, combating fake news, the illness / death of some personalities in the religious world (especially if they were previously denying the existence of the virus or the need for the vaccine, green pass), the popularisation of charity acts made by religious groups. However, some of them also focus on the immediate or long-term consequences of a sociological, anthropological or political nature, addressing theoretical/substance topics such as significant changes in the religiosity of the population, the imminent decline of the influence of "traditional Christianity"/pandemics were a fertile ground for the "traditional Christianity" to reborn, changes in the relationship between state and religious groups, etc.

c) 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.

Directly interested in the defence of religious freedom, religious groups were the main institutions that organised seminars, conferences (online) or edited articles, studies, etc. on this topic. The Romanian Academy and various specialists in religious freedom also stood out in these debates. The debates and conferences organised by the Romanian Orthodox Church are of reference: In April 2021, the Romanian Patriarchate organised a series of [debates dedicated to religious freedom during the pandemic](#), broadcast online. In May 2022, the subject of the

international symposium organised by the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Iasi was [*It Is Not Good for the Human to Be Alone Pandemics-Isolation-Isychia*](#).

One of the few public studies issued by a national institution is the „[Preliminary study on the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and its impact on human rights](#)” elaborated by *Romanian Institute for Human Rights*. This study also addresses how the pandemic has affected freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

2. Legal aspects:

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

Romania did not have any previous legislation regarding the regulation of religious life in the event of a natural or provoked disaster. Related to this topic, articles appeared in the press about the pandemics of the past centuries (especially the plague) in which were evoked the sanitary measures of that period, which also concerned the religious life and in which the Church and the priests played a significant role.

b) 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 State Secretariat for Religions has published [a list of all pandemic legislation that also refers to religious life](#).

According to this list, the main international standards on religious freedom that guided the Romanian authorities in drafting anti-pandemic legislation were represented by the:

- Art. 9 (2) of the ECHR (European Convention on Human Rights) - Freedom to manifest one's religion or belief may not be subject to restrictions other than those provided by law which, in a democratic society, constitute measures necessary for public safety, protection of the order, health, public morals, rights and freedoms of others.
- Art. 18 (3) of the ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) - Freedom of expression of religion or belief may be subject only to such restrictions as

are required by law and are necessary for the protection of security, order and public health or morals or freedoms, fundamental rights of others.

The measure that affected religious life the most was ***restricting the freedom of movement and assembly of citizens***. Due to this restriction, a series of consequences appeared in the public religious life:

- Because public gatherings were banned, regardless of their nature, religious services of a collective nature were held by worship staff inside the place of worship without the participation of the faithful, being broadcast on media channels (TV, radio, online, etc.).

- Although the Romanian state did not order the closure of places of worship, some cults decided on their own initiative to temporarily close them (the Muslim cult).

- The individual services (baptism, marriage, funeral, etc.) took place inside the place of worship with the participation of a maximum of 8 people.

- The faithful had access to the place of worship for individual prayer.

- at the proposal of the National Institute of Public Health, special sanitary measures were also ordered which limited the contact between believers, as well as between believers and objects (disposable teaspoons for the communion; icons kissing).

According to the provisions of Government Decision no. 394 / 18.05.2020, collective religious events (religious services, religious gatherings, etc.) were no longer included in the category of public gatherings and consequently the number of participants was no longer limited, the only condition being the compliance with the general health rules ordered by public authorities (social distancing, masks, etc.).

Although, according to the law, pilgrimages could be restricted or banned, public authorities did not restrict their conduct until October 2020. Amid the alarming increase in the number of cases of infection, at the suggestion of local authorities, was ordered the measure to limit the participation of believers in religious pilgrimages, allowing access only to people who have their domicile or residence in the locality where the activity takes place.

All pandemic legislation (the result of military ordinances), including those restricting religious freedom, was temporary in nature and was issued only for periods of emergency or alert.

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

According to the order of the Minister of Health no. 570/2020, among the regulations of the burial of corpses confirmed with the new coronavirus the following are also provided:

- Burial / cremation will be carried out as soon as possible with the sealed coffin.
- The bodies of the people who died of Covid and were autopsied are sanitised, but no cosmetic manoeuvres are performed on them, nor do they get dressed before they are put in the bag.

Such provisions were detrimental to human dignity and to the right to religious assistance, as the law did not allow the possibility of providing religious assistance to Covid patients or respecting religious rules regarding funerals. Thus, the religious groups [approached](#) the authorities to amend the law.

Thus, on April 9, 2021, the [new order](#) was issued to change the specific protocol on the deaths of patients infected with SARS-CoV-2, as well as access to hospitals of clergy.

According to the new regulations, the family / legal representative could provide the deceased's clothing and the coffin in which the deceased was going to be placed, and burial / cremation could be carried out with the sealed coffin, in the same burial conditions imposed on deceased persons for other reasons, respecting the will of the deceased's family and the rituals of the cult to which he belonged.

In the case of patients infected with SARS-CoV-2 who show severe symptoms of the disease, during hospitalisation, patients could receive, upon request, religious assistance, depending on the specifics of the cult to which they belong, and with the consent of the attending physician.

In order to ensure the protection of the clergyman and the patient, the visit could take place under the following conditions:

- only one officiating clergyman could enter the patient, only once.
- the time allocated to the religious service was a maximum of 15 minutes.
- the cleric had to wear complete personal protective equipment provided free of charge by the health unit in which the patient was hospitalised.

- the cleric had to respect all the sanitary measures that were required.

- only objects of worship that could be disinfected before and after use could be used, with the consent of the attending physician.

- objects that generate an open / closed flame or spark were not allowed.

d) 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.

At the level of the collective/public understanding, the state is considered solely responsible for all the rights restrictions (according to [the barometer of religious life](#) – 16.12.2020), implicitly for the violation of religious rights. The most vocal in this regard were religious groups, who publicly and repeatedly accused authorities that the anti-pandemic measures violated religious rights and that these measures were not directly proportionate to the *de facto* situation.

Also from this perspective, other fields of activity were considered discriminated in comparison with the religious field, in the sense that the state made the most derogations from restrictions in favour of religious groups, or the law was not fully applied when religious groups have violated the restrictions. Also, at the level of the collective mentality, the Romanian Orthodox Church, the largest religious group, benefited from a discriminatory treatment, in a positive sense, by the authorities, to the detriment of the other religious groups. Such suspicions have been occasioned by the derogations from restrictions granted on major holidays or pilgrimages or by the protocol concluded between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Interior due to which, the Holy Light of Easter was distributed to believers by police officers.

From the state's point of view, he does not consider himself guilty because religious freedom, as a right exercised in one's conscience, cannot be restricted. However, it is no less true that the public manifestation of religious freedom may be temporarily subject to exceptional measures for the defence of national security, order and health protection, etc., but these kinds of measures are included in the national and international legislation. Consequently, the exceptional measures are not the subject of illegality.

Regarding court decisions, although there have been attempts to overturn the anti-pandemic measures in court, in part or in full, the general situation has remained the same. From the perspective of religious freedom, it is worth noting the attempt to overturn the restrictive measures applied to pilgrimages. The [Bucharest Court of Appeal overturned the decision](#) that allowed participation in religious holidays only for people who have their domicile in the locality where they take place. The restrictions imposed by decision 47/2020 of the National Committee for Emergency Situations, which prohibited the participation in pilgrimages by believers outside the localities, were cancelled by the Bucharest Court of Appeal. But the court decision could not take effect, as the provision was also included in a valid government decision, which, however, had not been challenged in court. The decision of the Bucharest Court of Appeal was not final and was appealed.

3. Sociological aspect:

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

Obviously, the number of believers present at the religious services has decreased, but there are still no statistics to show a percentage. To the same extent, although pilgrimages were not banned, the number of participants was significantly lower than in the pre-pandemic years. From the perspective of physical participation at religious services, it is interesting to follow in the coming years if the presence at places of worship will return to its original values.

Many churches of many religious groups have made their religious services available through radio, online streaming, or television. Some believers have even used online applications that contain prayers. As the coronavirus shut down churches, synagogues and mosques, religious leaders moved their services online to social networks, posted via video links or downloaded apps on their phones. Including the very institutional communication, both internally and externally, of religious organisations took place exclusively online. The pandemic also affected the religious classes, the teaching process being totally influenced by the ICT (information, communication, technology) phenomena.

One of the least noticeable consequences of social distancing was the disappearance of door-to-door missionaries, for all religious groups. Another consequence was the decrease of own sources revenue of the religious groups, which led to a decrease in the income of their employees.

[According to Unicef](#), the most exposed social category due to the suspension of religious activities turned out to be the older persons, the age category most often present in places of worship, spaces dedicated to religious rituals but also to social contacts. Other vulnerable groups who suffered, not necessarily from a religious perspective, because of the health restrictions to which places of worship had to be subjected were homeless, low-income, or single persons.

b) 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?

As a personal opinion, the pandemic had only an amplifying role of the pre-existing condition, in the sense that those who believed strengthened their faith and those who did not believe strengthened their opinion as well. The third category would be the ``undecided`` persons, in biblical terms *lukewarm believers*, who most likely moved away from religion – they are most of the population. So, at a micro level, the pandemic accentuated the process of secularisation. Consistent quantitative and quality studies do not yet exist on this topic.

Many traditions, which accompanied the religious rituals on baptism, marriage, burial, have been interrupted and will hardly be resumed after the end of the pandemic. For example, the organisation of a commemorative meal after any funeral was widespread; due to the pandemic, this habit has been interrupted or replaced by the provision of food packages. Also due to pandemic restrictions, many young people have given up religious marriage, preferring only secular marriage. The same with the baptism. Of great relevance would be an ethnological study and a statistical analysis of data held by religious groups.

A special case is the controversy surrounding the use of the disposable teaspoons for communion. Health authorities have proposed the use of disposable teaspoons for communion,

to prevent the spread of the pandemic. After a short derogation - imposed by public authorities, the Romanian Orthodox Church firmly conveyed that the problem of Holy Communion and the communion of the faithful is one that belongs exclusively to the Church and that this will continue to be done, according to the liturgical tradition, from a single holy chalice and a single holy teaspoon.

From this last perspective, I would tend to think that we are talking about a process of resistance to secularisation, or of secularisation at the macro level. Through this dialogue / conflict caused by the pandemic, sometimes genuinely sometimes mimicked, between religious groups and public authorities has given the opportunity to traditional religious groups, which have the majority among the population, to fill the public space with messages, sometimes to victimise themselves, and thus to impose or regain, at the institutional level, the status of great players of the public scene.

c) 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?

The reaction of religious groups during the pandemic had both positive and negative aspects. The religious groups made donations, supported patients infected with SARS-CoV-2, opened telephone lines, asked believers to follow the rules of social distance, and finally, during the vaccination campaign, they officially supported to some extent the campaign, even if not entirely (the case of the Romanian Orthodox Church - some hierarchs have publicly spoken out against vaccination and urged the population to stay away from immunisation centres, spreading conspiracy theories).

There were also problems and tensions, as happened in 2020, during Easter. The authorities then took new steps to prevent the increase in the number of cases. But the clergy and church officials were concerned about the state's interference with religious freedom and the right to worship. The situation created a conflict that was resolved by concluding an agreement between the Patriarchate and the Interior Ministry.

In other cases, however, communication was interrupted. This was also the case when the Church refused to conform and to give the communion with disposable teaspoons. There

have also been numerous cases of religious holidays and processions in which certain priests have refused to comply with the distancing measures.

The conclusion of those who analysed in more detail the relationship between religious groups and the state during the pandemic was that the blame lies more with the public authorities, who did not know how to dialogue and did not provide logistical means and sufficient information.

The state did not understand that the Church is an eminently private space and did not respect the standards of international legislation on religious freedom. An element that negatively differentiates Romania from the practice in the West is the following: the Church or the religious group as an organisation have been restricted, not the place of worship. Restrictions normally apply to the place of worship, not to the worship itself. And this is due to the tendency to accuse the Church from the outset of cultural reasons. [As an example](#): because in the top of the ranking covid-19 excess deaths across countries there are especially countries from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, there were commentators who associated this statistic with the cultural background of these countries, especially their belonging to the Orthodox Church.

Then there is the lack of an institutionalised dialogue between the state and the religious groups. That would involve procedures, lists of participants, minutes, etc. For more than three months during the pandemic, there was no dialogue between religious groups and the authorities. An online dialogue platform has hardly been set up.

But the worst accusation is that the State has allowed itself to regulate even religious gestures carried out eminently in the privacy of private housing (health recommendations regarding individual pastoral visits at home) and the lack of respect for human dignity reflected in the initial provisions regarding the burial of persons who died of Covid 19 (worrying, from the perspective of religious freedom in a democratic society, is that only after 13 months the subject became public).

To highlight this last aspect, it is useful to quote **Pierre Manent**, that an [interview](#) granted to *Le Figaro*, emphasised that ``the government (French) has virtually taken over the authority to ban the last ritual to which we are attached - namely the funeral ritual... This brutal erasure of death is inseparable from the removal of religion...``

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

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