

CHAPTER 3

Religion and COVID-19 in Croatia

Preference for Religion and Varieties of (Non)compliance

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Abstract

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the legal and sociological aspects of the pandemic that pertain to religion. The legal measures undertaken by the Croatian government have not been challenged via the judicial system; the use of the courts for this purpose was almost non-existent. Concerning the sociological aspects, we focus on varieties of (non)compliance with government-prescribed measures at various levels of the Catholic community (religious leadership, clergy, and believers), as well as on how this (non)compliance changed over time. We also describe anti-mask attitudes and conspiracy theories in the belief that these phenomena, though not directly relatable to religion, reveal the overall social climate as a framework in which the social

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role of religion during the pandemic can be traced. Our analysis shows that the close relationship between the state and the Catholic Church was also evident during the pandemic. Furthermore, public debates about public health measures related to COVID-19 (e.g. vaccines and COVID-19 passes) contributed to the politicisation of the disease, and religion played an important role in this process. Although there is an evident lack of data on religious phenomena during the pandemic in Croatia, this chapter uses a variety of sources, including legal texts, the documents of public officials and institutions, media reports, and existing scholarly studies.

Introduction

In Croatia, the first case of COVID-19 infection was confirmed in Zagreb on 25 February 2020. On 11 March, the same day the World Health Organization declared a pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the Croatian Ministry of Health declared it to be an epidemic.

In Croatia, the spread of COVID-19 followed a pattern similar to that of other Central and Eastern European countries, where the pandemic broke out slightly later than in Western Europe. This slight delay gave the government time to prepare and implement strict measures, resulting in a mild first wave of the virus (Lesschaeve, Glaurdić, and Mochtak 2021). The government started easing the initial measures on 27 April 2020. By 11 May 2023, when the end of the epidemic was declared in Croatia, there had been five waves of infection. At the very beginning of the outbreak, the official measures were quite severe; however, in later stages, they became more relaxed. Despite this, there were public debates about the need for them, especially regarding vaccinations.

Research on the effects of COVID-19 on religion in Croatia is limited. Filipović and Rihtar (2023) seek to identify the impact of adolescents' religiosity on coping with the pandemic. They conclude that the faith of religious adolescents became more personal and positively affected psychosocial resilience and personal growth in combination with family cohesion. Pavić, Kovačević, and Jurlina (2023) explore the connection between religiosity, internet use, and vaccination attitudes to determine the possible interaction effect between internet use and religiosity. They find that internet use was negatively correlated with vaccine hesitancy before the pandemic; however, during the later

phases of the emergency, religiosity and internet use had an interactive impact. In other words, the relationship between time spent on the internet and vaccination attitudes differed according to a person's religiosity. Religious people who spent more time on the internet had higher vaccination conspiracy beliefs than those who spent less time surfing the web. Among those who were less religious, the pattern was different – people who spent more time online had lower scores on the vaccination conspiracy scale.

Interestingly, several papers that have dealt with conspiracy theories (Ančić and Cepić 2021; Bagić, Šuljok, and Ančić 2022) and far-right activism (Topić et al. 2022) in the context of the pandemic have completely ignored religion. Other articles are not entirely located in the field of sociology and only partly touch on the role of religion. These include a study of conspiracy theories about vaccination (Kelam and Dilica 2021) and one analysing attitudes towards COVID-19 and vaccination on a small convenience sample (Tadić, Brezovec, and Tadić 2022). Another paper does discuss the role of the Catholic Church in responding to the pandemic but is based on the 'research method of the pastoral judgment' (Jurić 2021). Eterović (2022) marginally deals with the role of the church in his ethical analysis of the interrelatedness of basic moral values and public health effectiveness, much like Žažar (2022) in his study of moralising in public discourse during the pandemic. Anthropologists Perinić Lewis et al. (2022) investigate how the infection and the health care measures taken to stop it affected the loss of family members, funerals, and mourning among small island communities.

In this chapter, we start with a brief overview of the social context in Croatia. Next, we sketch the legal and sociological aspects of the pandemic. Regarding the latter, we focus on varieties of (non)compliance with the anti-COVID-19 measures among different levels of the Catholic community (religious leadership, clergy, and believers) and their changes over time. We also look at differences in the state's attitude towards dominant and minority religions. Furthermore, we describe anti-mask attitudes and conspiracy theories in the belief that these phenomena, though not directly relatable to religion, reveal the overall social climate as a framework in which the social role of religion during the pandemic can be traced. Given the lack of empirical evidence regarding the pandemic's influence on collective religious life, we will mainly focus on how various secular and religious actors

positioned themselves in this situation. Our analysis draws on various data sources, including legal texts, the documents of public officials and institutions, media reports, and existing scholarly analyses.

Setting the Context

A brief overview of Croatia's historical, social, and political context is important to better understand the complex dynamics between religious communities, the state, and other societal actors that occur in the country. Croatia is traditionally a Catholic country bordering different religious and cultural regions, where diversity from its neighbours has historically been based mainly on religious identity and belonging. During socialism (1945–1990), the government eliminated religion from the public space and made it invisible; however, religion remained strongly present in the private sphere, where it was transmitted through socialisation based on traditional family patterns (Jukić 1994; Marinović Jerolimov 2004). For example, research conducted in the Zagreb region in 1972 showed that 81 per cent of respondents had crosses, images of saints, and small altars in their family homes (Marinović Jerolimov 2004, 306).

After independence and the introduction of democratic changes under transitional circumstances linked to the war against its independence, the identity of the new Croatian state became strongly related to Catholic values. This fact is visible in different areas of public life, for example in the intertwining of religion and politics or in religion's presence in the media and the education system. The vast majority of Croatian citizens (about 90 per cent) report confessional adherence, and 70–80 per cent identify as religious, which positions Croatia as among the most religious countries in Europe (Črpić and Zrinščak 2005; Pew Research Centre 2017). The most recent statistical data from the 2021 population census show that 83.03 per cent of the population were Catholics, 3.36 per cent Orthodox, 0.33 per cent Protestants, 0.66 per cent other Christians, 1.32 per cent Muslims, 0.09 per cent Eastern religions, 0.01 per cent Jews, 0.37 per cent other religions, movements, or worldviews, 1.68 per cent agnostics or sceptics, 4.71 per cent not religious or atheists, and 3.86 per cent not declared or unknown.¹ However, national and religious homogenisation and the deprivatisation and deindividualisation of religion from the 1990s onwards are only some of the multidimensional and complex dynamics pertaining

to religion in contemporary Croatia. These dynamics manifest themselves as different and sometimes contradictory trends at various levels of society. For most of the population, religion is part of a broad cultural-symbolic identification framework, which includes religious people but also some indifferent and non-religious groups (Marinović Jerolimov and Hazdovac Bajić 2017). Despite that, scholars have also documented processes of (contextual) secularisation² and individualisation. In other words, although personal religiosity has remained relatively stable (religious belonging, religious self-identification, and the importance of religion in everyday life), church religiosity has declined somewhat, especially in terms of institutional religious practices (church attendance) and the church's public role (trust in the church) (Nikodem and Zrinščak 2019).

Legal Aspects

The law used to enact the measures against the spread of COVID-19 was the Law on the Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases. This law has been in force in Croatia since 1992 and has been amended several times (in 2004, 2007, 2009, and 2018).³ After the epidemic was declared, the law was changed twice in 2020. These changes included adding the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus to the list of infectious diseases, authorising the Civil Protection Headquarters (in addition to the Ministry of Health) to prescribe special actions for the protection of the population, determining the method and conditions of self-isolation and the obligation to wear medical masks, and deciding on the fines for non-compliance with the official protective measures.⁴ In 2021, the law was again amended to incorporate the obligation to present proof of testing, vaccination, or recovery from COVID-19 to enter certain premises.⁵

The Civil Protection System Act (originally from 2015, amended in 2018) was also changed in 2020.⁶ In this case, the government authorised the Civil Protection Headquarters to make decisions under special circumstances (e.g. danger to citizens' lives and health or significant damage to property of great value, the environment, or economic activities), which were to be implemented by regional and local civil protection units. None of these regulations deals specifically with religious life, and there are no legal drafts that explicitly regulate religious life in the event of a future pandemic.

About 20 days after the first recorded case of infection in Croatia, the Civil Protection Headquarters issued the Decision on Measures to Limit Social Gatherings, Work in Shops, Service Activities and the Holding of Sports and Cultural Events,⁷ which officially started the first lockdown in the country. The anti-pandemic measures adopted through this decision included, among others, maintaining a physical distance of two metres indoors and one metre outdoors; limiting social gatherings to a maximum of five people; suspending all public and religious gatherings, service and cultural activities, catering facilities, and the operation of shops (except those selling food and medicines); and closing gyms, driving schools, and dance schools. A few days later, on 23 March, the Decision on the Prohibition of Leaving One's Place of Residence in the Republic of Croatia⁸ was adopted, leading to an even greater tightening of social life. In addition to suspending all religious gatherings, the Civil Protection Headquarters issued the Measure on the Manner of Conducting Funerals and Last Farewells and the Decision on Measures to Enter into Marriage and Life Partnerships, which directly impacted religious gatherings and ceremonies. These decisions established that funerals were to be performed exclusively with the closest family members and the representatives of the religious community in question. Musical services and the delivery of candles and flowers were suspended. Obituaries were prohibited from containing information about the place and time of burial. Entering into a marriage or life partnership was also limited to the presence of one's immediate family, a religious community representative, or an official person. All forms of wedding celebration were suspended. Although these rules were later relaxed, they affected the number of marriages that took place at the time. The data for 2020 show that marriages fell by 22.9 per cent compared to the previous year. More recent data confirm that the number of marriages from March 2020, when the epidemic was officially declared in Croatia, to February 2023 decreased by 11.1 per cent compared to the average for the previous five years.⁹ The Civil Protection Headquarters' recommendation to religious communities was to broadcast Mass via radio, TV, or any other means so that believers could still attend the celebrations without gathering inside religious buildings.

While funerals and weddings were legally regulated, chaplaincies in hospitals and other public institutions (prisons, nursing homes, etc.) were not explicitly controlled, nor was this an issue that anyone

in public dealt with. However, based on some media reports on the pastoral work of the Catholic Church during the pandemic,¹⁰ Catholic chaplaincies took place on a partially informal basis. The church claimed that all patients affected by COVID-19 should be provided with pastoral care because every person had the right to it, regardless of the severity of their illness. Hospitals and caregivers should provide such care while respecting the relevant health care measures intended to protect personal health.

The legal measures implemented by the government have not been challenged through the legal system. There were many public discussions and there was an attempt to hold a referendum on certain initiatives and on the government's authority to undertake these, which will be discussed later in detail. However, few cases were brought to court. According to the available information, only three cases were brought to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Thus far, the court has dismissed one of these as ill-founded.¹¹ Also, these cases were not extensively discussed in the public arena; as a result, they did not influence ongoing debates to a considerable extent. The limited use of courts, particularly regarding human rights arguments, is mainly due to Croatia's socialist legacy and the perception that the justice system is inefficient. From 1999 to 2020, citizens ranked the Croatian justice system very low in terms of trust, together with the country's parliament and political parties (Bovan and Baketa 2022).

In this context, it is also important to note that a close relationship between the Catholic Church and the state has existed in Croatia since the 1990s, when the country gained independence. This relationship is described in the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia. Although the constitution stipulates the separation of church and state, it stresses cooperation (protection and assistance) between them. This link was strengthened by four agreements signed with the Holy See in 1996 and 1998.¹² The state's relations with other religious communities remained unregulated until 2002. The interactions between the church and the state during the pandemic exemplified the close cooperation between the two. As we will show later, the strong social influence of the church was not unimportant for the state when it had to adopt protection measures, as was the case with the vaccination programme and the COVID-19 passes. At the same time, minority religious communities were not included in any public debates. Non-Christian religious minorities did not publicly declare themselves on any issues regarding

COVID-19 measures and there was no formal interreligious body in Croatia during the pandemics.

Sociological Aspects

This section focuses on the relationship between religious groups and the state. It aims to reveal the dynamics of compliance with/resistance to the measures imposed by the government to fight COVID-19. While this focus is conditioned by the fact that empirical evidence on how the pandemic influenced collective religious life is scarce, it can say much about the position of various religious groups in society and the relationships between religion and other social actors. This section is primarily based on the thematic content analysis of three secular news portals (Indeks.hr, Jutarnji.hr, and Vecernji.hr), as well as the websites of the Croatian Bishops' Conference (Hbk.hr) and a Catholic weekly magazine (Glas-koncila.hr), between April 2020 and December 2021 (Hazdovac Bajić, Fila, and Marinović Jerolimov 2022).¹³

Religions and the State: Varieties of (Non)compliance

Compliance with the measures imposed by the government should be looked at from two angles. The first is the difference between the various layers of a religious organisation (leadership, clergy, and believers); the second is changes over time. During the first wave of the pandemic and the strict lockdown imposed by the Civil Protection Headquarters, all the major religious communities in the country supported and implemented the official measures. On 19 March 2020, the Croatian Bishops' Conference decided to cancel all religious gatherings and issued precise instructions concerning all aspects of religious life.¹⁴ The bishops explained that it was a Christian duty to show solidarity to the population and do everything possible to prevent the spread of the virus. They referred to the Bible (Romans 12:12) by invoking the need to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. Other religious communities took similar decisions.¹⁵ This support lasted until the end of the pandemic. However, during the following waves, there was much criticism in the public about the official measures, even though they became very relaxed. That had an impact on the position of the Catholic Church. A telling example of this is the Catholic Church's position on vaccination. On 11 November 2021,¹⁶

the church issued a statement confirming that the vaccination programme was ethically acceptable. The statement, though, also insisted that the programme should be voluntary, based on the free will of citizens, and that it was completely unacceptable for rights to be denied to those who, for whatever reason, refused to get vaccinated. Mass anti-vaccination protests started in October 2021. At these events, the demonstrators carried images of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, and they sang religious songs. Some of the speakers were priests and members of NGOs with close links to the church. However, despite heated public debates and Croatia's low vaccination rate, the church's leadership remained silent on COVID-19 vaccines until their public statement in November 2021.

At the level of the clergy, the situation was more complex. While there is no precise data on this topic, it could be concluded that most priests followed the government's instructions. However, the media's attention was directed at those who opposed the measures. The media reported extensively on the priest from the city of Split who, despite the restrictions, kept holding religious services. A journalist who investigated this issue was insulted and physically attacked by some believers and the priest.¹⁷ He and some other priests stated that religious services and receiving communion were basic human rights that should never be denied, that COVID-19 had been made by the Americans, and even that those who believed in Jesus could not contract the virus.¹⁸ A professor at the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb declared on many occasions that the virus had been planned and was part of 'pandemic totalitarianism'.¹⁹ Still, it should be noted that the dean emphasised that the professor's opinion diverged entirely from that of the Catholic Faculty of Theology and from the Roman Catholic Church's belief in the usefulness of vaccines.²⁰

The public attention paid to priests and religious practices that went against the official policies hides an aspect that has remained completely unknown, at least for the general population. When the end of the epidemic was declared in May 2023, a Croatian MP, a former religious teacher known for his conservative attitudes, said the following: 'For me, the most difficult thing during lockdown was attending religious services in bunkers and other secret places, as they were forbidden, but the priests still held them.'²¹ While these words should be investigated further, they suggest that resistance to the official measures was more widespread than previously thought; they might even

indicate the existence of what can be termed an underground church. The most interesting thing is that there was no reaction to this statement. This fact is possibly a reflection of current disinterest towards COVID-19 and a general permissiveness regarding non-compliance with the official measures.

There have also been some elements of innovation. The Catholic priest who invited parish members to step out of their homes so that he could do the Easter food blessing from his car is an isolated but interesting example.²² Other innovations include the reliance on the online activities of priests and believers (e.g. dedicated YouTube channels) and other ideas that enabled religious people to maintain their sacramental practices in isolation (e.g. perfect repentance and spiritual communion).²³ There is no further empirical evidence that can give us more details. Still, the impression is that these were exceptions and that they have not significantly influenced religious life since the pandemic.

Religions and the State: Majority–Minority Relations

The pandemic reflected and reinforced church–state relations as well as the dominant position of the Catholic Church in Croatia, which was, as said, solidified by four agreements signed with the Holy See in 1996 and 1998. Such a position is documented by the official meetings between the government and the representatives of the Croatian Bishops' Conference, which took place twice a year to discuss and resolve potential problems. This did not happen with the other religious communities. The meeting held on 6 December 2021 is an excellent illustration of the 'success' of such gatherings. While the bishops supported the vaccination programme, they did not agree with the issuing of COVID-19 passes. Their attitudes changed after the meeting in question, and they distanced themselves from the public referendum on the passes started by the right-wing party.²⁴ In other words, bishops withdrew from the public discussions on the passes, did not comment on the referendum, and did not support the right-wing conservative party in its attempt to organise a referendum. This illustrates how the government relied on the support of the church's leaders. Despite public discussion about the position of the Catholic Church and somewhat divergent opinions among believers, there is no indication that the majority of believers would not pay attention to what religious leaders say. An important fact in that regard is that this right-wing government

has been favourable to the Catholic Church and, in return, expects support from Catholic bishops.

The Catholic Church also benefited from the government's recommendation, made during the first lockdown (March–May 2020), that Mass celebrations should be broadcast. National broadcasting was regularly provided only for the Catholic Church. The World of Life Union of Churches filed a complaint with the ombudswoman stating that, in 2020, national television channels did not cover a single event they organised, even though they were obliged to do so based on an agreement the church had with the government.²⁵ In November 2020, during the second lockdown, the Civil Protection Headquarters again recommended broadcasting religious services whenever possible. At the time, only gatherings of up to 25 people were allowed. This prompted the Croatian Bishops' Conference to argue that this restriction could put Catholics at a disadvantage because it did not consider the place where the religious gatherings occurred.²⁶ In a subsequent decision, taken in December 2020, the Headquarters exceptionally allowed Mass celebrations to go ahead on 24 and 25 December, though these had to be in line with special recommendations and instructions issued by the Croatian Institute of Public Health. According to such instructions, on the two days in question, the number of believers present would depend on the size of the inner area of the church, regardless of the restriction on gatherings of more than 25 people. However, the decision did not apply to the Serbian Orthodox Church, which celebrates Christmas based on a different calendar. This was raised by the ombudswoman as being discrimination, leading to the Civil Protection Headquarters changing its decision.²⁷ There were also other events that can be interpreted not as intentional discrimination against minorities but as a lack of sensitivity to the specificities of the minority position. Despite the unintentional nature of this stance, its results were still discriminatory practices.

Religions and the State: Preference for (the Majority) Religion

During the first, very strict lockdown, when even public parks were closed, the Civil Protection Headquarters allowed the pre-Easter public procession on the island of Hvar. Thus, on 9 April 2020, which was Maundy Thursday, the inhabitants of Hvar were allowed to hold the 500-year-old night procession of Za Križem on the condition that only

15 people took part in it. The Headquarters justified its decision by stating that the procession was an ancient tradition and was included in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage; it also argued that strict public health measures had been put in place for the event.²⁸ On 1 July, the Christian Brotherhood of Jelsa, which organises the procession, presented Prime Minister Plenković with a thank-you note for allowing it to preserve the annual tradition.²⁹ The whole event led to a heated public debate as this was the first time that the authorities had contradicted their strict rules regarding lockdown. The case highlighted how the Catholic Church is favoured (Žažar 2022) because part of the public interpreted it as the ‘open compromise with the Catholic Church’ (Eterović 2022, 129), which is a social actor close to the ruling party. However, this was not just a case of favouring the dominant religion over minority faiths; it was also a sign of the particular place that religion occupies in public life and politics in Croatia (Zrinščak et al. 2014). Permissiveness was also evident in the case of priests who violated the anti-COVID-19 measures without being sanctioned. This was in stark contrast to the treatment of ordinary citizens. An example of this asymmetry is that of a farmer from Maruševec, in northern Croatia, who was ordered to self-isolate upon returning from Italy. When the man violated this order to spread fertiliser on his fields on his own, he was fined.³⁰ Some legal experts warned that the uneven implementation of public health measures and repressive decisions brought into question the equality of citizens before the law, which could harm people’s trust in the authorities and create frustration and resistance towards said measures.³¹

Religion, Anti-mask Attitudes, and Conspiracy Theories

As mentioned above, the lockdown regulations adopted for the later waves of the pandemic were considerably more relaxed than the first ones. Despite this, they led to reactions from the public. These intensified after the start of the vaccination programme and the introduction of COVID-19 passes. The passes were interpreted as an illegitimate form of pressure on people to get vaccinated. In addition to various public and social media statements, two events are worth mentioning here.

The first was the proposal to hold a constitutional referendum against the COVID-19 passes and the powers given to the Civil

Protection Headquarters to suspend a range of civil rights. The referendum would consist of two questions. The first pertained to civil rights, which, according to the proponents, could only be suspended during the pandemic by a parliamentary majority of two-thirds. The second suggested that the Headquarters should not have the power to suspend people's rights and that Parliament should verify all its decisions, including the COVID-19 passes, which should be abolished. The referendum was proposed by the right-wing and pro-religion political party Most ('Bridge'). The initiators eventually collected the signatures of 10 per cent of Croatian voters, which was the threshold for holding a referendum. However, as the proposed questions entailed changing the constitution, the Constitutional Court found that the referendum was in conflict with basic constitutional principles and declared it inadmissible. Concerning the second question, the court decided that it challenged the fundamental and constitutionally protected relationships between the legislative and executive branches of government.³² In the end, the referendum was not held. However, the episode led to debates about the government's decisions and undermined its authority over issues related to COVID-19.

The other event worth mentioning is the Freedom Festival, a gathering of those opposed to public health measures related to COVID-19, which was held twice.³³ Although some prominent right-wing and religiously oriented people were featured as key guests at these gatherings, it is not possible to establish a clear link between religion and the Freedom Festival.

As previously noted, despite its broad influence on Croatian society, religion has not been considered a relevant factor when researching attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccination. However, this research reveals the overall social climate in the country and provides an important framework for studying the role of religion concerning COVID-19. Data have supported the impression that anti-mask protesters were right-wing-oriented, though the general picture is not straightforward (Ančić and Cepić 2021). Also, the analysis shows that anti-mask attitudes were marginal among the population, although the media attention paid to them might give a different impression. In sum, these attitudes were less common among older people. Interestingly, and in contrast to what has been found for other countries, they were more prevalent among the educated. Furthermore, anti-mask attitudes were more prevalent among those who experienced a loss of income during

the pandemic and who worked in the more precarious and less protected private sector. Distrust in the media and the government was also important (Ančić and Cepić 2021).

The issue of trust is very important in this context. Croatia is known for its declining levels of public trust in the period 1999–2022. This phenomenon concerns the country's political institutions, while trust in the security institutions has remained stable (Bovan and Baketa 2022). Trust in the Catholic Church is also declining (Nikodem and Zrinščak 2019), though the church remains among the most trusted institution. The erosion of trust in political institutions in Croatia is similar to that in other European countries and the world.³⁴ However, Sekulić and Šporer (2010) suggest that the socialist heritage is also significant in this regard. The basic characteristic of the socialist system was that institutions were designed in a top-down manner. The system also tried to address the dysfunctionality of some institutions by introducing reforms *from above*. Socialist society was caught up in endless processes of change. However, these were not the product of normal evolution, development, and gradual adaptation; instead, they resulted from an ideological design that often contradicted social reality. Thus, in socialist countries, institutions were not perceived as a natural part of society – something that helps society function better and supports individuals in meeting their needs – but as something imposed from the outside and unreliable. The collapse of socialism showed the unwillingness of all elites, including political ones, to solve numerous post-transition problems, which contributed to the general decline in trust in the state and the key institutions of democratic society (Nikodem 2019).

Acceptance of the official protective measures was more common among women and the elderly, as well as among those who perceived high risks from illness, had direct experience of COVID-19, or had more trust in the institutions that managed the health crisis (Bagić and Šuljok 2021). Some scholars have also found that a lack of trust in the government or the health care sector was one of the most important predictors of anti-mask attitudes (e.g. Kaliterna Lipovčan, Prizmić-Larsen, and Franc 2022; Pavić, Kovačević, and Jurlina 2023).

It is necessary to distinguish the belief that masks do not protect from COVID-19 from conspiracy theories, despite the connections between the two phenomena (Ančić and Cepić 2021). According to very limited research, individuals with far-right political views were

behind spreading disinformation on two media portals in Croatia. The contents of their posts were 'centred on global conspiracy and seeing the pandemic as a means to enforce a form of global fascism and impede personal freedoms across the globe' (Topić et al. 2022, 125). More comprehensive research of 4,576 comments on various internet portals and on Facebook found that 20.6 per cent of them were negative. Of these, about one-third (35.84 per cent) could be classified as conspiracy theories, followed by distrust of the composition, effectiveness, safety, and side effects of COVID-19 vaccines (19.93 per cent); distrust of scientists (15.8 per cent); and distrust of government (11.87 per cent) (Feldvari et al. 2022). The previously mentioned study that showed that religious persons who spent more time online held more conspiracy-related beliefs regarding vaccination (Pavić, Kovačević, and Jurlina 2023) indicates that more research is needed on the role of social media in shaping people's attitudes in this domain.

Conclusion

There is an evident lack of data on religious phenomena during the COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia. This fact alone is interesting since religion is an important factor in Croatian society. In terms of the legal aspects linked to the pandemic, there was a visible reluctance to act through the courts (especially based on human rights arguments), which also indicates distrust of the system. The official measures implemented by the government were not challenged via the judicial system, and the number of legal cases brought before the ECtHR was almost negligible. Sociologically, our analysis is exploratory in nature, but it can highlight the following three main points: (a) the position of the Catholic Church and the state's relations with other religions, (b) the innovation and/or preservation of traditional religious patterns, and (c) religion and the politicisation of COVID-19.

First, the prominent public position of the Catholic Church was visible during the pandemic. On the one hand, the ruling centre-right political party emphasised its closeness to the Catholic Church and its reliance on the church's support for its decisions by organising meetings with religious leaders. At the same time, the church supported the state's public health measures and, despite a long silence, confirmed its closeness to the government by accepting the disputed COVID-19 passes and distancing itself from the right-wing political party that

tried to organise a referendum on the matter. This closeness was also visible in the several examples of the state's permissive attitude towards religion (from allowing the procession on Hvar to take place during lockdown to turning a blind eye when some priests violated anti-COVID-19 rules). Thus, the state focused exclusively on the Catholic Church, deliberately or accidentally ignoring smaller religious communities. Occasional complaints by the country's minority faiths were in some cases resolved in their favour. However, these situations demonstrate that the relations between smaller religious organisations and the state are often insufficiently developed.

Second, our analysis shows that the Catholic Church implemented various adaptive responses that were related more to (non)compliance with the official measures than to innovative forms of action. This aligns with the fact that religiosity in Croatia is mostly a traditional and collective phenomenon. As illustrated, non-compliance/resistance was predominantly individual, sporadic, and located at the lower levels of the church's hierarchy. However, given that the Catholic Church has faced criticism for its close connection to the state/politics (Ančić and Zrinščak 2012) and that trust in the church, though still high, is declining (Nikodem and Zrinščak 2019), we can speculate that these events will further affect the perception of the Catholic Church in Croatian society. So far, the crisis of COVID-19 has reinforced existing patterns, and there are no indications that the level of religiosity has changed in the last three years. Future research will show whether the pandemic has accelerated the decline of church religiosity or has affected personal religiosity, which has proved very stable over the past two decades.

Third, public debates about the anti-pandemic measures, especially the vaccination programme and COVID-19 passes, contributed to the politicisation of the disease. The referendum proposed by the country's right-wing and pro-religion party highlights the important role played by religion in shaping public debate. However, the limited evidence available does not prove a direct link between religion, anti-mask attitudes, and conspiracy theories. Still, the important conclusion of this study is that excluding religion from analyses of pandemic-related public health measures at the individual and group levels leads to an insufficient understanding of current social processes.

Notes

- 1 The 2021 census was done according to somewhat different rules from previous censuses, and so this wrongly indicated that the share of 'other religions, movements and worldviews' rose from 0.06 per cent in 2011 to 0.96 per cent in 2021, and the share of 'other Christians' from 0.30 per cent to 4.83 per cent. However, many respondents who chose these two categories identified themselves simultaneously as members of traditional religions. Hence, the data presented above are recalculations (done by Siniša Zrinščak) based on those who undeniably identified as Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. Before the recalculation, the share of the Catholics was 78.97 per cent, Orthodox 3.32 per cent, and Protestants 0.26 per cent. Other categories remained the same.
- 2 The term 'contextual secularisation' refers to the idea that the pattern and intensity of secularisation change depending on the social context of a locale (Pickel 2011).
- 3 Zakon.hr, accessed 14 August 2023: <https://www.zakon.hr/z/1067/Zakon-o-za%C5%A1titi-pu%C4%8Danstva-od-zaraznih-bolesti>.
- 4 Narodne novine no. 47/20 accessed 14 August 2023: <https://www.zakon.hr/download.htm?id=2689>; Narodne novine no. 134/20, accessed 14 August 2023: <https://www.zakon.hr/cms.htm?id=46414>.
- 5 Narodne novine no. 143/21, accessed 14 August 2023: <https://www.zakon.hr/cms.htm?id=50830>.
- 6 Narodne novine no. 31/20, accessed 14 August 2023: <https://www.zakon.hr/cms.htm?id=43417>.
- 7 Narodne novine no. 32/20, accessed 6 June 2023: https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2020_03_32_713.html.
- 8 Narodne novine no. 35/20, accessed 6 June 2023: https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2020_03_35_737.html.
- 9 Bureau of Statistics, accessed 8 June 2023: <https://web.dzs.hr/Hrv/COVID-19/stanovnistvo-brakovi.html>.
- 10 Laudato.hr, accessed 10 June 2023: <https://laudato.hr/vijesti/biskupije/bolnicki-dusobriznici-pozeske-biskupije-o-pandemiji-koronavirusa>.
- 11 European Court of Human Rights, *Factsheet – COVID-19 Health Crisis*, accessed 4 September 2023: https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/fs_COVID_eng.
- 12 Agreement between the Republic of Croatia and the Holy See on Legal Issues, On Cooperation in the Field of Education and Culture, On Spiritual Care in the Military and Police Forces, and On Economic Issues. See also Zrinščak et al. (2014).
- 13 The bulk of this analysis was performed for a presentation given at the ISORE-CEA conference in April 2022, but additional sources were investigated for this chapter.
- 14 Croatian Bishops' Conference Decision, accessed 15 June 2023: <https://hbk.hr/odredbe-biskupa-hbk-u-vezi-sa-sprjecavanjem-sirenja-bolesti-COVID-19/>.
- 15 Instructions from the Islamic community to the Majlis regarding the coronavirus, accessed 7 June 2022: <https://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/naputak-svim-medzlisima-zbog-koronavirusa>); instructions from the Serbian Orthodox Church of Croatia concerning the coronavirus, accessed 7 June 2022:

- <https://www.bitno.net/vijesti/hrvatska/srpska-pravoslavna-crkva-u-rh-izdala-upute-vjernicima/>.
- 16 Croatian Bishops' Conference, accessed 7 June 2023: <https://hbk.hr/je-li-cjepivo-protiv-COVIDa-19-moralno-prihvatljivo/>.
 - 17 Slobodna Dalmacija, accessed 8 June 2023: <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/tag/don-josip-delas>.
 - 18 Jutarnji list, accessed 8 June 2023: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/svećenik-s-dugog-otoka-u-novom-skandalu-sukobio-se-s-vjernikom-svi-koji-vjeruju-u-isusa-ne-mogu-dobiti-koronu-15066028>.
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 - 22 Danas.hr, accessed 14 August 2023: <https://danas.hr/hrvatska/video-svećenik-iz-auta-blagoslovio-gradjane-kad-vjernici-nisu-mogli-u-crkvu-ona-je-dosla-k-njima-471fd168-b9f3-11ec-bfe6-0242ac130018>.
 - 23 Laudato.hr, accessed 14 August 2023: <https://laudato.hr/Duhovnost/Zelite-li-znati-vise/O-duhovnoj-pricesti.aspx>.
 - 24 Index.hr, accessed 8 June 2023: <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/biskupise-predomislili-nakon-sastanka-s-plenkovicem-podrzali-COVIDpotvrde/2323651.aspx>.
 - 25 Ombudswoman's report for 2020, accessed 2 June 2023: <https://www.ombudsman.hr/hr/interaktivno-izvjesce-za-2020/>.
 - 26 Ombudswoman's report for 2020, accessed 2 June 2023: <https://www.ombudsman.hr/hr/interaktivno-izvjesce-za-2020/>.
 - 27 Ombudswoman's report for 2020, accessed 2 June 2023: <https://www.ombudsman.hr/hr/interaktivno-izvjesce-za-2020/>.
 - 28 N1.hr, accessed 14 August 2023: <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/a499115-capak-objasnio-zasto-je-stozer-odobrio-vecerasnju-procesiju-na-hvaru/>.
 - 29 On its official Facebook profile, the Christian Brotherhood of Jelsa wrote the following message: 'Today, the president of our brotherhood presented Mr Andrej Plenković with a certificate of thanks, on behalf of all of us, for his generous support and help during the organisation of this year's Za Križem procession. In this way, we continued a tradition that has been going on for more than 500 years.' (https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=152289213058425&id=103672844586729, accessed 20 June 2023).
 - 30 Jutarnji list, accessed 9 June 2023: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/vozio-sam-gnoj-u-polje-i-popio-kaznu-od-8-000-kuna-sada-imam-jedno-pitanje-15004161>.
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