Editorial

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Metreveli, Tornike

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edited by Tornike Metreveli

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Table of Contents

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Editorial
The Pandemic and the Paradox of Orthodoxy

by Tornike Metreveli

The COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe, profoundly affecting religious practices and challenging age-old traditions within Orthodox Christian communities. This special issue[1] examines how faith among the ordinary parishioners, religious traditions of the institution of church and political interests of the ruling elites intersected with major public health crisis. It draws on ethnographic research conducted throughout the pandemic, from the emergence of the first COVID-19 cases to the development of vaccines and the eventual lifting of restrictions. The data gathering included narrative analysis, representative surveys, and interviews with clergy and believers.[2]

The pandemic demonstrated the pervasiveness of fideistic epistemology among influential clergy and theologians, which informed churches' approach to the implementation of sanitary measures designed to combat the spread of the coronavirus.[3] In the context of the pandemic, fideistic beliefs were predicated on three key assumptions: that faith is more powerful than physical reality; that robust belief provides immunity to viruses; and that the implementation of sanitary measures in churches is indicative of weak faith.[4]

In those churches where fideistic worldviews were prevalent, we observed profound institutional resistance against health measures, higher engagement in contagious religious rituals and practices and broader COVID vaccine resistance.[5] Decentralized character of Orthodox Christianity was a factor here. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church with its centralized authority in the Pope, Orthodox Christianity lacks a single unifying figure; each autocephalous church operates independently under local patriarchs and political influences.[6] This structure led to diverse interpretations and implementations of public health measures, reflecting each region's socio-political context. Interactions between religious and secular authorities, shaped by historical and cultural factors, further complicated these responses. Some ecclesiastical leaders aligned with government directives, prioritizing public health and cooperation. Others resisted restrictions, emphasizing religious freedom and autonomy—often justified by fideistic reasoning and local political pressures.[7] The pandemic thus tested the adaptability and, to an extent, political instincts of Orthodox churches.

The advent of the global pandemic of 2020 acted as a catalyst, amplifying and intensifying pre-existing tendencies within Orthodox communities to embrace conspiracy theories. These theories, frequently advanced by right-wing politicians and grounded in long-standing concerns about modernity, globalization, and the

perceived decline of Orthodox identity, flourished in the context of the uncertainty and fear generated by the pandemic. The virus, its origins, and the public health measures implemented to combat it were frequently situated within a narrative of malevolent global conspiracies aimed at undermining traditional values and controlling populations. This conspiratorial mindset was further fueled by misinformation and distrust towards both secular authorities and scientific expertise, leading some to reject public health guidelines and embrace alternative, often unproven, remedies. This phenomenon not only hindered efforts to control the pandemic in the Orthodox world, but also deepened existing divisions within the church and society at large, as different groups interpreted the crisis through vastly different lenses.

Ukraine: A Mosaic of Responses

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) proactively adopted social distancing and complied with state regulations. In contrast, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) was more hesitant, emphasizing communal gatherings. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) fully complied with state guidelines, promoting vaccination and socially distanced services. Communication breakdowns and unclear guidance from hierarchs amplified these issues. Tetiana Kalenychenko argues in her article that the UOC-MP's resistance stemmed from a desire to preserve traditions and avoid alienating its conservative followers. The pandemic also worsened existing trends of declining church attendance, making it harder to maintain community connections during restrictions. Tensions escalated, leading to disagreements among parishioners and even clergy within the same church.

Despite recognizing the threat, all three churches aimed to keep their doors open. The UGCC provided structured instructions to its clergy, while the UOC-MP faced public scandals due to its initial denial of the pandemic, leading to accusations of being "anti-vaxxers." The OCU saw decreased attendance and struggled with internal communication but also noticed an influx of younger members seeking answers to existential questions. Each church grappled with the meaning of rituals, the use of technology, and how to adapt ancient practices in a modern crisis. Kalenychenko's article shows how the pandemic spurred innovative responses and a reevaluation of the church's role.

Romania and Bulgaria: Ambivalence and Contradictions

In Romania, the Orthodox Church generally aligned with government health measures. However, many prominent figures, especially in monastic circles, openly opposed vaccination and spread misinformation and conspiracy theories. This internal conflict, as Lucian Leustean shows, intensified by the rise of the right-wing Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party, led to increased polarization and

decreased trust in science. Disputes arose over traditional practices like using a shared spoon for communion versus adopting safer methods. Emphasizing spiritual solutions, such as prayer and relic processions, often overshadowed scientific approaches. These challenges contributed to Romania's low vaccination rate and high COVID-19 mortality. Despite this, the church highlighted its charitable work during the pandemic, emphasizing its social role. In Bulgaria, the Orthodox Church initially resisted restrictions and maintained close ties with the government under Prime Minister Borisov, who used religious rhetoric for political purposes. The church's reluctance to endorse vaccination and lack of transparency about infected clergy led to declining public confidence. When a new government critical of the church's pandemic response took office, relations strained further. Leustean argues that the churches' hesitance to promote vaccination likely contributed to the high mortality rates in both countries.

Greece and Cyprus: Tradition vs. Adaptation

In Greece and Cyprus, the pandemic heightened tensions between those holding firmly to traditional practices and those open to change. Conspiracy theories blaming international organizations and even figures like Bill Gates for orchestrating a "new world order" gained some traction. Initially, disbelief and labeling the pandemic as "fake news" were common, especially among those who saw restrictions on religious gatherings as attacks on Orthodox faith and measures like vaccination as threats to Orthodox identity and freedom. Strict lockdowns, including closing places of worship, met resistance against restrictions and skepticism toward science. Some clergy even held secret services in defiance of the rules, justified by a belief in the church's exceptionalism and fideistic rationale.

The disruption of regular rituals led - to what Vasilios Makrides and Eleni Sotiriou called - "ritual arrhythmia," causing anxiety, fear, and a sense of loss among believers. Yet, it also sparked innovation. Parishioners, often led by women, established "domestic churches," and virtual worship became a new avenue for practicing faith. The debate over continuing the traditional shared spoon for communion highlighted the challenge of reconciling deep-seated beliefs with scientific knowledge. Vaccine hesitancy, fueled by misinformation and skepticism, underscored the tension between individual freedom and collective responsibility. While some embraced increased religiosity through prayer and online services, others questioned the authenticity of virtual worship.

Serbia: Diverse Practices and Theological Debates

Within the Serbian Orthodox Church, opinions on liturgical adaptations and communion varied widely among bishops, clergy, and laity. As Stefan Radojkovic explains, the key issue was how to administer the Holy Communion safely. This sparked extensive discussions, with various theological and practical arguments

leading to a range of religious practices. The Holy Synod issued guidelines that were often vague, resulting in different responses—from strict adherence to open defiance of restrictions, though most chose to stay home. Some priests altered the traditional shared spoon practice by using multiple spoons or pouring wine directly into communicants' mouths to ensure greater safety. Similar to other case studies in this special issue, adaptations led to theological debates between those firmly upholding tradition and those prioritizing public health. Despite the differences, communion remained essential for Orthodox believers in Serbia. The pandemic significantly affected Easter celebrations both in Belgrade and in the regions, with some churches conducting services without congregants while others facing criticism for allowing gatherings. Due to the isolation of the Serbian community in Kosovo-Metohija eparchy, for example, these adaptations, such as limiting attendance at services and using alternative spaces (e.g., outside the church), were driven by both epidemiological considerations and the need to avoid confrontation with local authorities. The Church served not only as a religious institution, but as a support system, particularly in Serbian enclaves, where it was often the only reliable institution helping the local population. This contrasted with the more structured and diverse responses observed in urban areas like Belgrade.

Faith in the Face of Fear

Amid the devastating loss and grief caused by COVID-19, the faithful longed for the comfort and solidarity of communal religious practices which manifested in a significant increase in religiosity worldwide as the pandemic unfolded. However, the extent of this resurgence varied; more secular societies experienced smaller increases in religious activity compared to those with strong religious foundations.[8]

For Orthodox Christians, the pandemic posed profound challenges. Centuries-old traditions—such as shared spoon communion, kissing icons, and gathering for large services—were suddenly at odds with public health necessities. Difficult decisions had to be made about modifying these sacred rituals, balancing religious freedom with social responsibility, and rethinking the role of technology in worship. Some churches introduced individual spoons for communion or sanitized icons between veneration, while others resisted any changes, viewing them as a compromise of their faith.

The decentralized nature of Orthodox Christianity was both a vulnerability and an asset. Without a unified response, variations in compliance and resistance to government restrictions emerged among clergy and laity. Diverse theological interpretations led to internal disagreements and public disputes, affecting the church's perceived unity. For example, while some churches embraced livestreamed services and encouraged safety protocols, other jurisdictions were slower to adapt, leading to confusion and frustration among the faithful. Yet, decentralization allowed for adaptability too. Our special issue shows how clergy and believers

found innovative ways to practice their faith, sometimes at the expense of negating the state-imposed health protocols. For example, online services became prevalent, outdoor liturgies allowed congregations with relative safely.

The pandemic also brought profound theological questions to the forefront and forced the churches to address these questions anew. Confronted with mortality, suffering, and disrupted rituals, many revisited the age-old question of theodicy—how to reconcile a benevolent, all-powerful God with the existence of evil and suffering. As we showed in the edited book through diverse case studies, some churches saw the pandemic as divine punishment or a test of faith, emphasizing repentance and spiritual renewal. Others focused on compassion and active efforts to alleviate suffering, embracing scientific measures to prevent further loss[9]. This diversity of views highlighted ongoing theological debates[10] in Orthodox Christian theology about God's providence, the meaning of suffering, and human responsibility.[11]

The special issue demonstrates how pandemic exposed a deep divide within the Orthodox Church between those clinging to tradition and those advocating for adaptation. This tension manifested in concerns over individual agency versus communal responsibility and the church's role in a rapidly modernizing world. Fears about societal change led to a rise in conspiracy theories and vaccine hesitancy among some believers, challenging both clergy and laity. The response to these issues had implications not only for internal unity but, as surveys showed, also for the church's public role and influence.[12]

This ongoing tension between tradition and modernity raises critical questions for Orthodoxy's future. Can the church reconcile these opposing forces without compromising its core values? Does the pandemic signal a turning point for Orthodox churches and communities, pushing them toward a more engaged reflection on their theological stances on science, health, and social responsibility? Addressing these questions will require to find a balance between faith and reason, tradition and innovation, individual freedom and communal responsibility. The special issue highlighted the extent to which the pandemic prompted a broader reflection on the role of religious institutions in promoting public health while staying true to their spiritual mission. The global health crisis has served as a catalyst for reflection and discussion within the Orthodox Church. It remains to be seen whether this will prompt a profound reconsideration of the manner in which the Church can engage with the challenges of a rapidly advancing world without compromising its rich heritage and traditions.

About the author

Tornike Metreveli is Associate Senior Lecturer in European Studies and Associate Professor of Sociology of Religions at Lund University, Sweden. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology, University of Bern. Prior to joining Lund University, Metreveli had scholarships at Harvard University (in Ukraine Research Institute and Davis Center), University of St. Gallen and London School of Economics. A scholar of nationalism with an MSc in Nationalism Studies from the University of Edinburgh, Tornike's research focuses on the intersection of nationalism and Christianity. His first book, Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia (Routledge, 2021), examines the role of Orthodox Christianity in the post-communist political transitions in Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia. Metreveli has led several research projects, including Coronavirus: A New Test(ament) of Orthodox Christianity, which explored the responses of Orthodox churches to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a second edited book, Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic (Routledge 2023). Tornike also led the Religion and the Wars of the 21st Century project, creating ReWars21 open data repository on the role of religion in recent conflicts. His project Territoriality of the Georgian Orthodox Church won him the EU Prize for Journalism in 2022.

Endnotes

1 The articles are condensed versions of chapters from Tornike Metreveli's edited volume, *Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic* (London: Routledge 2023) resulting from the GCE-funded "Coronavirus: A New Test(ament) of Orthodox Christianity A comparative analysis of 12 European countries" project led by Tornike Metreveli. For earlier results of the COVID-19 and Orthodox Christianity project, please also consult "Impacts of the Pandemic on the Georgian Orthodox Church." *Euxeinos: Governance & Culture in the Black Sea Region* (2) 33, 2022.

2 In light of the sensitive subject matter and the inherent challenges of conducting research during the pandemic, some articles in this special issue diverge from traditional academic formats. These articles incorporate raw field notes, personal observations, and unfiltered narratives alongside rigorous analysis. This unconventional approach permitted researchers a multi-layered comprehension of the pandemic's impact on Orthodox communities. It illuminates not only the intellectual debates, policy concessions, and institutional logic of church-state relations but also the emotional struggles and adaptations that occurred in real time.

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5 Metreveli, Tornike. "Impacts of the Pandemic on the Georgian Orthodox Church." *Euxeinos: Governance & Culture in the Black Sea Region* 11, no. 33, 2022.

6 Hovorun, Cyril. *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2018.

7 See Kalenychenko, Hovorun, Brik on divergent responses of Orthodox Church of Ukraine and Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of Moscow Patriarchate).

8 Bentzen, Jeanet Sinding. "In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 192: 541–583, 2021.

9 See Metreveli (eds.) 2023.

10 Papanikolaou, Aristotle, George E. Demacopoulos, Ashley M. Purpura, and Aristotle Papanikolaou, eds. *Faith, Reason, and Theosis*. Fordham University Press, 2023.

11 Makrides, Vasilios N. "Orthodox Christianity, modernity and postmodernity: Overview, analysis and assessment." *Religion, State and Society* 40, no. 3-4 (2012): 248-285.

12 Brik, Tymofii, and Tornike Metreveli. "Shots of Faith: The Influence of Christian Nationalism on Vaccination Behaviour in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro during the COVID-19 Pandemic." In *Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, pp. 170-185. Routledge, 2023.

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A Pandemic Shock. How Key Orthodox Churches in Ukraine Faced the Challenge of COVID-19

by Tetiana Kalenychenko

The pandemic exposed the weaknesses and lines of polarization that were present in the church environment in Ukraine. Although the churches have had different reactions to these global events, in general they have seen the outward manifestation of both internal and external challenges. However, the crisis became an important space for solving internal problems, which only intensified and deepened after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, and required much faster and more critical reactions of religious leaders on different levels.

Keywords: Ukraine, Orthodoxy, pandemic, church

The challenges of the pandemic exposed the internal problems of churches and the Orthodox environment, in Ukraine in particular. They found a number of important consequences that concern not only ministers and parishioners, but also the whole society. The pandemic has demonstrated lines of polarization and conflict that have manifested themselves at various levels: between parishioners of different churches and jurisdictions; a crisis of insufficient communication and coordination, as well as trust between Orthodox priests within the same church; lack of communication, understanding and clarification regarding the service from the hierarchs to the ministers, as well as the detachment of the church leadership from the realities on the ground. The pandemic affected both existential and everyday aspects, such as the economic standard of living of priests, who were forced to independently find additional sources of income in order to cover at least communal services for the temple, not to mention their own comfort. The new crisis made them think about the main role and mission of the church, its understanding as a community of people, not a building, and also transformed the perception of the sacraments and the use of the latest technologies, which, on the one hand, increased the opportunities for the participation of those parishioners who could not be physically present in the church, and on the other hand significantly reduced the motivation to participate directly in the liturgy.

Although the churches have had different reactions to these global events, in general they have had the opportunity to see the outward manifestation of both internal and external challenges and respond to them in their own way. I propose to consider examples in the three churches that we studied the most – Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC(MP)), Orthodox Church of

Ukraine (OCU) and Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (UGCC).

The OCU priests took a significant initiative in adjusting the rituals to make them safer for people on official level. This is an evidence of the readiness of the ministers for grassroots democracy and initiative. However, it was not always approved by the church hierarchy. The question of the Eucharist distributed through a spoon or directly through the hands has become a cross-cutting and certain trigger for some believers or priests, which we see through the whole study and every conversation. For a certain circle of priests, this is perceived quite logically and does not raise questions as an ancient practice of the Church. "A part of the clergy is horrified to think about returning to the spoon," – one of the respondents claimed. For others, it is a certain allusion to Catholic practices, which are considered alien. At the same time, some believers showed considerable conservatism, refusing to receive communion through their hands, because the spoon became a symbol of stability for them and was considered a mandatory element of communion. Not all priests could explain the difference and why this kind of Eucharist is now safer. The OCU priests, in contrast to other churches, mentioned a lot of changes in their daily habits: new online Bible readings, online donations (through e-banking), daily sanitation, changing the schedule of liturgies to accommodate people in smaller but more frequent groups, praying for doctors and sick people, etc. Most importantly, the OCU priests did not feel that they were forced to change their practices by their leadership. Instead, they argued that their leaders acted reasonably and clearly communicated that the virus constitutes a severe threat. Although such a supposedly democratic reaction of the OCU hierarchs may indicate readiness to accept and nurture a grassroots initiative, this issue is not so clear-cut. So, unlike the UOC(MP), the leadership of the OCU indeed reacts more flexibly and gives priests the opportunity to make their own decisions.

Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, it was completely unclear how to respond to calls if one of the parishioners came to serve the sick; how to visit those who are sick with coronavirus, protect yourself, protect his family and at the same time fulfill your duties as a minister; how to change the sacraments of weddings, funerals and baptisms in order to act within the framework of the law and not provoke a surge of disease in the territorial community. Some priests of the OCU shared in an interview that they proposed to the regional leaders to convene an urgent meeting in order to make joint decisions and act uniformly, but this never happened. Therefore, against the background of the general recommendation of church leaders to act within the framework of the law, each parish adopted its own rules and changed them in order not to be exposed to danger. This caused a lot of dissatisfaction and discussions among the believers, who could now choose a priest who still gives communion from a spoon, conducts a funeral at home or not, allows more people to be in the church, and so on. The challenge of the pandemic can teach church structures that it is worth discussing joint solutions, giving some

joint instructions and being ready to listen to ordinary ministers on the ground, who often offer creative solutions that not only reduce the risks of infection, but also return the church to its traditions and bring the believers together among themselves.

The Greek Catholic priests provided similar answers. At the same time, it was in this church that the hierarchs gave clear instructions that were used in churches in different regions, in both cities and villages. This did not eliminate the problem that certain ministers still wanted to follow their own way, but it made it possible to refer to direct church documents and removed the level of tension for the parishioners. However, when they talked about using new digital tools, they were more positive than the OCU priests. Still, there are some personal cases when not all priests followed recommendations. Yet, they are the most disciplined ones. An important aspect in the case of the ministry of the UGCC during the pandemic is a more structured response, including the church leadership, as well as public communication on behalf of the church itself, which made it possible to clarify certain doubts of the faithful and provide points of reference in order not to lose access to spiritual nourishment and continue to attend church. However, this did not save even the congregation of the UGCC, which is one of the most organized, from the partial loss of believers who switched to online formats for meeting their spiritual needs, which also had a negative impact on the daily service and safety of ministers in the field.

The entire spiritual environment of the UOC(MP) found itself in the middle of not only a public scandal, but also a misunderstanding of how priests should continue their ministry in the conditions of the pandemic. In the public space, the reactions of the leaders of the UOC(MP), who at first rejected the very existence of COVID as a phenomenon, served as a reason to label believers and ministers of the church as pro-Russian (since similar reactions were seen only from the Russian Orthodox Church) and those that pose a threat to health and safety other Ukrainians. Even after recognizing the existence of the pandemic, the situation could not be substantially leveled. The misunderstanding also concerned the internal dynamics among UOC(MP) clerics, who had to take responsibility and try to overcome prejudices against their own church. From their perspective, the UOC(MP) was keen on rituals that they carefully nurtured and preserved, making them the pillar of their faith. For them, changing the rituals might trigger changes in how people view the church and weaken their faith. One of the key topics for discussion was the sacrament of communion. The UOC(MP) priests claimed that their leaders insisted on keeping regular ways of distributing Holy Communion, by spoon, because they feared making any changes. They also claimed that the church's leadership perceived its members as conservatives that would not appreciate the change. The UOC(MP) priests complained that they felt discriminated against by local authorities and governmental policies – in contrast to the OCU priests. Even

further, one of the respondents reported that they were forced to use the state contractors to film and broadcast their liturgies.

To summarize, all respondents from all religious groups acknowledged that the pandemic is an existential threat for churches. Importantly, the pandemic has become a global crisis that has affected basic everyday practices at the level of even a rural parish. Due to the loss of a certain number of parishioners, due to the competition between ministers who use different ways to change the sacraments under the conditions of the pandemic, each minister faced the challenge: what do we perceive as the church and its community? What should keep people together besides rituals like the Sunday liturgy? How to increase the level of spiritual awareness and practices under the conditions of remote contact? How to bring people back to the church by using the latest technology? Why should the church as a special place be attractive to young people? All these questions were and remain even more relevant for all priests, regardless of the jurisdiction and their scope of service. More importantly, they envisage the main challenge in how to find new and deep meaning in the rituals that are executed online or individually, and not through shared collective religious experiences. While these perceived threats are common for all groups, some churches reported unique challenges. Pandemic services, thus, were used to draw another line of division. In contrast, the issue for the UOC(MP) stems from the opposite situation – because their flocks are more devoted to the traditional rituals, they tend to ignore the anti-pandemic measures. In any way of church dynamics, pandemic opened up latent problems in every confession. "Thanks to the pandemic, we saw what works in our church, what doesn't, and it's time for all of us to think about communication with the parish," – a UGCC respondent mentioned after one year of service during the pandemic.

The challenges of the pandemic have once again revealed an identity discrepancy in the Orthodox environment of Ukraine, where the national can exceed the religious. That is, belonging to the Orthodox Church, which reflects the national identity of a Ukrainian, turns out to be the primary motivation for religious affiliation. This leads to the fact that as soon as the conditions for regular service change, part of the parishioners stop participating in spiritual gatherings, because they consider belonging to the church more important than practical faith and religious practices. This particularly applies to both public and hidden forms of confrontation between the UOC(MP) and the OCU.

Another common challenge faced by all churches is the lack of discussion and understanding of ancient practices, which are not only known, but also actively applied under various social challenges. The question of the Eucharist, distributed through spoons or in hand, became the most critical, not only because of hygiene standards, but also because of the possibility of a more democratic style of service. In most cases, at the institutional level, we observed the transfer of the responsibility of the church leadership to the personal responsibility and

awareness of the priest. Therefore, he had to find out on his own what could be changed, what the conditions for service from the local self-government and the police could be, and how seriously they should be taken. How to ensure a minimal level of security and conduct explanatory work among parishioners, etc. All these dilemmas and challenges were mostly overcome by the ministers on their own instead of being able to discuss them with the church leadership and understand how exactly to organize the spiritual life of the community further.

The pandemic exposed the weaknesses and lines of polarization that were present in the church environment. This affected all churches, and also exposed the problem of belief and belonging to the church practice of Ukrainians, who prefer to rely on cultural religious affiliation instead of direct participation in spiritual life. However, the pandemic crisis for the Orthodox environment of Ukraine became an important space for solving internal problems, which only intensified and deepened after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, which took place on February 24, 2022 and required much faster and more critical reactions of religious leaders as in the church leadership , as well as on the ground.

About the author

Tetiana Kalenychenko Ph. D. in Sociology of Religion, her thesis work about "Religious component in Socio-Political Conflict in Ukraine 2013-2017 years". Together with other colleagues, created an organization called "Dialogue in Action" that aims to develop culture of dialogue by uniting secular and religious leaders in the fieldwork. Tetiana has more than 10 years of experience in Peacebuilding, Sociology of Religion, Conflict studies, Conflict management, Restorative practices and dialogues in cooperation with international (USIP, OSCE, UNDP, USAID, MCC, DRC and others) and many national organizations. Educated as peacebuilder at Mirovna Academia (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina). She is combining work in the field of analysis and academic research as well as field work as dialogue facilitator and trainer in the frames of adult education.

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Orthodoxy and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Romania and Bulgaria: Political Turmoil, Informal Networks, and Religious Scepticism

by Lucian N. Leustean

Romania and Bulgaria stood out in the European Union as the countries with the lowest COVID vaccination rates. The article argues that Orthodox churches have played an influential role regarding the ways in which the population adhered (or failed to adhere) to national health measures. In Romania, the Church was divided between official and informal networks of social and political power which led to an increase in the far-right movement. In Bulgaria, the Church was closely associated with the government's stance towards supporting health measures and, in the long term, political protests became associated with anti-vaccination program.

Keywords: Orthodox Church, Romania, Bulgaria, COVID-19 pandemic, political protests, far-right political parties, the European Union, nationalism.

Introduction

Low COVID vaccination rates coupled with high death rates mark Romania and Bulgaria as exceptionally abysmal compared to other European Union (EU) countries. In November 2021, *The Guardian* published an article with an unsettling title: "Morgues fill up in Romania and Bulgaria amid low COVID vaccine uptake."[1] The article pointed out that the countries had the European Union's "highest daily death rates from COVID-19, after superstition, misinformation and entrenched mistrust in governments and institutions combined to leave them the least vaccinated countries in the bloc." What brought Romania and Bulgaria together was not only the fact that they were two predominantly Eastern Orthodox countries, but that they had the lowest vaccination rates in the European Union: 34.5% of Romania's population received two jabs, while in Bulgaria, the figure was even lower at 23.04% of the population. The figures in these two Eastern Orthodox countries contrasted with those of Western Catholic Spain, Malta, and Portugal in which over 80% of the population was vaccinated.

Data from John Hopkins University which monitored COVID-19 cases around the world between 1 March 2020 and 15 February 2022, shows a contrasting picture to that of other EU member states. In 2022, while in the category of "Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people," both countries are

somewhat around average, much lower than Germany and similar to that of the United Kingdom and Italy (Figure 1), Bulgaria and Romania rank first in "Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people" (Figure 2) and lower than other EU countries in regard to "Share of people who completed the initial COVID-19 vaccination protocol" (Figure 3). The link between the lack of vaccination and high mortality rate is evident in all these graphs.

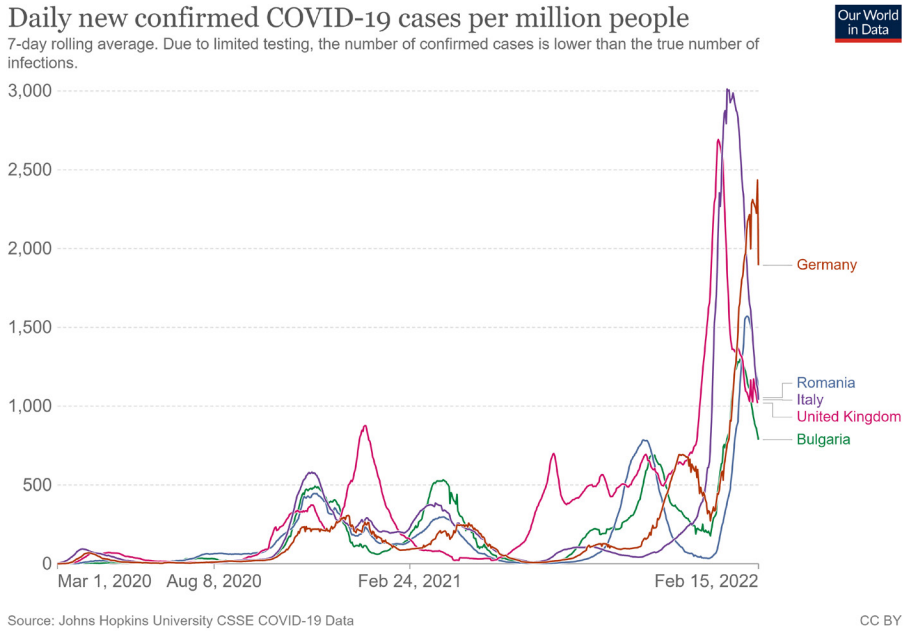

Figure 1. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people. Source: Our World in Data.

Orthodox churches are imbedded in the social fabric of Romania and Bulgaria. At the institutional level, Orthodox churches have retained close relations with the state authorities. The pandemic showed that institutional links have limits and that conformity to health measures relates to religiosity rather than top-down directives from religious and political leaders. In both countries, the Orthodox Church is considered to be one of the most trusted institutions by the local populations. However, the main difference between both countries is in terms of public attendance of religious services. In Bulgaria, despite over 70% of the population identifying as Orthodox and noted as one of the most secular states in Eastern Europe, just between 7%[2] and 9%[3] of the population are regular churchgoers; while in Romania, 24% of the population attend services on a weekly basis.[4]

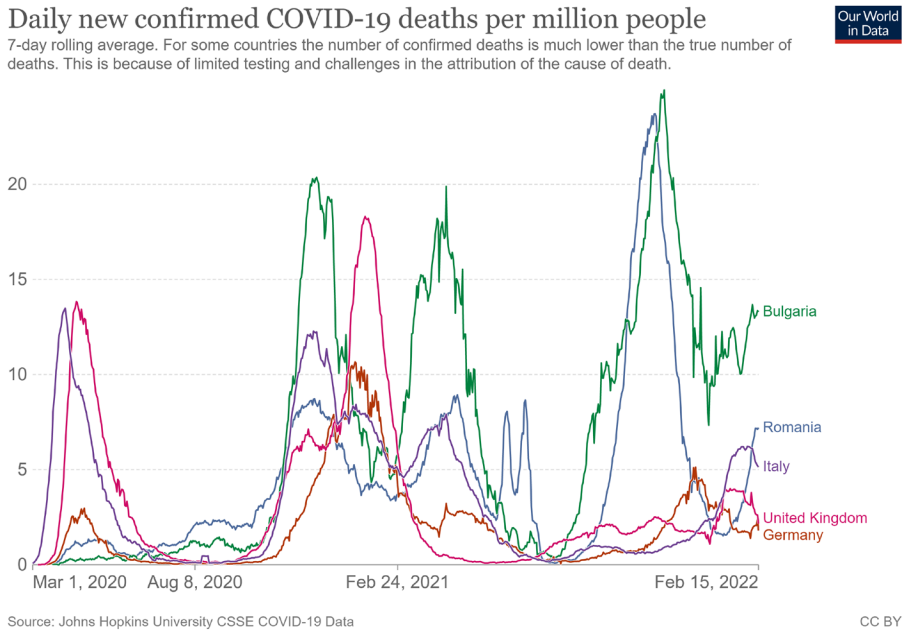

Figure 2. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people. Source: Our World in Data

This article investigates the interplay between religious and state authorities from January 2020, when the World Health Organization announced that a novel coronavirus emerged in Wuhan City, Hubei, China, until February 2022, at the end of the fourth COVID-19 wave when European countries began to lift pandemic restrictions. How have Orthodox churches, as institutional communities, in Romania and Bulgaria perceived the COVID-19 pandemic? In which ways have Orthodox churches in these countries responded to national state mobilisation in observing strict health measures and national vaccination programs? This article argues that in Romania, the Church was divided between official and informal networks of social and political power which led to an increase in the far-right movement. In Bulgaria, the Church was closely associated with the government's stance towards supporting health measures and, in the long term, political protests became associated with an anti-vaccination program.

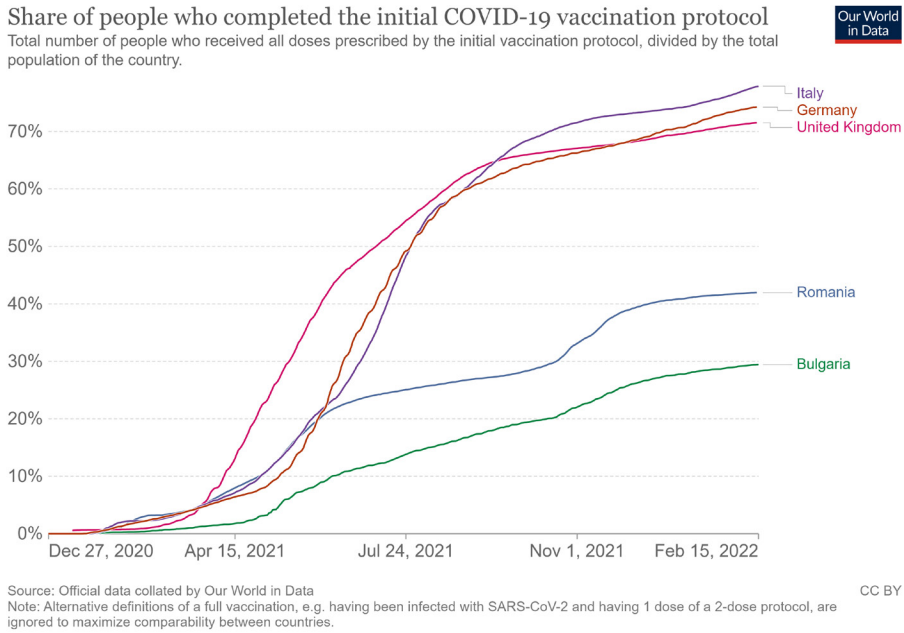

Figure 3. Share of people who completed the initial COVID-19 vaccination protocol. Source: Our World in Data

Romania: Between Formal and Informal Channels of Religious Communication

The pandemic started in an electoral year. In November 2019, the *Partidul Național Liberal* (National Liberal Party) appointed its prime minister, Ludovic Orban, to lead a minority government, and secured the re-election of President Klaus Iohannis, a pro-EU and reformist politician. The start of the pandemic in the winter of 2020 delayed the electoral process to autumn. Local elections were held on 27 November 2020, and legislative elections on 6 December 2020. The turnover was the lowest since 1989 with only 32% of the population voting.

The elections saw the emergence of a new right-wing political party which was set up only five months before the start of the pandemic, the *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, or AUR, (Alliance for the Union of Romanians) with 9.17% of votes (541,935 people) enabling it to reach 14 seats in the Senate and 33 in the Chamber of Deputies. The AUR was registered as a political party in September 2019 with an initial platform promoting the unification of Romania with the Republic of Moldova. The meteoric rise of the new party was due to a combination of factors including the absence of the right-wing Greater Romania Party from the Parliament since 2012, the strict health restrictions imposed by the government in tackling the pandemic and the religious card employed by the party's political

leadership.

As evident throughout 2020 and 2021, the ambiguous position of the Romanian Orthodox Church (RomOC) leadership towards the most appropriate ways of responding to the pandemic, the challenge of political decision, the lack of national mobilization to involve Orthodox parishes, and the pressure from monastic communities towards what was perceived as state interference in religious life, are key to understanding the low figures of vaccinated people.[5]

At first, the RomOC's response was similar to that in neighbouring Orthodox countries, namely a national debate on the use of liturgical tools in administering the sacraments. The most significant controversy was the use of the spoon in receiving the sacrament of the Holy Communion, seen in theological terms as the transfigured bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In response to the pandemic, the Romanian government issued the Military Ordinance no. 1 on 17 March 2020, and the Military Ordinance no. 2 on 21 March 2020, which restricted the movement of people with the whole country going into lockdown.[6] On 22 March the Holy Synod of the RomOC issued further instructions clarifying the Church's position. Orthodox services continued to be performed but without the physical presence of the faithful; they were transmitted via online networks and, at the national level, by the Church's channels, Trinitas TV, and Radio Trinitas. The faithful was encouraged to arrange a religious space for prayers inside private homes and to refrain from travelling to the nearby church. The priests were allowed to travel to administer Holy Communion or Holy Confession only after following travel regulation instituted by the local authorities. All faithful were encouraged not to leave their homes expect in an emergency. The Church was able to perform only three sacraments in person inside church buildings with the presence of the faithful, namely baptisms, weddings, and funerals, restricted to only eight people.

In addition to observing strict state measures, the Church provided its own weapons fighting against the disease, namely public processions with relics of saints. On 5 April, for the third time in the last three centuries, and for the first time since 1947, the relics of Saint Parascheva, protector of Moldova, from Iaşi left the metropolitan cathedral and went on public procession to Roman city, Piatra Neamţ, Tîrgu Neamţ, and three monasteries in the region, Bodeşti, Văratec, and Agapia. In all of the cities and villages to which the relics travelled, bells rang, and people welcomed the procession from their balconies.[7] On the same day, a procession took place in Bucharest, when the relics of Saint Dimitrie based in the patriarchal cathedral toured the key sites in the capital with prayers to end the pandemic.[8]

The exceptional travel restrictions meant that churches were unable to celebrate the Orthodox Easter on Sunday, 19 April. Informal channels of communication protesting against religious restrictions spread through Facebook. For example, Father Marcel Malanca, Dean of Negreşti Oaş in north-western

Romania, challenged the measures imposed by physician Raed Arafat, head of the Department for Emergency Situations, by claiming that his Department had no authority to shut churches.[9] The 2020 Easter was celebrated without the faithful in a largely symbolic gesture which demonstrated the powerful influence of the Church throughout Romanian society; with the help of local volunteers, each local parish organised impromptu ceremonies in which people were given the Holy Easter Light at home.[10] The dramatism surrounding the Easter celebration reached climax at the end of April when the Church announced that Archbishop Pimen of Suceava and Rădăuți was infected with the virus. The 90-year-old prelate was transported by helicopter to Bucharest where he died one month later.[11]

On 15 May, after the first wave of the pandemic and the lifting of partial travel restrictions, in consultation with the government, the RomOC issued new guidance on how to celebrate religious services. The faithful was able to attend services inside or outside a church, however, keeping a two-meter distance and following strict hygienic measures. Baptisms, weddings, and funerals were now able to accommodate sixteen people. The Holy Synod decreed that the use of a single spoon in administering the Holy Communion was not a standard requirement and that discussions were underway with other Orthodox churches.[12]

These decisions were welcomed by the clergy. In a highly unusual gesture, which reflected dissatisfaction with the state authorities, Archbishop Teodosie of Constanța, decided that in his diocese the Church would celebrate a second Easter to be held one week later, on the night of 26–27 May. The decision, which did not follow church norms, was presented by the Romanian Patriarchate as the desire of the local hierarch rather than a coordinated policy.[13]

On 2 December 2020, the Pfizer–BioNTech vaccine developed in Germany received temporary regulatory approval in the United Kingdom which began the first large-scale vaccination program. In the following weeks, most EU countries followed suit and approved the Pfizer–BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, and on 30 December 2020, the UK approved a second vaccine, the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19. The relatively fast process of developing and approving vaccines was regarded with high scepticism across Eastern Europe, and Romania was no exception. The change of government and the unexpected rise of the right-wing party in the December 2020 legislative elections led to an increase in the usage of religious symbolism in political speeches. The ambivalence of the RomOC towards the vaccination programs was evident in its communication with the faithful. Officially, the Church remained committed to health measures instituted by the state authorities. Each parish was instructed to promote a booklet titled "*Vaccinarea împotriva COVID-19 în România. Gratuită. Voluntară. Sigură*" ("Vaccination against COVID-19 in Romania. Free. Voluntary. Secure"), however, the hierarchy did not send any pastoral letters to the faithful in supporting the vaccination process. The booklet was presented by the Church as the most important measure in

communication directly with the faithful while local clergy were able to exert their authority as they saw fit regarding the most appropriate publicity means, such as speaking to the people, distributing, or placing it in the church where people could see it.[14]

The encouragement of far-right conspiracies became evident around Easter. In his pastoral letter, Bishop Sebastian of Slatina and Romanați, lamented that the previous year when the Church was forced to celebrate without the faithful was the "saddest Easter after the murder of Our Lord Christ." He doubted the efficacy of the vaccination program and claimed that the invention of new vaccines in just under a year was an example of "resetting the world." A similar approach to denouncing health measures which linked to far-right ideology came from Archbishop Teodosie of Constanța. At the same time as the government instituted social distancing and banned public events, he encouraged pilgrimages to continue in his diocese. When asked by a reporter if he felt that he would have people's lives on his conscience, he replied that "If it is time to leave this life, people go to God anyway." He asserted again his scepticism that the vaccine was beneficial and claimed that, in his view, "The Holy Communion is the most authentic vaccine."

The clash between these two visions in the Church continued. In June 2021, Abbot Zenovie from Nechit Monastery in Neamț county gave a sermon which was widely circulated in the mass media and highly criticised by both the Patriarchate and health officials. In an apocalyptic message, he claimed that the vaccine was

> *[...] anything, but not a vaccine. All those who have been vaccinated should expect the following diseases: terrible skin diseases, kidney failure, strokes, heart disease, neurological diseases, paralysis. People who have been vaccinated, in combination with the new unknown - the epidemic - will not be able to walk, they will be zombies, just like we see drug addicts. It will be the worst epidemic on earth.* [15]

Similar sermons were uttered in other monasteries. Teodosie Paraschiv, an influential clergyman from the iconic Durău Monastery, gave several sermons in which he claimed that a world government was imposed by aliens, and that the world population will be controlled through vaccine chips and magnets implemented during the vaccination program. He encouraged the faithful to oppose the vaccine for themselves and others: "You are getting vaccinated; you have signed your death sentence. Don't poison your children!"[16]

The Patriarchate's official position continued to be consistent with that of the health officials. Vasile Bănescu, the spokesman of the Patriarchate, asked the faithful to follow the local authorities rather than conspiracy theories or "apocalyptic mixing of vaccination with faith and theology."[17] In July 2021, Archbishop Nifon of Târgoviște had a similar message claiming that "the Christian Church is against ignorance, against superstitions of all kinds."[18]

Public pressure became more evident on the Patriarch himself to declare his

support for the vaccination program. On 22 July, when Patriarch Daniel turned 70 and was decorated by President Iohannis in a public ceremony, Bănescu pointed out that the Church has many times presented its official position over the last few months. Bănescu stated that "the Patriarch was a person like everyone else," "an individual with a personal medical profile," "who consulted with his doctors" and that "vaccination was a right not an obligation."[19] The uncertainty over the Patriarch's stance towards the vaccine lasted until November 2021, when Romania held one of the highest mortality rates in Europe. At the end of a meeting in the Parliament, the Patriarch was approached on the corridors by journalists and asked why he was not vaccinated. His brief response, "Of course, I am vaccinated, that's it" was impromptu and veiled in secrecy rather than a coordinated reaction of encouraging the faithful. He referred to the Church and state's authorities' official position that medical records were confidential and that all people should make a decision after discussion with their personal doctor.[20]

Bulgaria: Political Turmoil and Religious Scepticism

As in Romania, in the first two years of the pandemic, Bulgaria witnessed political uncertainty. Boyko Borisov, the second longest serving Prime Minister, who ruled the country intermittently since 2009, was at his third mandate in 2020. His pro-European Union conservative populist party, *Grazhdani za evropeĭsko razvitie na Bŭlgariya*, or GERB, (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), ruled together with two far-right parties, IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO) and the *Natsionalen front za spasenie na Bŭlgariya*, or NFSB (National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria). Bulgaria faced a major political crisis when the office of President Rumen Radev, a critic of Prime Minister Borisov, was raided by representatives of the specialized prosecutor's office on 9 July 2020, an act which led to widespread demonstrations lasting nearly a year, until 16 April 2021.[21] In May 2021, Borisov resigned, and two snap elections followed in July and November.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) stood out among South-eastern European countries as the only Church which continued to hold the Easter service in the first year of the pandemic. By contrast, in Greece, services were held only with cantors and clergy; in Romania and Serbia, the Church accepted the ban; in Ukraine and Russia, some churches were closed, particularly in the densely populated areas. The only country which followed a similar approach to that in Bulgaria was Georgia, where the Georgian Orthodox Church refused to follow government advice.[22]

The BOC's stance and the holding of the Easter service was coupled with the government's religious card in support of its policies. Uncertainty over the best way of responding to the pandemic was evident in the first few months of 2020.[23] Metropolitan Gabriel of Lovech claimed that only those who had a weak faith were contaminated and that "In no way has the contagion been transmitted and spread in churches where sacraments are performed! There have never been epidemics

in the Church."[24] On 10 March 2020, Patriarch Neophyte sent a letter to the faithful in which he encouraged attendance indicating that churches were open mainly because "The Holy Mysteries cannot be carriers of infection or any disease, but are a medicine for the healing of the soul and health."[25]

The Church's ambivalent stance was echoed by political leaders. Yordan Kirilov Tsonev, Deputy Chair of the Parliamentary Group "Movement for Rights and Freedoms" with studies in economics and a doctorate in Orthodox theology from Sofia University, stated that "no virus or infection can be transmitted during the services […] I will take the Eucharist from the shared spoon today because I genuinely believe that it brings us salvation."[26]

The Church's message was close to the far-right discourse. Volen Siderov, a Sofia city councillor and chairman of the nationalist party Attack, encouraged people to disobey the state of emergency. After Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, Head of the National Operational Headquarters for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic, appealed to the population to follow restrictions and stay at home, Siderov sent a press release with the headline: "Go out en masse at Easter and prove that God is above Mutafchiyski!"[27] The Church hierarchy's response to criticism of performing services was presented as following "God's Providence." Metropolitan Anthony for Central and Western Europe stated that if church buildings were shut, it would have been perceived as the Church "abandon[ing] the faithful in this difficult time […] God's providence is beyond any logic."[28]

In early June, as in many East European countries, the government relaxed its restrictions. Political clashes between the ruling coalition and the opposition became evident when Borissov's GERB party and the Socialist Party began to hold large-scale electoral gatherings which attracted a fine of 3,000 leva (around 1,500 euros) for not following social distancing. A few weeks later, the COVID-19 cases started to spike reaching 3,984 people and 207 deaths. Borissov himself was fined 300 leva for not wearing a protective mask during a religious service at Rila Monastery.[29] On 18 August, the Church announced that Metropolitan Ambrose of Dorostol passed away after being admitted to hospital with coronavirus symptoms.[30]

The Church's stance of continuing to perform services led to hierarchs and clergy not disclosing publicly when they became ill. An exception to the lack of public trust was in November 2020, when, in a radio broadcast Metropolitan Kyprian of Stara Zagora expressed his gratitude to doctors after he recovered from the virus. The broadcast mentioned that one priest from Vidin, two priests from Sofia and three priests from Nevrokop diocese died the previous week.[31]

With its public image affected by close relations with the political authorities and a lack of transparency regarding the number of ill clergy, the Church hierarchy attempted to present a more inclusive attitude towards those affected by the pandemic. On 10 December 2020, after a meeting with Bishop Polycarp of

Belogradchik, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov gave a public address on national television in which he pointed out the latest measures. Patriarch Neophyte's proposal that, from 20 to 26 December during the Christmas period, the clergy would go to hospitals and sprinkle the patients with holy water.

On 27 December 2020, the vaccination program was officially launched in Sofia with the first vaccines being received by two state and religious officials, namely Kostadin Angelov, Minister of Health, and the 75-year-old Bishop Tikhon of Tiberias, vicar of Patriarch Neophyte.[32] On 29 December, Borissov held a meeting with Bishop Evlogiy of Adrianople, abbot of the Rila Monastery, in which he expressed his gratitude for the Church's support, however, no public statements in support of the vaccination program was issued by the Church. The Holy Synod of the BOC only issued a short a statement confirming that Bishop Tikhon's vaccination was only a personal decision based on his previous medical training before he joined the Church hierarchy rather than a coordinated religious policy.

No other statements were made by the Church in relation to the vaccination schedule across the country. Bulgarian theologians defended the view that the Church did not become publicly involved in the national vaccination program for fears of being accused of becoming "an instrument of state policy."[33] In the following months, church-state relations did not lead to any major changes in support of the vaccination program. Prime Minister Borissov's four-year term ended on 12 May 2021, amid mass national protests, while Patriarch Neophyte's health deteriorated and he was hospitalised twice, in April and in June. The Holy Synod issued official statements with vague updates on his illness advising that he was not suffering from COVID-19.[34]

The election of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov in December 2021 represented a change in state policy towards the Church. For the first time in the last two decades, Petkov did not invite Patriarch Neophyte to attend the oath and inauguration ceremony of his premiership held in the National Assembly. Petkov was dissatisfied with the close relations between the previous administration and the Church hierarchy and the lack of Church support towards the vaccination campaign. Tense relation continued until the end of the fourth wave and the lifting of international travel restrictions.[35]

Conclusion

The lack of national mobilisation in Romania and Bulgaria towards mass vaccination programs demonstrated not only a mistrust in state institutions but most importantly that informal networks of communication and religious scepticism dominated public attitudes. In Romania, religious pressure exerted by influential hierarchs and monastic circles added to the mistrust of the local population into health measures. In the long term, religious scepticism fuelled the rise of far-right discourses. In Bulgaria, despite following the government health

measures, the Orthodox Church was allowed to hold the Easter service in the first months of the pandemic. Religious uncertainty towards the best way of engaging with health measures and increasing dissatisfaction with state authorities dominated the Bulgarian political protests.

The Orthodox Churches in both Romania and Bulgaria were deeply embedded in social structures. No health measures could be implemented by state authorities without the direct involvement of local and high-ranking religious leaders, not only because they reached rural populations, but also due to the legacy of church-state relations in defining the identity and religiosity of the faithful. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that, in both countries, state authorities could not work in a societal vacuum and that the Orthodox Churches were influential actors in ensuring that local populations adhered (or failed to adhere) to national health measures.

About the author

Lucian N. Leustean is a Reader in Politics and International Relations at Aston University, Birmingham, United Kingdom. His recent publications include, as co-editor with Grace Davie, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2021), with Victoria Hudson, *Religion and Forced Displacement in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022) and, as editor, *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2014).

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Ritual Arrhythmia and Religious Dissonance: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Greek and Cypriot Orthodoxies

by Vasilios N. Makrides and Eleni Sotiriou

This article analyzes the discussion and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic within the Orthodox Churches of Greece and Cyprus. First, we investigate the attitudes, responses, and reactions of these churches towards the various facets of the pandemic. Second, our research also covers the area of "lived religion" by exploring the religious practices of active believers and their responses to the transformations and innovations in their religious habits and towards official church policies. Using Lefebvre's "rhythmanalysis," we concentrate on the phenomenon of "ritual arrhythmia" that resulted not only in the disruption of ritual life, but also in ritual transformation and innovation. By combining these two different strands of research, we aim to provide a more holistic picture of what "pandemic Orthodoxy" looked like in our specific contexts.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Orthodox Church, Greece, Cyprus, church/state, rigorism/fundamentalism, conspiracy theories, lived Orthodoxy, ritual arrhythmia

Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic created numerous unprecedented challenges for all religions around the globe, including the Orthodox Christian Churches and cultures. Historically speaking, the Orthodox Churches were not against protection measures during such acute health emergencies in the past and also supported the use of scientific medicine in overcoming them. However, the recent pandemic often revealed a different face – one in which many Orthodox actors questioned medical authorities and refused hygienic and other measures (including vaccination) while relying exclusively on the powers of God and the supernatural to combat the pandemic. In this article, we focus our gaze on the impact of the pandemic within the Orthodox Churches of Greece and Cyprus (with some references to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople) in an attempt to locate common patterns of Orthodox responses and reactions towards it. We shall consider the main problems resulting from the pandemic and how they were addressed in both official and unofficial Orthodox discourses. In addition, we shall also cast a view on the area of "lived Orthodoxy" by examining the practices of active believers and

their responses to the transformations and innovations in their religious habits.

The Pandemic in Various Orthodox Discourses: The Issues at Stake

What were the specific aspects of the pandemic that were touched upon in Orthodox discourses, official and unofficial alike? In most cases, they were interrelated and fell under the following categories:

A first issue that characterized almost all the debates surrounding the pandemic from the very beginning was its constant contextualization on a broader conspiracy canvas, to which an "Orthodox twist" was usually given. Orthodox cultures in general have a particular penchant towards constructing conspiracy scenarios in a religious framework; for example, due to their problem-ridden relations to Western Christianity and the West in general. Hence, both Greece and Cyprus very quickly became prime locations of such phenomena.[1] The pandemic in its individual aspects was accordingly portrayed, usually in a diffused way, as part of an internationalist plan aimed at creating a global government and religion, connected to the curtailment of national sovereignty, personal freedom, and Orthodox identity. Such imagined scenarios became widespread especially within the broader current of Orthodox rigorism/fundamentalism. In Cyprus, a bishop that made headlines in this context was Neophytos, Metropolitan of Morphou, whose influence could also be observed among many believers in Greece as well. According to him, the pandemic was part of such a "new world order" aimed at eliminating large numbers of people globally in order to create a new elitist and obedient generation of humans.

In connection to the above point, a further reaction to the pandemic in the first months after its eruption was its full negation, combined with an underestimation of the dangers posed by it (e.g., coronavirus downgraded to a mere flu). The whole issue was presented by many Orthodox believers as "fake news" obfuscating ulterior hidden motives, such as disorienting people by making them susceptible to central control and manipulation. The early strict measures taken by the Greek and Cypriot governments regarding Orthodox worship, which especially affected the Holy Week and Easter services, were deemed as a camouflaged attempt to alter the Orthodox character of the respective countries. In addition, the fact that the Orthodox Churches finally complied with the state measures was often interpreted as a betrayal of their prophetic mission in society and their authentic identity.

Moreover, even greater reactions were provoked within the church hierarchy and among numerous believers by the state decisions about an obligatory confinement and restriction rules in the spring of 2020 including shutdowns, lockdowns, exit strategies, isolation, and social distancing, which were also applied to church buildings and services. Such restrictions were not only assumed to impinge upon religious freedom and basic human rights, but also seen as exhibiting a clear anti-Orthodox spirit. Church services experienced dramatic changes during Lent,

Holy Week and Easter and took place solely with the presence of a few clergy and personnel. Instead, the faithful could celebrate them at home, either by following the services digitally or performing rituals symbolically (e.g., on the balconies and the yards of their homes holding candles during the Easter service). Popular pilgrimage places were also affected by these measures.[2] Officially, despite initial reservations, the churches kept an attitude of compromise, supporting the state measures and legitimizing such alternative modes of worship (e.g., through the concept of "domestic church"). However, simultaneously, several bishops, priests and monks disobeyed state and church prescriptions and kept performing "secret liturgies" linking them symbolically in the Orthodox mind to the persecutions experienced by the early Christians in the Roman Empire. As the pandemic lingered on, additional disruptions and restructurings of Orthodox ritual life continued well into the spring of 2021 (e.g., celebrating Easter at 21.00 instead of the traditional 24.00 o'clock). Given the importance of every detail in the Orthodox ritual tradition, such measures were deemed by many believers as grave deviations from the sacred tradition. Interestingly enough, reactions to such state measures also came from the medical side. In Cyprus, there was a petition signed by 152 doctors and nursing personnel addressed to the Cypriot President taking a stance against lockdown measures and supporting the Orthodox tradition, which were, in the end however, dismissed as populist interventions into church affairs by Archbishop Chrysostomos II.

An immediate consequence of such social distancing measures was the enhanced digitalization of the entire spectrum of human life and work including the Orthodox ritual domain. This change triggered widespread fears about a fully virtual church life, a development that would have multiple repercussions for the self-conceptualization of Orthodox Christianity as an "embodied religion," as Orthodox worship strongly feeds on a sense of community and interpersonal relations. For example, a virtual community of believers could never amount to the experiential advantages and the emotional significance of celebrating Easter in presence in a church building with all the ritual richness and festivities. In other words, the pandemic brought about an era of "ritual arrhythmia," by which we refer to an overall disruption of habitual ritual life, which will be taken under scrutiny in the next section. Officially, however, the enforced digitalization of ecclesiastical life was regarded as a temporary measure that was justifiable according to the principle of "church economy" (i.e., the lenient application of church rules). In any event, this did not pertain to the sacrament of the Eucharist, a very sensitive issue during the pandemic.

What is also striking is that in this context even the state-imposed hygienic and other protection measures were met with an ambiguous stance by numerous Orthodox actors. These measures included: the obligatory use of facemasks, antiseptics for hand disinfection, controlled waiting of worshippers at the entrance

of church buildings, safety distances, and a limit on the maximum number of people allowed inside a church building, as well as insuring for their good ventilation, refraining from shaking hands, frequent and meticulous cleaning of icons, other religious objects and surfaces, and the distribution of the consecrated bread with rubber gloves. In general, both Orthodox Churches officially supported these new rules, and there is also evidence that many believers seemed to comply with them too. Markedly – especially in light of the hygienic anxiety brought about by the pandemic –, the Holy Communion and the traditional way of its distribution were not touched upon by the state in the framework of these obligatory measures, which was a development that generally pleased the respective church leaderships. However, in reality, various parish priests professing dissident views allowed parishioners to bypass these measures or not to apply them at all. Following a "logic of transcendence," they believed that under the protection of God sanitary measures in a church building, the abode of God, were trivial and totally unnecessary. Be that as it may, the growing neglect of such measures led to a rising number of infections in church buildings resulting in many deaths of priests and even bishops.

One of the measures that was especially targeted was the obligatory use of facemasks. The main pro-mask argument on the side of the church referenced the protection of oneself and the others – a central action of Christian responsibility based on the love of one's neighbor. Yet, opinions did vary on this matter considerably. Many Orthodox believers interpreted facemasks as a means to curtail the very characteristics of the human person created in the image and likeness of God, as they could hide and constrain emotions, sentiments, individuality, and freedom. The latter are considered indispensable in the context of the multisensory Orthodox worship (e.g., for the visual and physical interaction between icons and believers). Such masks could thus lead to a non-physical, artificial disruption of the divine-human communion. Wearing masks especially in the holy place of a church building was also regarded as a symbol of a distorted and deficient view of Orthodox faith, as where there is faith, there should be no fear, which the mask had become emblematic of. Hence, there have been incidents of priests interrupting religious services and asking individual participants to take off their facemasks.

Turning our attention now to the sacrament of the Holy Communion, this was a very sensitive issue because of the way it is traditionally transmitted to the faithful, namely by using a common chalice and a shared spoon.[3] This practice had triggered some suspicions or fears in the past about the potential transmission of viruses due to the unavoidable mixing of human saliva. Yet, in practical terms, this has never been an issue, and no measures were ever taken due to a potential epidemiological problem. This sacrament was always considered to prove the "supernatural" and "miraculous" character of Orthodox worship, given that it has never been associated with a pandemic eruption or the spread of diseases in

the past. As already mentioned, during the recent pandemic, its suspension was never part of the protection measures imposed by the state. For the Greek and Cypriot Churches, the whole matter was *a priori* non-negotiable. The same stance was initially kept by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, yet it came to finally adopt a more lenient policy in June 2020, especially because of its numerous dioceses around the globe, which had to obey to local state prescriptions.[4] This gave the leeway for various policies in each different country. For example, in Germany the Greek Orthodox Metropolis had to completely suspend this ritual for believers. Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, on the other hand, approved the use of separate disposable spoons for the Holy Communion.

Interestingly enough, some prominent medical experts (e.g., the epidemiologists Eleni Giamarellou and Athina Linou) in Greece publicly claimed that the Holy Communion does not pose a public health threat, because it is a mystery and a miracle performed by God. Similar opinions were formulated by other medical experts.[5] Yet, such judgements were deemed to be at odds with the medical profession as such, hence causing the outrage of their more secular colleagues. In any event, there are no reliable epidemiological data about the potential transmission of diseases through Holy Communion. There is solely one serious study of the US Centers for Control and Prevention of Diseases (CDC), which did not provide any specific data that this ritual transmits infectious diseases.[6] Theoretically, there is a risk of contamination of healthy people through a common communion cup and related germ exposure,[7] but no outbreaks of diseases were linked to this practice. In Cyprus, the same issue was raised in the aforementioned petition of doctors and nursing personnel, who fully supported the dominant Orthodox account about the miraculous sacrament of the Holy Communion. The entire discussion revealed once more the constant blurring of boundaries between religion and science as well as the sheer ambiguity surrounding this sacrament and its understanding.

A final aspect of the pandemic that was very controversially discussed throughout 2021 until the spring of 2022 involved the issue of vaccination. The whole issue concerned a multifaceted anti-vaccine movement of global proportions including members of the medical profession and far beyond the religious domain. Numerous Orthodox actors became quite vocal in objecting vaccination (especially vaccines with an RNA technique) within a conspiracy framework. There was a large array of theological or pseudo-scientific anti-vaccine arguments, while the state-imposed obligatory vaccination was discarded as a new form of totalitarianism restricting human freedom. Empirical surveys have shown that the percentage of unvaccinated persons was considerably high in church milieus, monasteries, ecclesiastical academies, and university schools of theology.[8] In Greece, the church issued an official encyclical aimed at offering persuasive answers to all queries and doubts about vaccines,[9] but this was not effective in curbing the anti-vaccine opposition among the clergy. It is thus not accidental that numerous unvaccinated bishops,

priests, and monks died as a result of their disapproval. The most prominent case in the public eye concerned the Metropolitan of Aitolia and Akarnania Kosmas, who even refused medical help and hospitalization. Nevertheless, the majority of the Greek clergy were in favor of vaccination. In Cyprus, the previously mentioned Metropolitan Neophytos continued his conspiracy-driven anti-vaccine rhetoric. Characteristically, the Church of Greece officially called on its Cypriot counterpart to ask the outspoken Metropolitan to tone down his rhetoric due to its wider detrimental influence among the faithful in Greece as well. Officially, the Cypriot Archbishop Chrysostomos II issued strong guidelines for priests and theologians to receive vaccination and backed the government's related campaign from the very start.

Pandemic Implications on "Lived Orthodoxy"

Drawing on interviews and fieldwork mainly in Greece, our research also covered the area of "lived religion" during the pandemic, which was characterized by an emergence of new forms of ritual behavior. Using Lefebvre's "rhythmanalysis,"[10] we categorized the consequences of the pandemic as "ritual arrhythmia," especially because churchgoers were deprived from the possibility of being present in important Orthodox services and rituals including the Holy Week and Easter. This meant a breakdown of the usual time-space structures of religious experience with dramatic effects on the lives of believers. Despite criticism and opposition, most of our interlocutors could understand the logic behind the state-imposed protection measures. This was also because the stance of the church at the beginning was particularly criticized on social and other media by various secular actors as lacking the necessary flexibility in the view of the enormous challenges posed by the pandemic.[11] On the other hand, some of our interlocutors interpreted the measures taken (e.g., the silencing of church bells) not only as unnecessary, but also as part of a war against the church and Orthodoxy. Such criticisms reflected the need to reclaim the rhythm of ritual life, thereby resisting the silence that might have resulted through the complete annihilation of Orthodox identity. In general, "ritual arrhythmia" produced, on the one hand, a crisis of the collective Orthodox identity exemplified in fears, violent reactions, and discord within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and between the clergy, the laity, and the state. On the other hand, it also allowed for creative strategies of adaptation and innovation in Orthodox rituals, beliefs, and practices. The final result was not so much a coherent scheme of action, but rather a multitude of religious responses and practices, both on the part of the official church and of the laity.

While the closure of churches and the prohibitions on religious practices were opposed by our interlocutors, they usually found new ways to observe their rituals, either through livestreaming liturgical services on their computer or television screens or creating a "domestic church" in their homes. One female interlocutor

even turned her dining table into a "Holy Altar," covered with a white lace cloth and adorned with icons, an oil lamp, and big candlesticks. This was a means to compensate for the lost "liveness" of the church, both as a space filled with sacred objects that produce specific embodied experiences of the divine and as a space for the congregation of the faithful. It was a symbolic relocation of the church in the domestic sphere, manifesting more private and informal religious experiences and practices centered on individual and familial needs and concerns – especially on part of women who have always been the virtuosi of everyday Orthodox practices. The sensuous character and the important role, which materiality plays in shaping the religious experience of the laity[12] in Orthodox Churches, were clearly visible in the creation of homemade *Epitaphioi* for the commemoration of Christ's Passion and death on Good Friday in both Greece and Cyprus. Some of them were later even donated to the respective parish churches, expanding their ritual life and "sacralising" them even further, thus adding meaning to them beyond just being a mere substitution for an original and official sacral object.[13]

Furthermore, some of our interlocutors realized that in using the "comments" section underneath livestreams of religious services they could relate to other Greek Orthodox Christians all over the globe. Hence, social distancing had not only transferred the building of community into the digital domain, but also resulted in the collapse of the inside/outside boundary and extended the physical spaces in which communal worship of the sacred could take place. During the Easter service, balconies, gardens, and yards as in-between spaces unofficially became "spaces of religion" where individual bodies could keep safe and "alive," while at the same time allowing for the "liveness" of communal worship, yet from a safe distance. It is obvious that "ritual arrhythmia" during the pandemic facilitated the creation of new temporal and spatial frames by blurring the boundaries between secular and sacred, public and private, physical and virtual, as well as clergy and laity. In this way, new opportunities were generated for the maintenance of Orthodox identity, yet all the while there was also contestation and refusal to adopt new ways of "being Orthodox."

Conclusion

The stances of the Orthodox Churches in Greece and Cyprus during the pandemic have both been praised and criticized, using different criteria and perspectives. In our view, the pandemic once more brought to the fore a deep cleavage between a reactionary, radical, conspiracy-driven and fundamentalist-oriented Orthodoxy and another one, which is more moderate, pragmatic, reasonable and even liberal to a considerable degree. These trends and the concomitant polarizations between them can be observed both at the grassroots level and within the church hierarchy. What ensued was an "Orthodox polyphony" that was further accentuated by the constant blurring of boundaries between scientific medical and religious

discourses. The same ambiguity can also be observed at another level, namely in the relations between fidelity to tradition and changes and adaptations in perspectives and practices. The pandemic did act as a catalyst for changes within Orthodoxy, although some spoke of a "missed chance" for the church to introduce important changes without jeopardizing the "essence" of the Orthodox faith.[14]

At the level of "lived religion," the pandemic brought about many changes in the ways that Orthodoxy was enacted, performed, and embodied. The pandemic disturbed the "habitual rhythm" of religious life and produced a pathology of uncertainty, anxiety, and skepticism. But this "ritual arrhythmia" brought about new forms of "sacral individuality," since it promoted individual rather than communitarian worship for the sake of keeping the congregational "body" healthy. At the same time, it also created new forms of "sacral communitarianism" by generating new "spaces of religion," both in the digital and in the physical domain and in the interplay of both, where community worship could take place. In some cases, it also bred disunity and contestation since it went against the traditional way of doing things. Finally, during the pandemic the locus of religious worship largely shifted to the "domestic church," formally acknowledging the religious expertise of women, a fact that somewhat upset old hierarchies. Which of these changes will endure in the post-pandemic era remains to be seen.

About the authors

Vasilios N. Makrides has studied in Athens, at Harvard and in Tübingen, and since 1998 has been Professor of Religious Studies (specializing in Orthodox Christianity) at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Erfurt, Germany. His main research interests lie in the religious-cultural history and sociology of Orthodox Christianity as well as in the relations between the Orthodox East and the Latin West and in the Greek Orthodox diaspora in Eastern and Western Europe. His latest book publication is *Orthodoxy in the Agora: Orthodox Christian Political Theologies Across History*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024 (co-edited with Mihai-D. Grigore).

Eleni Sotiriou is a sociologist and social anthropologist, and an independent researcher, who has previously taught at the University of Erfurt, Germany. Her research interests focus on the relations between women, socio-cultural change, and religion, particularly within Greek Orthodoxy.

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Believers and Priests during COVID-19: Serbian Orthodox Church Liturgical Practices

by Stefan Radojkovic

Serbian Orthodox Church clergy's reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020 were, if anything, as complex and diverse as the thinking and actions of believers in Serbia (including Kosovo-Metohija). This was particularly visible regarding the need for liturgical practice adaptation and the way of administering communion. In order to untangle complex issue of contradictory and undefined statements, recommendations, and consequential actions taken by priests and believers, lived religion approach was applied to uncover whether liturgical practices were adapted and in what way. Also, we have outlined reasons that could explain the adaptations during a global crisis.

Keywords: Serbian Orthodox Church, COVID-19, priests, believers, liturgy, communion, lived religion.

Return of the Serbian Orthodox Church – Reactions

Just as the return of religion was noticed in societies across the globe during the 1980, the same could be said of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Communist Yugoslavia. Ensuing public and scientific debates about the SOC's comeback were rife with arguments from both proponents and opponents.[1] Accordingly, and this is especially true for the post-Yugoslav period, SOC documents and official announcements were closely analysed. Interviews were conducted with both prominent SOC representatives and their critics. The general Serbian public was surveyed about religion. Conclusions among sociologists ranged from Orthodox Christians' utter inability to accept and understand modern life, democracy and human rights in particular, to their ability to accept its economic and technological achievements only.[2] Although few and far between in term of sheer volume, responses from the Church followed along these lines:

> *These democratic processes are slowed down by 'masked' Communist nomenclatures and oligarchies, and by incorrect perceptions of democracy, human rights, and freedoms (democracy is seen by many as a source of unlimited wealth and hedonism, or as a source of unlimited and unrestricted rights and freedoms).*[3]

Even after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a kind of trigger for discussions among sociologists and for theological debates within the SOC,[4] there is little evidence of fruitful exchange of opinions between these two, notwithstanding exceptions such as *Teologija.net*.[5] Part of the explanation can be found both within

SOC history[6] and history of sociology during Communist Yugoslavia and after it.[7]

On the other hand, one could find a plethora of divergent positions taken by both Bishops and their clergy alike. The main issue was the (in)acceptability of holding Sunday liturgies in the extraordinary conditions of the pandemic; at its core was the question of communion's hygienic adequacy. More specifically, was it necessary to adapt the established liturgical and communion practice of the believers to the situation; if so, in what way and to what extent?

Bishop Dimitrije (Rađenović) made 11 recommendations to clergy and believers of his diocese, some of which refer to the adjustment of previous liturgical practice, but not to the conduct of communion.[8] In contrast, Bishop Grigorije (Durić) pointed out current non-existence of any official attitude of SOC regarding COVID-19 as well as the rather broad stance of the Synod which can be interpreted differently.

In fact, the Synod issued two announcements.[9] In addition to the expected criticism from the civil society, there were voices from the SOC itself, which not only questioned some Synod's decisions, but also strengthened the impression of the lack of a coherent attitude within SOC towards COVID-19. Among those voices was appearance of Fr. Vukašin Milićević on a well-known TV show where, on the one hand, he emphasized the need to adjust communion to the current situation and, on the other, he expressed skepticism about the possibility of applying the Synod's recommendations.[10] Namely, in the third letter from March 28, the Synod's office recommended that sick people and people over the age of 65 should not come to liturgies, but should receive communion at home.[11] Also, the Synod did not ban the holding of liturgies or the administration of communion to believers, although it did try to limit the number of people present at liturgies by calling for respect regarding official prevention measures.

As Easter approached (19 April 2020), the views of SOC dignitaries did not become any more harmonized than they were at the beginning of the pandemic and its outbreak that coincided with Easter Lent. Jorgačević not only confirms the diverse range of SOC Bishops' decisions, but also tries to point out their attainments.[12] Specifically, Jorgačević raises the issue of respect for the recommendations, both Synodal and episcopal, by believers on Easter day. If the insights presented in her text are to be believed, the reactions of believers were equally, if not more, complex.

Making Sense of the Complex Situations

First, global religions and local beliefs, i.e. the human need for spirituality and meaning, have not been overcome. Based on Casanova's findings religion in Europe has emerged from the private lives of individuals, especially since the 1980s, and now penetrates the sphere of public life.[13] In fact, Casanova points out the border porosity between private and public life, affecting relations between church institutions and the state and between believers and parish priests.[14] Being more

radical in her critique, Ammerman believes that theories of modernization fail to explain why societies, during the process of modernization and development, incorporate and promote religious sentiments and practices instead of pushing them into the domain of the private.[15]

On the other hand, Blagojević argues that return of religion in public sphere (*desecularization* of Serbian society, in our case) could be explained by major socio-political turbulences and long-lasting social crisis (e.g. dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia) i.e. "revitalization of the religion and church was not a result of an eminently religious process in terms of sincere and deep change in the spiritual life of people, […]."[16] In his subsequent article, Blagojević has modified his previous statement to certain extent. Although primacy of socio-political factors is undisputed, individual spiritual transformation is not only possible but part of the equation as well; just not on a socially relevant, mass scale.[17]

If that is the case – individuals are able to act autonomously in a religious way, within the context of certain socio-political situation – I am more interested in exploring their contemporary religious practices and sentiments; but, how to do that? The *lived religion* approach – named after the 1994 joint collection of works by American sociologists and historians – represents one of the alternatives to the dominant ways in which we deal with religious issues. The emphasis is on researching the authentic religious experience and practice of both individuals and religious groups.[18] A similar turn took place within history. According to Kjeldstadli, the new wave of historians is expanding the field of their interest (chronologically, geographically, and in terms of society), as well as their research methods.[19] On the one hand, writing is more problem-oriented, with a synthetic approach prevailing according to which it is the whole that matters, rather than its parts;[20] on the other hand, instead of analysing SOC documents (classic historical approach) or public opinion polls (mainstream sociological approach), new research methods are more appropriate to anthropology (e.g., participatory observations of religious ceremonies and interviews with believers).

To put it more precisely, I have embarked on a sort of "walking the wire" venture between the exploration of authentic religious practices and experiences of believers and their priests while simultaneously trying to take the *lived religion* approach for a test drive. The goal is to see if we can bridge the gap not only between proponents and opponents for a SOC public life comeback, but also to update our understanding of religious people as persons not opposed to modernization but active participants in this process.

Researching the Complex Situations

It was a relatively simple challenge to operationalize and determine the research subject of SOC believers' daily religious practices in Serbia (including Kosovo-Metohija) during COVID-19. The main question of aforementioned discussions was

the hygienic adequacy of communion, i.e. was it necessary to adapt established communion practice to the circumstances? If it was, in what way and to what extent were they adapted?

Starting on 21 March 2021 until the liturgy held on 13 June nine field trips to observe and participate in liturgical life of the believers were conducted at four locations.[21] Of these four locations, two in Belgrade and one in Kosovo-Metohija proved to be of special importance, and therefore the subject of analysis. In particular, I participated three times each in the liturgical life of the parish Church of Transfiguration[22] and the graveyard Church of St. Tryphon,[23] both located in Belgrade; on the other hand, I started my field work by going to Gračanica Monastery. Due to the unexpected finding, I repeated the participatory observation once more time before the end of the field work on 13 June 2021. It should be noted, the majority of field trips took place during Easter Lent.

In addition to notes and photographs, participation in the liturgical life of Belgrade church communities produced interviews with two focus groups,[24] during July and August 2021.[25] It was impossible to apply the same research method when it came to Kosovo-Metohija, because it would imply continuous presence in the field. Due to logistical restrictions, 2 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with SOC believers from Kosovo-Metohija were conducted (Tatjana Lazarević and Darko Dimitrijević, both prominent within their respective communities).

In addition, due to the intrinsic advantages and limitations of both research methods, I conducted two more 'control' interviews with experts from academia and media sector.[26] Interviews with Marko Veković,[27] professor of religion and politics, and Jelena Jorgačević,[28] journalist in charge of religious topics reporting, were necessary not only to analyze the behavior of SOC and its believers during COVID-19, but also for the critical rethinking of my initial premises alongside the preliminary findings.

Liturgical Practices in Serbia during COVID-19

I started our research work by visiting the Gračanica Monastery. Already during the first field trip on 21 March 2021, liturgical changes were visible. Although the liturgy officially begins at 8 am – as indicated at the entrance of the Monastery – on this occasion it started at around 7 am so as to end before 9 am. Due to this unexpected change, I had to repeat field-work (i.e., participatory observation) once more. Despite a second attempt to attend the liturgy, and this time from the beginning, I was unsuccessful. I received an explanation for this behavior from the local priest during an informal conversation with a parishioner at hand. It was an unwritten rule aimed at reducing the number of believers attending the liturgy, hence fewer opportunities for spreading the disease. Jelena Jorgačević, a journalist at *Vreme* news magazine and one of the interviewees, pointed out the fact that this liturgical change is not an isolated incident: "I know the priests who did that in

Belgrade. They say that there will be a liturgy at 8 or 9; they start an hour earlier so as not to make a crowd. When the communion starts, there are not too many of them indoors. And I heard that from several priests."

Further research of liturgical practices revealed additional reasons behind the changes. The village of Goraždevac (Kosovo-Metohija) has developed its own liturgical practices. According to Darko Dimitrijević,[29] editor of the local radio station, in order to avoid confrontation with the local administration

> *We organized ourselves so that we had a priest in the church with five other people; also, we had five more people at the gate, next to the door on the right; on the left side of the church, five more people so we didn't gather and concentrate in one place. [...] So, the goal is not to create a problem for the priest or for ourselves, after all.*

Similarly, churches in Belgrade, which were visited during our field trips, undertook liturgical changes. The front doors of one parish church were left wide open during our first visit and in front of them an average of five to ten people carefully followed the liturgy. Most of the believers stood quietly inside the parish church, some with protective masks over their faces. In contrast, a cemetery church did not keep the door open. Instead, speakers were placed on the wall near the entrance, i.e., the altar was equipped with a sound system. Although significantly smaller than the above-mentioned parish church, the cemetery church was completely occupied (approximately fifty people, some with masks). Additionally, a dozen believers stood in front of the shut door while closely following the liturgy over the speakers. The liturgical practice had undergone certain changes, obviously. The open door of the parish church suggested the use of the churchyard as an alternative space for the liturgy. Nada, one of the interlocutors from the parish church congregation, confirmed it: "Our church worked normally, except during one period when the liturgy was held outside."[30] In the case of the cemetery church, the yard around the church was used as additional space, thanks to the audio equipment.

However, the Gračanica Monastery/Goraždevac church and the churches in Belgrade carried out different measures. While liturgical changes were adopted by all, churches in Belgrade changed the practices of communion as well. For example, Petar did receive communion but took the advice of cemetary church priest: "Our priest advised us not to take full spoon with our mouths, in the way we usually do."[31] Goran, one of the regular attendees at the cemetery church liturgies, pointed out during our conversation there was no uniform answer by the priests to the question of an acceptable way for administering communion: "We hear that it was different in other churches. There was not one particular position on the matter, also. Maybe there should have been one." Ljuba, an interviewee from the parish church, indirectly confirmed Goran's thoughts by providing information about

the awkward situation in the church located just outside Belgrade: "I heard from my own sister, when some people came to receive communion, there was a bit of frowning. They wanted to take communion, but they would not open their mouths. Over time, they gradually freed themselves from it."

These differences have not gone unnoticed by our interlocutors. Tatjana Lazarević, *KoSSev's* editor-in-chief and a well-informed person with a critical mind, is familiar with the adapted liturgical practices by the SOC churches.[32] She considers the need for communion self-evident: "For example, I fully understand people who treat communion the same way nowadays as they did before. The very act of communion, I completely understand that. I also think that is completely right for the Church authorities to look for a way to protect the believers. I think that is not unfamiliar to Christianity." Jorgačević believes that parishes outside of Belgrade are "livelier," and that this has a special credence in Kosovo-Metohija province where Gračanica and Goraždevac are situated: "The only institution that, in my opinion, maintains ties with the people there helps those people, especially in the enclaves [Serbian rural areas in Kosovo and Metohija], is the SOC. The same goes for those Serbs who are not believers." In other words, the relationship between priests and believers is extremely important according to the *Vreme* journalist – the metaphor *living Church* is frequently used in the interview when describing their interaction – which partly explains why communion practices in Kosovo-Metohija differ from those in Belgrade.

The second part of the explanation, of course, lies in the fact that belonging to the SOC is part of the Serbian community identity. We cannot ignore the fact that in conditions of *double isolation* – Živojin Rakočević's description of Kosovo Serbs life during the pandemic[33] – SOC churches and monasteries become areas of even more pronounced identity significance. Therefore, it is not surprising that for the inhabitants of Goraždevac, the modest celebration of the village's patron saint (14 May, St. Jeremiah), in accordance with the epidemiological regulations, is of great importance.[34]

Clergy adaptations to COVID-19

The key word is *adaptation* to the emergency situation during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia, including Kosovo-Metohija province (March 2020–May 2021). The primary challenge for faithful ones was how to follow, to the greatest extent possible, medical recommendations and administrative regulations; at the same time, how to practice one's faith in accordance with these recommendations and regulations, and sometimes despite the imposed restrictions. Priests and their parishioners found themselves between a hammer, i.e., responsibility towards society in a time of crisis and an anvil – the need to practice their faith. There were various creative solutions applied, both in the way the liturgy itself was performed, and in the ways communion was administered.

The only predictable thing about it was the striking absence of a uniform response from parish priests to the controversy over the hygienic concerns. To quote Jorgačević, if someone is looking for a homogeneous SOC position on any issue, "it does not exist. The Serbian Orthodox Church is a heterogeneous multitude, and we see it in dozens of examples, on most important social issues. As a final point, that is the case with the pandemic."[35]

From the interviews with various interlocutors, as well as from our visits, it can be concluded that parish priests, at times with an agreement amongst the parishioners as in Goraždevac, applied certain tactics aimed at reducing the number of believers present at liturgies; consequently, a reduction in the number of those who wished to receive communion was achieved. At other places, all did not welcome the priests' adaptations. Dragan, an interviewee from a Belgrade parish church, witnessed a unique way in which the priest there administered communion to believers – pouring communion from a certain height into wide open mouths; in his estimation, the priest was young and therefore probably inexperienced or inconsiderate.[36]

Regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed, approved, or condemned, showed understanding for the priests and their adapted liturgical and/or communion practices, interviewed believers agreed on one thing without exception. According to Tomislav, who was one of the most eloquent and unrestrained interlocutors from the Belgrade parish church congregation, when everything is taken into account adaptation is not important because: "I need Christ. If you are going to give me [communion] with a metal, wooden or plastic spoon, give it to me. If you're going to pour it to me from a meter or ten-centimeter distance, give it to me. I take communion with Christ in order to live. I don't live to receive communion; I receive communion to keep on living until the next communion."[37] In other words, despite the lack of uniform liturgical practices in churches, the need for communion among believers is unquestionable. The only thing that was unknown was the way the local clergy responded to their needs.

About the author

Stefan Radojković, PhD (1984), graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Department of History (2009). He continued his post-graduate studies at the Faculty of Political Sciences (FPN) of the University of Belgrade, where he obtained a master's degree in political science for international affairs in 2014. The same year in November, he enrolled in doctoral academic studies (International and European Studies) at FPN. In September 2024, he defended his doctoral dissertation on the survival practices of the Serbs in Kosovo-Metohija. As an expert associate at the Genocide Victims' Museum (MŽG) in Belgrade, from July 2018 until June 2022 he participated in the projects 'Crimes on the Territory of the

Former Yugoslavia in the 20th and 21st Century' and 'Encyclopedia of Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia'. He has been employed at the Institute for Political Studies since February 2023, currently as a research associate.

Endnotes

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22 Dates are as follows: April 11, April 18 and May 23.

23 Dates are as follows: April 4, May 2 and May 16.

24 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 501–513.

25 Although I am part of the religious community generally speaking, parishioners needed time to get used to me in order to do interviews. Dates for focus group interviews are as follows: July 28 (parish church) and August 8 (graveyard church).

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Contact
University of St.Gallen
Center for Governance and Culture in Europe
Müller-Friedberg-Str. 6/8
CH-9000 St.Gallen, Switzerland
Phone: +41 (0) 71 224 25 61
Email: euxeinos@unisg.ch
URL: www.euxeinos.ch

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