

CHAPTER 17

Religion and COVID-19 in Bulgaria

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Abstract

Bulgaria was among the few countries in the world where the state authorities did not require the closure of religious sites during the pandemic. This peculiarity led to some deviations in the implementation of anti-epidemic measures in the religious sphere. This analysis pays special attention to the impact of the country's religious demography and the teachings of different faith communities on their response to the anti-epidemic policy of the Bulgarian state. It also discusses the diverse approaches of the local religious majority and faith minorities. Finally, it comments on the state's communication with religious communities during the pandemic.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Bulgaria in March 2020. As in other countries throughout the world, the state adopted an anti-epidemic policy based on the principle of social distancing. Until mass vaccination, there was no other effective tool for combating the spread of

How to cite this book chapter:

Kalkandjieva, Daniela. 2024. 'Religion and COVID-19 in Bulgaria.' In *Religion, Law, and COVID-19 in Europe: A Comparative Analysis*, edited by Brian Conway, Lene Kühle, Francesco Alicino, and Gabriel Birsan, 383–399. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-28-18>.

the disease. At the same time, the anti-epidemic requirements put into question the traditional performance of religious rites.

Setting the Context

On 13 March 2020, a few days after the first cases of coronavirus infection, the Bulgarian parliament declared a state of emergency (Parliament of Bulgaria 2020). Simultaneously, the minister of health imposed a ban on entertainment and other collective activities and events (Government of Bulgaria 2020b). At the same time, the government invited the leaders of local faith communities to close their religious sites. However, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC), representing the local religious majority, left its churches open. In this way, the religious minorities received the chance to do the same. As a result, the anti-epidemic policy in the religious sphere was marked by some specificities. The sanitary measures in religious sites included frequent disinfection of their interiors and objects of veneration. There were also requirements for their visitors. All believers were obliged to wear medical masks and keep a two-metre distance between each other during religious services.

Still, the government's abstention from closing the churches triggered heated public debates in Bulgarian society. In the spring of 2020, two extreme positions took shape. The first was supported by Orthodox believers, who welcomed the government's concession to their church and adopted a selective approach to the imposed sanitary measures. In general, worshippers accepted the requirements for wearing masks and keeping distance in the churches. They also started bowing before icons and other objects of veneration instead of kissing them. At the same time, the adherents of Eastern Orthodox Christianity continued receiving Holy Communion from the same spoon. In their turn, secular citizens criticised the government's softness as being dangerous for public health and called for religious sites to be closed, as they were in other parts of the world, including the neighbouring Orthodox countries of Greece, Romania, Serbia, and North Macedonia. In this way, the public debates opposed the common good and religious rights.

In the spring of 2020, the public debates were intensified by the conjunction of the first pandemic wave in Bulgaria with the most important Christian, Muslim, and Jewish festivals. The Orthodox Bulgarians, representing the local religious majority, became especially

sensitive to the very idea of closing their churches. In this regard, it is necessary to point out that the Great Lent is the most strenuous time in the life of Orthodox Christians, preparing them for their holiest holiday – Easter. In contrast to Christmas, which Orthodox Bulgarians traditionally celebrate as a family holiday at home, Easter gathers them in the churches. Therefore, the number of churchgoers and communion takers is higher during Lent than in regular Sunday liturgies.

In the summer of 2020, the outbreak of political protests against the then-ruling government of Boyko Borisov additionally fuelled the debate on the anti-epidemic measures and led to a politicisation of the issue of religious rights.¹ In particular, the political opposition was tempted to attack the policy of social distancing as an anti-democratic development. Meanwhile, Orthodox churchgoers admired the government's tolerance towards religion. They also drew parallels with the closure of churches under communism and insisted that the government was acting in line with the norms of democracy.

At a later stage, the start of the vaccination campaign triggered the next round of debates. This time, however, the debates revealed a division between the majority and minority religions. Despite the concessions received from the state during the pandemic, the BOC, the most influential religious institution in the country became the only religious body that did not send its representative to the public council set up at the Ministry of Health to promote the COVID vaccines (Hristiyanstvo.bg 2021). Meanwhile, the leaders of the religious minorities supported the efforts of the state to popularise vaccination.

Finally, the religious responses to the challenge of the pandemic were also influenced by the religious demography of Bulgaria. According to the national census of 2021, the country had 6,519,789 citizens. As they are not obliged to answer questions regarding their religious, ethnic, and linguistic identity, the data collected on these criteria are not full but only 472,606 of the respondents (7.25 per cent of the country's population) refused to reveal their religious identity (National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria 2022). There is also no information about the religious affiliation of 616,681 persons added from administrative sources and for whom information is missing in the registers used in the census. At the same time, 305,105 citizens (4.68 per cent) declared that they had no religion and another 259,235 (3.98 per cent) found it difficult to define their religion.

From this perspective, the census offers a good idea of the religious composition of the Bulgarian population. It reveals that 4,219,270 citizens, or 64.71 per cent of the entire population, belong to Christianity (National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria 2023, 50–51). Though confessionally diverse, this group is strongly dominated by the adherents of Eastern Orthodoxy. According to the census, 4,091,780 Bulgarian citizens (62.76 per cent) are Orthodox, 69,852 (1.09 per cent) are Protestants, 38,709 (0.59 per cent) are Catholics, 5,002 (0.08 per cent) are Apostolic Armenians, and 13,927 (0.21 per cent) belong to other Christian denominations. There is also a significant Muslim community. In the case of faith minorities, the census registered 638,708 adherents of Islam (9.8 per cent), 1,736 Jews (0.02 per cent), and 6,451 believers belonging to other various faith communities (0.1 per cent).

Legal Aspects

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a challenge to Bulgarian legislation in the sphere of human and religious rights as well. To fight the spread of the virus the Bulgarian government took the unprecedented step of issuing the first proclamation of a state of emergency on the grounds of the 1991 Constitution of Bulgaria (Article 64.2).² In addition, the National Parliament adopted a special law on the measures and activities during the state of emergency (Government of Bulgaria 2020a). This guaranteed state subsidies for the BOC and the Muslim religious denominations (paras 17 and 18). At the same time, it did not discuss any special sanitary measures regarding the faith communities in the country. Yet the general requirements for social distance had an effect on the right of believers to practise their faith ‘in community with others’ (European Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 10.1), as well as on the performance of certain rites.³ The Bulgarian Constitution does not contain an explicit reference to the religious freedoms of citizens regarding the collective practising of their faith but employs a rather general formula about the freedom of Bulgarian citizens to practise their religion.⁴ In addition, the constitution clearly states that the freedom of religion ‘shall not be practiced to the detriment of national security, public order, public health and morals, or of the rights and freedoms of the others’ (Article 37.2).⁵

To combat the quick spread of coronavirus, the government appointed a national consultative board of experts. In parallel, the Ministry of Public Health issued a series of normative documents and instructions. On 13 March 2020, it introduced a complex set of sanitary norms that were to be observed during the state of emergency, and the Directorate of Religious Affairs invited the leaders of the local faith communities to inform their members about the sanitary measures they had to follow during the pandemic.⁶ At the same time, even during the most extreme moments of the spread of the infection, the state authorities abstained from closing religious sites. As a result, the final decision belonged to the respective religious leaders. In this way, less than 1 per cent of the religiously active citizens, mainly Roman and Eastern rite Catholics, Apostolic Armenians, and Jews, were temporarily restricted from the right of worship in their religious sites.

Meanwhile, some sanitary measures caused various problems for the faith communities whose religious sites remained open. In the case of the Muslim community, disinfection presented a peculiar challenge because most available substances contain alcohol. In this regard, the Grand Muftiate explicitly instructed the faithful that disinfection is absolutely mandatory, even when the disinfectant has alcohol (Grand Muftiate (Bulgaria) 2020a). At the same time, the quarantine-related requirements turned out to be less challenging for the adherents of Islam. In this regard, the Grand Muftiate reminded them of a hadith teaching that neither the inhabitants of a place contaminated by a disease should leave it nor should outsiders visit it (*ibid.*).

During the pandemic, the Ministry of Public Health issued additional instructions reducing the attendance at such major family religious rites as weddings, baptisms, and funerals. At the same time, while baptism and wedding ceremonies continued to be performed inside temples in the presence of a few closest family members, funeral rites began to be conducted outside the religious buildings. The state authorities also did not cancel such major religious rituals as the blessing of military flags on Epiphany (6 January) and the blessing of the Bulgarian Army on St George's Day (6 May), which are carried out in open-air spaces. Yet the attendees were limited to a minimum. Similarly, the public performance of the midnight Easter liturgy – the most important festivity of Orthodox Bulgarians – was not banned. Still, Orthodox Bulgarians were asked not to visit the churches but to watch the TV transmission of the Easter liturgy in the patriarchal cathedral

of St Alexander Nevski or the online transmissions of the church services in their diocesan cathedrals. In contrast to other years, church services were not attended by politicians. Further, the part of religious services performed in front of the Orthodox temples was prolonged. In fact, the Easter celebrations in 2020 became the least visited since the fall of communism.

As a rule, the state normative documents issued during the pandemic observed the principle of religious non-discrimination (Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 21). Still, there were cases of its infringement. In April 2020, the Roma evangelical community in the town of Samokov was accused of breaking the anti-epidemic measures because of a collective prayer in the churchyard held on Palm Sunday (Bulgarian National Radio – Horisont 2020; see also Kalkandjieva 2024, 252–53). The imposed administrative sanctions were immediately contested by the United Evangelical Churches (UEC), whose leaders sent a letter of protest to the prime minister with copies to the prosecutor general, the minister of the interior, and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (News.bg 2020). In response, the evangelicals provided evidence that their gathering was conducted in line with the sanitary measures, namely that all believers had worn medical masks and kept a two-metre distance between themselves. The UEC also pointed to the constitutional guarantees for their civil and religious rights in a state of emergency (Bulgarian Constitution, Article 57, section 3).

Two months later, media publications about the coronavirus contamination of several pastors, allegedly caught during their working meeting in Perushtitsa, provoked another remonstrance (Bulgarian National Radio – Radio Plovdiv 2020). This time, the UEC's chairman sent a letter to the minister of public health and the chief health inspector. He complained that the publications blamed the evangelicals for the spread of the infection in the same town and accused the media of using double standards aimed at stigmatising their faith and community (Unified Evangelical Churches 2020). According to the chairman, the media disclosed the religious identity of the diseased persons only in the case of evangelicals. Therefore, he reminded them of the instructions of the World Health Organization to respect the religious freedoms of believers during the pandemic (World Health Organization 2020).

Sociological Aspects

The legally recognised religious denominations in Bulgaria responded differently to the anti-epidemic policy of the state. Although none of the governments that ruled Bulgaria during the pandemic ordered the closure of religious sites, the local Catholic and Armenian Churches as well as the Jewish Central Consistory closed their places of worship. They also instructed the faithful to temporarily conduct their religious rites at home. At the same time, the leaders of the Muslim and Protestant communities adopted a different approach. The Grand Muftiate left the mosques open but appealed to Muslims to abstain from the collective Friday prayers at mosques and to perform their religious duties at home (Grand Muftiate (Bulgaria) 2020a). Similarly, the Protestant churches remained open for individual prayers. Only the BOC's Holy Synod preserved the traditional face-to-face religious gatherings.

Two factors determined the different behaviour of faith communities. The first is linked to their shares in the country's religious demography. Correspondingly, the places of worship that remained open during the pandemic belonged to the two most numerous faith communities – Orthodox Christians and Muslims. It is also necessary to pay attention to the fastest-growing religious denomination of Protestants. For the first time in the history of Bulgaria, its membership reached, and exceeded, 1 per cent of the local population. At the same time, they did not form a unified religious body. According to the Register of Legally Recognized Religious Entities, maintained by the Directorate of Religious Denominations at the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria, these believers are organised into about 200 churches.⁷ In short, about 77 per cent of the country's population had the opportunity to visit their religious sites during the pandemic. From this perspective, it seems that the government of Boyko Borisov (May 2017–May 2021) abstained from closing churches to avoid the potential discontent of so many citizens at a moment when the protests of the political opposition were gaining momentum. In the summer and autumn of 2020, its representatives even organised the public burning of medical masks as an act in support of civil freedoms and democracy (Lyuba Ivanova 2020). In addition, there were mass protests by parents who disagreed with their children wearing masks at school (Darik Radio 2020). In fact, the sentence of the only Bulgarian citizen condemned for protests

against the mask-wearing rules was overturned by a court of higher instance (Zhelyazkova 2023).

Theology was another factor that determined the different conduct of religious communities during the epidemic. In general, Islam and Judaism allow greater flexibility than Christianity regarding the private practising of religion at home. As religious gatherings and collective prayers are paramount for evangelical churches, the requirement for social distancing turned out to be especially challenging for their faithful. Meanwhile, the Catholic and Orthodox churches were more concerned about the customary methods of receiving communion, which non-believers considered incompatible with the sanitary measures. Both theologies teach that the Holy Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ and that by receiving communion believers become one with their God and reaffirm the unity of the Church. Correspondingly, the disruption of this custom is perceived as a 'sacramental shut-down' threatening the church and its members (Condon and Flynn 2020).

At the same time, the Catholic and Orthodox churches are differently organised. The Catholic Church has a unified hierarchical structure and decision-making is in the hands of the Roman Pope. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church is decentralised and consists of multiple autocephalous churches whose ruling bodies act independently of each other. As a result, the decisions in Eastern Orthodox Christianity can vary from church to church. In Italy, public church services were cancelled by the Vatican before the issue was discussed by the Italian government (Condon and Flynn 2020). Further, the Roman Pope allowed priests to celebrate Holy Mass 'even without the presence of the people' when it would help to rescue human lives (Holy See Press Office 2020). In addition, the Pope offered an example of spiritual communion prayer that believers may say from home (Mares 2020). This was the model adopted by the Catholic Church in Bulgaria.

The BOC, however, adopted a different approach. Its Holy Synod decided to leave churches and monasteries open. Thus, it introduced sanitary measures for disinfection and required churchgoers to keep physical distance. At the same time, only lay believers were obliged to wear medical masks, because they would impede clergy from the normal performance of religious rites. In addition, the sick parishioners were invited to worship at home. Owing to the growing spread of the coronavirus in the spring of 2020, the Bulgarian government

attempted to persuade the Orthodox episcopate to close churches during the Easter holidays. For this purpose, state representatives visited the Synod on 30 March and 9 April. Although Prime Minister Boyko Borisov attended the second round of negotiations, the mission did not reach its goal. The church hierarchs agreed only to cancel some popular local customs that were not rooted in Orthodox teaching, e.g. the traditional distribution of blessed willow branches on Palm Sunday was revoked (*Sofia Globe* 2020).

The use of digital platforms for reaching the faithful marks another difference between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches in Bulgaria. After the outbreak of the epidemic, the Catholic clergy started transmitting church services online, while the Orthodox clergy remained 'analogue'.⁸ The BOC's episcopate insisted on the face-to-face participation of the faithful in the church services. During Lent, the patriarch, the Holy Synod, and diocesan hierarchs issued special encyclicals instructing believers to fast, attend liturgy, and take communion as a cure for their bodies and souls (Bulgarian Orthodox Church 2020b). Orthodox churchmen repeatedly stated that communion could not transmit any disease (Bulgarian Orthodox Church 2020c). Further, priests were obliged to visit sick people in their houses whenever they asked to receive communion. The fear of infection was not accepted as a reason for declining such requests (Sofia Metropolitan's Office 2020). Similarly, some of the BOC's parishes abroad continued to distribute communion by the same spoon during the pandemic (Infante 2021; Ivanov 2021).

Furthermore, although the Orthodox Church resisted the digitalisation of liturgy, it employed social media and the internet to promote its engagement with the pandemic in quite a selective manner. On the one hand, the BOC, as well as the other religious denominations, avoided providing statistical data about the infected and deceased churchmen. In the case of the Orthodox Church, such information could undermine the belief that communion would save not only the soul of the true believer but also their body. In the summer of 2020, the death of the Orthodox metropolitan of Dorostol and the growing number of priests who had perished due to the coronavirus contagion provoked a change in the BOC's rhetoric. The focus of church media moved to the engagement of clergy in fighting the pandemic. Yet this commitment is not linked with the role of medical chaplains, because the BOC, as well as the other religious denominations in the country,

do not have such chaplains. Meanwhile, as only the Orthodox Church erected chapels near or inside hospitals, it was able to organise their public prayers for the victims of the pandemic and the health of the medical personnel and their patients (Dveri.bg 2020b). In November 2020, on the feast of the Christian family, several Orthodox priests from the Diocese of Sofia, who had cured themselves of the COVID infection, donated blood necessary for the production of antibodies serum then used for the healing of infected people (Dveri.bg 2020a). These gestures received significant publicity thanks to the national media. At the same time, there is no information on whether religious minorities had similar access to hospitals.

Furthermore, the pandemic had an effect on the religious rites connected with the main stages of human life, e.g. baptisms, weddings, and funerals. During the state of emergency, the number of people attending them was restricted. In parallel, the number of Orthodox weddings and baptisms declined as many people preferred to postpone them. In the meantime, the funerals rapidly increased during the first pandemic year, when mortality in Bulgaria marked a growth of 32 per cent (Petya Ivanova 2020). At this point, religious ministers of all faiths agreed to modify the funeral ceremonies, and Orthodox priests were instructed to perform them outside the churches (Bulgarian Orthodox Church 2020a). In line with the sanitary requirements, the coffins were closed and the mourning relatives had to abstain from such customs as touching and kissing the dead. Further, cremation became customary. If cremations in pre-pandemic Bulgaria varied between 10 and 15 per cent of all funerals, now they reached about 50 per cent (Bulgarian National Television 2022). This shift was provoked not only by the sanitary measures but also because of the shortage of graveyards in the big cities and the increased prices of traditional burials. Generally, the Orthodox hierarchs were not satisfied by this development. For years, they had insisted on body burials as the only proper mode of funeral for Orthodox Christians. Thus, some priests used to refuse funeral services for dead people who had asked in advance for cremation. During the pandemic, however, the BOC's episcopate agreed that funeral services would also be performed for those dead who would be cremated afterward.

Similarly, the Grand Muftiate paid special attention to funeral rites. At the start of the epidemic, the Fetwa Commission of the Higher Muslim Council issued a special instruction (Grand Muftiate (Bulgaria)

2020b) according to which, when a Muslim dies of COVID-19 in a hospital, the body must be buried in the manner it was received from the medical institution. Muslims were also instructed not to take out the bodies of the deceased person from the disinfected sack or coffin. In such cases, the only rite that had to be performed was a ritual cleaning known as *teyemmüm*. The fatwa explained that this modest rite did not mean that the relatives had not properly fulfilled their duties to the dead. It also pointed out that the simplicity of the rite aimed to limit the spread of the disease and was in line with the priority that the Quran gives to the safety of the life of the living over the washing of the dead.

At the same time, media publications from the pandemic period raised the complaints of relatives of Muslim coronavirus victims who had been placed in coffins with Christian symbols. To resolve the problem, the Grand Muftiate and its regional branches sent letters to the hospitals and the regional sanitary inspectorates (Blitz.bg 2020). It is worth mentioning that, in 2012, the Grand Muftiate called on Muslims not to bury their deceased in coffins and reminded them that such practices used to be forcefully imposed on Bulgarian Muslims during communism (Vitkova 2012). Finally, another fatwa instructed imams on how to protect themselves during the traditional funeral washing of people who had died at home. They had to wear masks, gloves, high boots, and raincoats (Grand Muftiate (Bulgaria) 2020c). Muslims were also advised to temporarily stop performing customs requiring physical contact between the participants during funeral ceremonies (Kardzhali Bgvesti 2020). It is intriguing that publications on the funerals of Muslims who had died of coronavirus do not mention any cases of cremation.

Finally, when the first vaccines appeared in Bulgaria in the last days of December 2021, the religious denominations failed to take a common stand in support of the vaccination campaign. To a great degree, this was a result of the BOC's general anti-ecumenical approach. Only a few Orthodox bishops made positive public statements about the vaccines. One of them was Metropolitan Naum of Ruse, who elucidated that vaccination was not an act of apostasy and that God had given free will to people to decide for themselves (Dveri.bg 2021). Yet he did not disclose whether he had been vaccinated. The only hierarch who publicly announced his vaccination was Bishop Tikhon, who is not a member of the Holy Synod and has medical education (Fakti.bg 2021). At the same time, anti-vaxxer gossips found fertile soil among a good

number of Orthodox and other believers. According to a survey held by Eurobarometer in February 2022, only 49 per cent of Bulgarians agreed that the vaccines from the EU were safe and 29 per cent were totally against the vaccination (Eurobarometer 2022). Under these circumstances, the ministers of most religious minorities did not give much publicity to their vaccination. The main exception was the chief mufti, Mustafa Hadzhi, whose vaccination was publicly announced (Novini.bg 2021). At the same time, in the summer of 2021, when the Ministry of Health set up a public board for the promotion of the vaccination campaign, the BOC refused to send its representative there and only the religious minorities did so (Trifonova 2021). It should be clarified that this council was not an interreligious body but a public one. Its members were prominent Bulgarian citizens whose voice was expected to make the vaccination more popular.

Conclusion

The presented overview of the encounter of religion with COVID-19 in Bulgaria reveals a set of peculiarities. The abstention of state authorities from ordering the closure of religious sites allows us to see how the teaching and organisation of different faiths influence their responses to the pandemic, including the range of solutions found in their attempts to balance between the duty to God and the responsibility to the local society. The analysis also points out that the share of one or another faith community in the country's religious demography could also impact the decisions of its religious leadership and the behaviour of its faithful in a state of emergency.

At the same time, the attitudes of Bulgarian citizens to religious liberties during the pandemic were not defined only by their secular or religious worldviews. The debate on the choice between the freedom of religion and the public good was also influenced by the memory of the communist persecution of religion. As a result, not only practising believers but many nominal ones were inclined to perceive any restriction of religious freedom as an infringement of democracy. Finally, the majority-minority divides also left its imprint on the attitude of Bulgarian citizens. The state authorities accepted the refusal of the BOC's leadership to close its temples and make changes in its sacramental practices, but seem to have been less sensitive to the rights of Roma evangelicals.

Notes

- 1 The politicisation of the issue of religious rights during the COVID-19 pandemic is discussed in Daniela Kalkandjieva (2024).
- 2 Constitution of Bulgaria <https://www.parliament.bg/en/const>.
- 3 Article 10.1 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union reads: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.' See https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf.
- 4 The Bulgarian original of the constitutional text on the freedom of practising religion (Article 13.1) is very vague. It reads: 'Veroizpovedaniyata sa svobodni', which literally means 'Religious denominations are free'. See <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/const>. At the same time, the meaning of the word *veroizpovedaniya* is unclear. In Bulgarian, this word could mean a religious denomination, institution, community, or all these notions together. According to the Additional Provisions (§1.1) in the Religious Denominations Act, the term *veroizpovedanie* embraces 'the totality of religious beliefs and principles, the religious community and its religious institution'. See <https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135462355>. At the same time, the English translation of the above-cited constitutional text, presented on the website of the Bulgarian Parliament reads: 'The practicing of any religion shall be unrestricted.' See <https://www.parliament.bg/en/const>.
- 5 Constitution of Bulgaria.
- 6 The Directorate's appeal to the religious leaders is available on its website: <http://veroizpovedania.government.bg/home>.
- 7 The Register of Legally Recognized Religious Entities in Bulgaria is retrievable from the website of the Directorate of Religious Denominations (<http://veroizpovedania.government.bg/docs>).
- 8 One of the BOC's youngest metropolitans, Kipriyan of Stara Zagora, issued an encyclical letter advising the faithful from his diocese to follow the Easter liturgy home via Facebook instead of coming to the church (Bulgarian Orthodox Church 2020d).

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