

CHAPTER 9

Is Our Religious Freedom in Danger?

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Religion in Estonia

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Abstract

Estonia is a highly secularised country, where religious legislation is very liberal and the state's interference in religious affairs has for the last 30 years been minimal. I suggest in this chapter that, although the restrictions that were imposed in Estonia during the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be considered disproportionate, and that during the first wave of coronavirus in 2020 religious organisations were in favour of the limitations, this nevertheless turned out to be a challenge for them, because for the first time in decades the state interfered in religious affairs. In addition, during the pandemic a heated and dividing value debate about the legislation on same-sex unions was going on in Estonian society. In spring and autumn 2020, during the first and second waves of the virus, the question of whether the state has the right to limit religious activity resulted in a confrontation between various factions within religious groups as well as between religious associations

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and the state. In connection with the restrictions implemented, the question of respecting religious freedom as well as the proportionality of the restrictions were raised in Estonian public media. In this chapter I analyse the position of the Estonian state and various religious institutions during the time of the coronavirus and the discussions held in Estonian society during different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to that, I focus on the impact of the pandemic to people's religiosity and the 'digital revolution' in the churches.

Introduction

On 3 May 2020, Archbishop Urmas Viilma, the head of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC), wrote on social media that he invited his clergy to ring the church bells during the coming week. Even though Viilma explained that his appeal was to signal that the churches were ready to open their doors for public services, it was interpreted by the public not only as an outcry by the church leader to resume religious services after a period of nearly two months of the COVID-19 pandemic but also as a confrontation with the state government over its COVID-19 policy, which had imposed restrictions on religious associations, among other public institutions (Kiviorg and Rohtmets 2021, 106). At the same time, on 24 April, the government had decided to grant €2 million of support to religious associations, whose activities had been severely disrupted during the crisis. Because of the restrictions, the possibility of religious associations to earn their own income was significantly limited (Kogudused saavad 2020).

Viilma's appeal was not the first or the last public criticism of the restrictions imposed by the state. Although this kind of criticism was heard in several European countries, public opposition of that sort had not occurred before in Estonia. The Republic of Estonia has during the last 30 years never experienced such wide-ranging restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms as it did in 2020–2021. The reaction of religious associations to restrictions during the pandemic, of course, first of all depended on the duration and extent of the restrictions, but no less important was the local historical experience regarding the relationship between the state and the church and the liberal religious legislation established in the last 30 years, which had so far spared the churches from even the slightest state restrictions.

However, while restrictions are still not at all unknown in Estonian religious life, they are primarily associated with the time of the Soviet occupation. It should be briefly noted that Estonian statehood is more than a hundred years long, but this period includes an occupation period of more than 50 years (1940–1991) when the Republic of Estonia, like other Baltic States, was occupied by the Soviet Union (1940–1941, 1944–1991) and Germany (1941–1944).

During Soviet times, religion was considered something that belonged to the past. The atheistic state tried to eradicate religion from the society with numerous campaigns, repressing clergy and publicly humiliating religious people, closing churches, etc. (Rommel 2011, 305–12). Although the number of clergy who saw or personally experienced religious persecution is by now rather low, the time of the persecution is part of the historical identity of Estonia's religious associations. Therefore, it is no coincidence that, during the pandemic, protests over religious freedom and restrictions on the activities of churches reached the point where the restrictions were compared with the repressive religious policy of the Soviet era.

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at the restrictions on religious activity in Estonia during the COVID-19 pandemic, asking what the reaction of religious associations was towards the restrictions and how it changed over the first, second, and third waves of the virus. In this regard, attention must be paid to the debates in Estonian society from spring 2020 until the end of 2022 over the freedom of religion and whether restrictions had been proportionate. A separate debate was held over vaccination. What was the role of churches and individual clergy in this debate, and did religious associations share the views of the majority of society here, or did they go against the tide? The time of the pandemic challenged the stability of the entire society: what solutions did religious associations come up with to handle the difficult times and what was the state's support for religious associations during this difficult period?

Setting the Context

Estonia is a sparsely populated country in which a little more than 1.3 million people live on 45,339km². Although the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 shook the whole of society, the first wave of the virus passed with a low number of victims (69 people died) owing to

the restrictions imposed by the government and the sparse population. During subsequent waves of the virus, the restrictions were more nuanced, but the spread of the virus was faster and it resulted in several thousand casualties. In order to analyse the reactions of religious associations to what happened in society and the interaction between the state and religious associations during the crisis, we must first take a short look at the religious situation of Estonia in its historical context and the legislation that regulates religious life in Estonia.

In August 1991, the independence of the Republic of Estonia was restored on the basis of legal continuity. With this, the Estonian government recognised that it was the same country that was established in 1918 and was illegally occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940. Legal continuity has shaped the self-definition of religious organisations. Likewise, the hostile attitude towards religion during Soviet times has played a role in framing the religious policy of the Republic of Estonia. More importantly, it has also shaped the attitude of the Estonian society towards religion and it for this reason Estonia is considered to be one of the most secular countries in Europe (Ringvee 2011, 43–47).

If in the 1930s practically the entire population of Estonia was a member of one or another religious organisation, the Soviet period with its repressive religious policy managed to disrupt the social and family religious tradition. Secularisation in Estonia took place at a significantly faster pace than in Western Europe. According to the 2021 census, of the whole of the population over the age of 15 (1,114,030) only 29 per cent (321,340 people) identified themselves as followers of some religion and 93 per cent of those were Christians. Those who did not identify themselves as affiliated with any religion was 58 per cent of the entire population (650,900). The most common forms of religion are Eastern Orthodoxy and Lutheranism; only 5 per cent of the religiously affiliated believe in other religions. Based on the 2021 census, out of the entire population (over the age of 15) 16 per cent considered themselves affiliated with Eastern Orthodoxy (181,770 people) and 8 per cent considered themselves Lutherans (86,030 people). The percentage of those who identified themselves as Catholics was 0.8 per cent (8,690 people) and 0.5 per cent (5,800 people) were Muslims. The number of people who identified themselves as Baptists or belonging to another free church, or as native believers (*maausulised* and *taarausulised*), Buddhists, or belonging to another minority religion, was smaller (generally between 1,000 and 4,000 people). There is a lack of

knowledge about religion, because religious education is taught on a voluntary basis, but, as the society is highly secularised, only about 10 per cent of Estonian schools teach religion (Population Census 2022).

The religious policy of the Estonian state was developed in the early 1990s based on both legal continuity and international conventions on religious freedom, but, in the same way, it was consciously intended to oppose the previous atheistic Soviet religious policy. Therefore, in the 1990s, Estonian politicians defined the state as a partner to religious associations (Rohtmets 2018, 200–204). The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, which was adopted in 1992, established freedom of religion and thought as well as the absence of a state church. The constitution determines the benevolent attitude of the state towards religious organisations. The neutrality of the state does not mean that religion is ousted from the public realm but that the state and religious organisations cooperate on matters of interest and the state treats religious organisations equally (Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus 1994, 9).

According to Estonian legislation, traditional religious associations are not distinguished from non-traditional ones. The privileges and requirements are the same for all religious organisations and there is no special legal framework for religious minorities. Religious organisations are registered as non-profit organisations. Religious work is also community work and, based on that, the state supports religious work in Estonian society among other areas of life, keeping in mind the public interest and needs. Financially, religious associations are independent, and the state does not support any religious association directly. However, money is given from the state budget for the preservation and reparation of historical cultural heritage, sanctuaries and holy places, and chaplaincy in military, prisons, hospitals, and caring centres, as well as to the Estonian Council of Churches (ECC), which is the biggest religious organisation in the country, uniting ten Christian religious associations. The ECC has been the most active participant in social debates, issuing statements about same-sex unions, euthanasia, abortion, etc. (Rohtmets 2019, 171–77).

In recent years, representatives of religious associations have voiced more criticism about the nature of cooperation with the state. This is partly related to the value debate on same-sex cohabitation, which has been on the agenda since 2010. In 2014, the Parliament of the Republic of Estonia adopted the Cohabitation Act, following which same-sex couples could register their cohabitation. Although some clergy

supported the law on cohabitation, all religious associations in Estonia formally opposed the law on cohabitation and the legalisation of same-sex marriage. Within religious associations, the debate on this topic has been minimal, although year by year the number of clergy who support the legalisation of same-sex cohabitation has increased (June 2019).

Criticism has also increased after Urmas Viilma was elected as the Archbishop of the EELC in 2015. In 2022, he also became the president of the ECC. Although, according to the census, the largest defined grouping in Estonia is Orthodox Christianity, the majority of those adherents are Russian-speaking people, not all of whom are Estonian citizens. Therefore, the EELC has traditionally been considered the majority church in Estonia. In the 1930s, 78 per cent of the Estonian population (including children) defined themselves as Lutherans; however, by 2021, only 8 per cent of the population (older than 15 years) said that they were Lutheran. In the 1930s, 19 per cent of the population (including children) said that they were Orthodox; by 2021 the percentage had dropped to 16 per cent among people older than 15 (Population Census 2022).

Archbishop Viilma has demanded greater state support for churches and the compulsory inclusion of religious education in the school curriculum, but has encountered opposition from both the public and politicians. In the past ten years, more tensions have emerged in the cooperation between the state and religious associations, and the cooperation has either ended or decreased in several areas. This context must also be kept in mind in the context of the restrictions during COVID-19 and the disputes over them.

Legal Aspects

In the Republic of Estonia, no extensive restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms had been imposed before the 2020 pandemic. The restrictions that were implemented in Estonia during the pandemic cannot be considered disproportionate.

According to the Constitution of Estonia, the most important principles of freedom of religion and belief are mentioned in Sections 40 and 41. The constitution stipulates the right of everyone to remain true to their opinions and beliefs.¹ In addition to these sections, there are other sections in the constitution that are important in establishing

and guaranteeing freedom of religion and belief, including sections dealing with discrimination (Section 12), freedom of speech (Section 45), freedom of assembly (Section 47), and freedom of association (Section 48).

Limiting the freedom of religion and belief can only be discussed in a few cases mentioned in the constitution and international conventions. The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia allows restrictions to be established for the purpose of protecting public order, health, and morals (Section 40). Section 19(2) of the Constitution adds the possibility of limiting freedom of religion and belief in order to protect the rights and freedoms of other persons ('everyone must respect and consider the rights and freedoms of other people and obey the law when exercising their rights and freedoms and fulfilling their obligations').

In the context of the pandemic, the constitutionally protected rights to health protection (Section 28) and life (Section 16) were important too. Thus, the constitution not only stipulates the rights of everyone but also the obligation of everyone, including religious associations, to respect these rights among others. This is the principle of solidarity that holds society together. The same principle of solidarity is also mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 29).

The state has a positive obligation to protect people's health, life, as well as freedom of religion and belief. At the same time, there can be no doubt that 'the right to life is the most important fundamental right, because it is a prerequisite for the exercise of all other rights and freedoms'. If there is no life, then there is no possibility of exercising freedom of religion and belief (Kiviorg and Rohtmets 2021, 96–97).

As mentioned earlier, during the first wave of the pandemic the government of the Republic of Estonia decided on 12 March 2020 to declare a situation of emergency, which was initially meant to last until 1 May, but in April it was extended and lasted until 17 May. According to the Law on Situation of Emergency, it was possible to establish restrictions on freedom of movement. The law also allowed to restrict holding public meetings and public events. Funds from the state's stabilisation reserve could be used during the situation of emergency. According to the law, the government and the head of the situation of emergency (the prime minister) gave decrees to regulate specific areas of the governance.

The Constitution of Estonia distinguishes between three emergency situations: a state of emergency, a state of war, and a situation of

emergency. While the states of emergency and war are connected with the state's national security, a situation of emergency is declared by the government in the event of a natural disaster or a catastrophe, or to prevent the spread of an infectious disease (Section 87) (The Constitution 1992).

A declaration of a situation of emergency, in contrast to the declaration of a state of emergency or a state of war, is insufficiently regulated in the constitution, especially with regard to the increased rights and duties of the administrative power and supervision when imposing restrictions. For example, a state of emergency can be declared by the Estonian parliament, the Riigikogu, on a proposal of the president of the republic or the government of the republic. It can only be established for three months, and a majority vote of the Riigikogu is needed to make a decision. In the event of a situation of emergency, the constitution does not provide for a time limit. However, it can only last as long as it is absolutely necessary. This is why the Estonian public and the president and the chancellor of justice from autumn 2020 began to question whether the situation of emergency deprived the parliament of its obligation not only to approve the actions of the government, but to discuss and propose measures that regulate the life of Estonian society during the pandemic (Madise and Koppel 2021).

On 13 March 2020, Minister of Population Riina Solman met with the leaders of the ECC to discuss the requirements and restrictions arising from the state of emergency and stressed that all gatherings and public events, including services, should be stopped due to the potential risk of infection. Solman said that, in individual cases, religious services could be performed privately, but, even then, the possible risk of infection to other people must be ruled out.

As a result of the meeting, emergency instructions were given to congregations stating that all religious public organised events, including public worship services, church concerts, and other gatherings, were postponed or cancelled until new instructions or emergency situations were completed. The statement emphasised that the religious freedom of all Estonians was guaranteed even in an emergency, but that considerations of the protection of human health had also to be taken into account (Juhised 2020). Estonian Christian and non-Christian minority religious associations did not have an interreligious body and they more or less followed the line of major religious groups. They made no statements concerning the state's policy.

Private religious services (pastoral conversations, worship and communion) were still allowed. However, they had to be organised in such a way as to exclude the risk of infection to other people. The Estonian government allowed the churches and other places of worship to remain open in order to meet people's personal religious needs. While churches in most cases remained open, the Estonian Islamic Center in Tallinn closed its doors completely. As it was the time of Ramadan, members of the centre organised food aid to frontline workers in hospitals and to those in need (Islami keskus 2020).

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

After the first wave of the pandemic, the government started to revise the Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Act, giving the Estonian Health Board more rights to prevent the epidemic spread of infectious diseases (Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Act 2020). The changes were criticised because they limited the rights of Parliament to control restrictions during the time of the crisis and, according to critics, gave too much control to the government. The discussion over its accordance with the constitution continued throughout the pandemic and even after that. Among the critics was the chancellor of justice (Õiguskantsler 2022). Because of the changes during the other waves of the pandemic from late 2020 until 2022, the government did not declare a new situation of emergency but chose the path of making specific restrictive measures and establishing regional differences.

Although the members of religious associations were rather critical towards the restrictions and partly to restrictions that were implemented in connection with vaccination, no court appeals were made by religious associations during the pandemic. The only appeal that was made was addressed to the chancellor of justice to challenge the restrictions in spring 2021, during the second wave of the virus.

The chancellor of justice, Ülle Madise, pointed out in her answer that people could continue to pray alone or perform other (non-public) religious services in a church (public services were not allowed but churches were opened). It was also possible to have online services. In outdoor conditions, the restrictions were slightly more relaxed. From

the point of view of assessing proportionality, the fact that the restrictions were imposed for a very limited time in the interests of health protection was also significant. Madise emphasised that the motive of the government of the republic was primarily to protect public health with restrictions (Kiviorg and Rohtmets 2021, 120–21).

Sociological Aspects

Religious associations made first preparations for the possible spread of coronavirus as early as March 2020, when it was clear that the spread of the virus would soon gain momentum. Masks were stocked and hand disinfection facilities were set up. For example, the holy water touched by those entering the church in the Peter and Paul Cathedral of the Catholic Church in Tallinn was removed. The Orthodox churches considered it necessary to clean more often the surfaces that were kissed. However, the cancellation of services was not considered necessary and the communion was celebrated as before (Ka Eesti kirikutes valmistutakse koroonaviiruse levikuks 2020).

The situation changed on 12 March, when the government of Estonia decided to declare a situation of emergency. Initially, this was meant to last until 1 May, but in April it was extended and lasted until 17 May 2020. Among other restrictions, all public gatherings were prohibited (the government declared an emergency situation in Estonia until 1 May 2020).

While at first religious associations and their leaders adapted graciously to the new situation, in April the first critical speeches and writings about restrictions were published. Criticism was especially sharp among the conservative Christians (mostly Lutherans and Catholics). Often, similar statements from Europe were cited. Latvia, Estonia's closest neighbour, was mentioned as a positive example, because public services were not entirely forbidden there. At the same time, restrictions in Finland were similar to those imposed in Estonia, but these were usually not referred to. The most common argument that was used to criticise the imposed restrictions considered religious associations as being in a special position compared to shopping centres, cinemas, theatres, etc., with a special role to play during the time of the crisis and in the lives of the people. Therefore, their closure was not justified (Kiviorg and Rohtmets 2021, 103–04).

In addition to that, in mid-April, an Estonian conservative online magazine, *Our Church*, asked whether the church should obediently obey state orders or whether it should listen to the word of God rather than the word of man, referring to the New Testament (Acts 5:29). The author of the article, a Lutheran pastor, Veiko Vihuri, declared that the secular authorities did not have the right to order the church not to hold services. He called it a tyrannical abuse of power. He also criticised church leaders and clergy who had been more obedient to worldly powers than to God's command (Tähelepanekuid 2020).

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

The understanding that the status of churches was different from that of cafés, football matches, or other public places and events was heard more and more in April and May, especially when the gradual opening of the society was starting to be discussed. At the end of April, Archbishop Viilma proposed that the restrictions on the churches be eased. According to his proposal, services had to be restored under certain conditions. As no decision followed, Viilma considered his right to publicly signal to the representatives of the state that the church wished to resume organising worship services. On 3 May he announced in the media that he invited the clergy to ring their church bells on the Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of the following week. This decision reflected the disappointment that the churches could not open their doors from 1 May (Kiviorg and Rohtmets 2021, 106).

Although Viilma explained that his aim was to signal that the churches were ready to open their doors, it was interpreted by politicians as a rebellion against state authorities. This was characterised by the statement of Helle-Moonika Helme, deputy chairman of the Riigikogu's faction of the Estonian Conservative People's Party, that Viilma was already engaged in politics before the parliamentary elections in 2019 and was still doing politics. Helme considered it a public health issue. Helme also referred to state support, which was intended

to compensate for the loss of income during the service (Viilma tegeles 2020). At the same time, the conservatives in the Lutheran Church were critical of Helme's views and asked whether the shopping malls would really be opened before the churches (Kas kaubanduskeskused 2020).

Whether churches had to comply with the orders of the state authorities came up on the agenda again in October 2020, when Archbishop Viilma said in connection with the planned marriage referendum that, for the church, the Bible is more important than the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, clarifying that the ideal is a situation where the constitution and the Bible were in harmony with each other, and adding that 'We don't want a situation where one [constitution] is above the other' (Peapiiskop kooseluseaduse 2020).

The second wave of the virus began slightly later than in Western Europe, starting from early November, when the number of new infections was consistently rising. During November, the number of patients requiring hospitalisation also increased consistently. From 14 December to 31 December, the government decided to close all schools in Estonia. Religious places of worship, on the other hand, remained open and the services in them could continue. Just as during the first wave of the pandemic, on 12 November the Estonian Islamic Centre decided to close its doors (Kiviorg and Rohtmets 2021, 110–11).

The limited restrictions to religious associations were justified by an argument that religious freedom needed to be protected. For example, the minister of population, Riina Solman, who commented on the government's decision, pointed out that the situation in Estonia was not so critical that restrictions to religious freedom were justified. Bringing in the topic of religious freedom was a consequence of the criticism heard during the first wave of the virus. The state authorities took into account the criticism by the clergy and the leaders of religious communities, which by Estonian standards had been unusually aggressive (Pühakojad 2020).

At the same time, the decision to close schools but leave churches open received mixed reactions from the public and politicians. On the one hand, there was criticism of the decision, for example, Member of the European Parliament Marina Kaljurand said that she did not understand how keeping churches open helped to protect the older generation as those who came to the churches were mostly old people. The only time when churches are full in Estonia is Christmas. Marina Kaljurand claimed that the churches being full during Christmas did

not help to overcome the pandemic (Piiirangute 2020). On the other hand, representatives of the Estonian Conservative People's Party expressed the view that the wish to close churches expressed the anger of left-wing parties (Helme 2020). The issue of closing churches became part of the political battle during the time, when the referendum on marriage was on the agenda.

The situation in Estonia steadily worsened in the early months of 2021, and therefore the government decided to ban all public meetings, public events, including conferences, theatre performances, concerts and cinema screenings, and public religious services. Prior to the introduction of the new restrictions, the new government, led by Kaja Kallas, had taken office, and the leaders of religious associations were upset that the new rulers did not contact them before the introduction of new restrictions. Another thing that was rather disappointing for religious associations was the fact that shopping centres were initially left open but public religious services were banned (Kiviorg and Rohtmets 2021, 112–13).

Just like in 2020, the government started to lift the restrictions in May. From 3 May, people were again allowed to go to public religious services. On 21 April 2021, the ECC sent an appeal to the government to open churches one day earlier than promised, because on 2 May the Orthodox Church celebrated Easter. The government declined. On 23 June 2021, the government of the republic decided to abolish all restrictions (Alates homset 2021).

After the first wave of the virus, a number of articles were published. Some of them were more general, e.g. an analysis of the restrictions to religious freedom or belief in Estonian legal context (Kiviorg and Rohtmets 2021) or a description of religious activity and pastoral counselling in Estonia during the pandemic in spring 2020. The article was based on sociological data that was collected during or after the first wave of the virus (Soom and Schihalejev 2020). There were also articles that focused on specific cases, e.g. an analysis of the religious life of a specific denomination (evangelical free churches) before and after the crisis (Rommel and Rommel 2021).

In 2022, after the pandemic was over, a special issue, 'Making Sense of the COVID-19: Faith Community Responses to Traumas and Epidemics Past and Present' of the *Estonian Theological Journal* was published. The special issue had general articles about Christian communities during the pandemic, e.g. 'Perspectives of the Estonian Christian

Community Regarding the Coronavirus Pandemic and Their Relation to Personal and Community Beliefs', and more specific analysis on the challenges of pastoral care in hospitals and nursing homes in the context of the pandemic (Linnuste and Kartau 2022), or on conspiracy theories during the crisis (Uibu 2022).

There were more and more conspiracy theories raised and promoted after vaccination started from the end of December 2020 and continued throughout spring 2021. Because it took place in a situation where the second wave of the virus had reached its peak, the vaccination was initially successful.

In February 2021, religious associations independently as well as through the ECC instructed their members on how to communicate with members in their congregation about vaccination. The church leadership of the EELC stated to their clergy that 'when advising others on vaccination, it is not permitted for clergy to share recommendations for refraining from, postponing, or refusing vaccination, even if the pastor himself/herself is not getting vaccinated'. The clergy who had already been critical in spring 2020 began to criticise the church leadership, saying that it was the first time since Soviet times that clergy had been told what they could or could not tell their church members.

Illimar Toomet, a pastor at Central Estonian Märjamaa congregation, mentioned that stem cells of embryos that had lost their lives through abortion had been used in developing the vaccine (Vaktsineerimisega 2021). This argument was widely used by conservative Christians elsewhere in the world. They claimed that it made the use of the vaccine unethical. At the same time, there were clergy who called for people to be vaccinated and confirmed that the benefits outweighed the potential harms (Vaktsineerimisest vastutustundlikumalt 2021). The leader of the local Catholics, Bishop Philippe Jourdan, called it an act of love that allowed everyone to signal that they cared for each other. Jourdan supported Pope Francis's call for vaccination (Jourdan 2021). The same message was repeated by Lutheran bishops Tiit Salumäe and Urmas Viilma.

In November and December 2020, the ECC conducted a survey about religion in Estonia. This was the sixth survey in a series conducted every five years. The focus of the surveys has been to find out the religious beliefs and habits that describe Estonian people. While in 2010 and 2015 the survey had been conducted using face-to-face interviews, in 2020 it was done with a questionnaire online and by post.

One thousand participants were involved and only the adult population (over 18 years old) was included.

Although the questionnaire has been almost the same over the years, so as to compare the answers in a longer period of time, a question about coronavirus was added: ‘Has your interest in Christianity or other spiritual topics changed since the establishment of the situation of emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020)?’ While the interest towards Christianity had remained almost the same, interest among young people towards other spiritual topics had grown 17 per cent. This is a considerable rise, which on the one hand clearly signals the recession of Christianity in Estonian society but on the other hand mirrors the quest for other spiritual practices during the time of the pandemic. To compare, while according to the Pew Research Center survey conducted in summer 2020 28 per cent of the respondents in the United States said that the pandemic had made their religious faith stronger (in Europe the figures were lower), people in Estonian society did not assimilate their interest with religion or more specifically Christianity but with spiritual topics, which usually means all sorts of New Age, neo-pagan, etc. practices (Elust, usust, usuelust 2020).

A few surveys with a smaller number of respondents were conducted in 2020–2021. After the first wave of the pandemic a survey was conducted among the clergy of 72 member churches of the ECC, which confirmed the increase in the amount of pastoral work during the pandemic; only 10 per cent of the clergy who responded did not show initiative in looking for those in need (Soom and Schihalejev 2020, 45–46).

In 2022, another survey was conducted, with 127 people from different Christian denominational and social backgrounds responding. Seventy-two per cent of the respondents supported vaccination, while 26 per cent were partly or totally against it and 3 per cent were in between the two groups. If we compare these proportions with the adult population of Estonia as a whole, we can notice a significant coincidence (72.3 per cent of the entire population are vaccinated), which could indicate that church membership did not have a direct effect on attitudes regarding vaccination. While ‘more than two-thirds of respondents supported the idea that topics related to vaccination should be discussed within churches ... almost no one indicated that

the sermons had an impact on their attitudes towards the vaccination' (Tankler and Lilleoja 2022, 29–31).

Although Estonia is usually considered to be a pioneer in e-governance, it was the pandemic that brought about a digital revolution in local congregations. From the beginning, the state also offered its assistance in broadcasting services and, on the proposal of the minister of population, a Sunday service was included in the Estonian Television programme schedule from March 22 (ETV2 2020).

In December 2020, Archbishop Viilma mentioned in his speech that the future of the church was the e-church. He claimed that churches could benefit from technology: 'We have certainly been able to experience this in the wake of the coronavirus everywhere in those congregations, where online worship services have found regular weekly attendance.' He added that senior members might not accept it but they also change and in ten years there would be a new group of older members for whom mass media, online newspapers, online television, and everything that comes with them would be a normal thing (Viilma 2020).

Through the Ministry of Social Affairs, the chaplaincy for pastoral care started working on making emergency pastoral care available and a telephone counselling service was launched on 17 March 2020, by which medical institutions and nursing homes received a personal pastoral worker (Kristlik maailm 2020). The ECC itself, through the foundation 'Ühiskonnatöö', launched a Christian spiritual help platform, 'www.sinuabi.ee'.

In prisons, because of the established set restrictions and the joint contribution of the staff, there were no large-scale infections and uncontrolled disease outbreaks during the second wave of the pandemic. In 2021, services in the chapels were not interrupted, and activities that had been interrupted (Bible lessons, prayers, etc.) were resumed. For the third wave, in 2021, the prison staff was significantly better prepared than during the first outbreak. The extensive restrictions seen in spring 2020 were not reimposed (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu aastaaruanne 2021, 56).

Conclusion

Restrictions imposed by the government of the Republic of Estonia during the pandemic were based on the Constitution of Estonia as well as international treaties and were not disproportionate, i.e. excessive,

but were limited, proportionate, and imposed for a certain period of time. The restrictions referred not only to the sections about freedom of religion and belief (Sections 40–41) but also the constitutionally protected rights to health protection (Section 28) and life (Section 16).

During the first wave of the pandemic, on 12 March 2020 the government decided to declare a situation of emergency, which lasted until 17 May. In 2021, the parliament changed the Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Act, giving the Estonian Health Board more rights to prevent the epidemic spread of infectious diseases and therefore during the other waves of the pandemic the government did not declare a new situation of emergency but chose the path of making specific restrictive measures and establishing regional differences.

Religious organisations were in solidarity with the rest of society in the spring of 2020, because the restrictions were general and limited. Problems arose when it was proposed to impose different levels of restrictions (shopping malls, cinemas, theatres, churches). As no extensive restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms had been imposed before the 2020 pandemic and there were heated debates going on in the society over cohabitation law, conservative Christians saw the restrictions to religious associations as yet another decision made by representatives of a secular society, who did not understand the difference between religious associations and entertainment. At the same time, no court appeals were made by religious associations during the entire period of the pandemic.

The criticism that was made in late spring 2020 by representatives of Christian religious associations proved to be successful, because during the first months of the second wave of the pandemic, at the end of 2020, the government guaranteed a special position for religious associations, so that, when all the schools were closed, churches remained open. At the same time, the question of which sectors to impose restrictions on was raised and, in this regard, the question of the proportionality of the restrictions also was discussed. When the churches were given a special position in late 2020, fewer restrictions to religious associations were justified by the argument that religious freedom needed to be protected.

When the situation worsened in the early months of 2021, and the government decided to forbid all public meetings and public events, including public religious services, criticism by Christians became more vocal again. In addition to criticism about the imposed

restrictions, from early 2021 the clergy who had already been critical in spring 2020 began to judge the leaders of different denominations for their support and instructions about vaccination, saying that it was the first time since Soviet times that clergy had been told what they could or could not tell their church members.

Sociological data have shown that, after the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020, interest among young people towards other spiritual topics grew 17 per cent. People in Estonian society did not assimilate their interest with religion, or more specifically Christianity, but with spirituality and spiritual practices, which reflects a high rate of secularisation and the low figures of institutionalised religion.

At the same time, clergy contributed actively to pastoral work and confirmed the increase in the amount of pastoral work during the pandemic. Only 10 per cent of the clergy who responded did not show initiative in looking for those in need. With the help of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the chaplaincy for pastoral care started working on making emergency pastoral care available and a telephone counselling service was launched. The state also helped to broadcast services, and, on the proposal of the minister of population, a Sunday service was included on Estonian national television. As early as the first wave of the pandemic, religious associations started organising online services, thus bringing about a digital revolution in religious communities. As online services have continued and there is interest in them, it is obvious that the pandemic managed to change the habits of congregation members.

Notes

1 § 40. Everyone has freedom of conscience, religion and thought. Everyone may freely belong to churches and religious societies. There shall be no state church. Everyone has the freedom to practise his or her religion, both alone and in community with others, in public or in private, unless this is detrimental to public order, health, or morals.

§ 41. Everyone has the right to remain faithful to his or her opinions and beliefs. No one shall be compelled to change them. Beliefs cannot excuse a violation of the law. No one can be held legally liable because of his or her beliefs.

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