

## CHAPTER 5

# Changes in the Relations between the State and Religion during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Slovakia<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Slovakia is a country with a Catholic majority but with a variety of other minorities – mainly Christian churches. In Slovakia, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred from March 2020 to April 2022 in four waves. Throughout all waves of the pandemic, there was no specific legislation in force or action taken regarding religious groups, and all restrictions on religious life were part of general restrictions. The differential treatment of religious and other actors was more evident in the case of various exemptions from measures, when in the early periods state-recognised religious groups were not afforded such exemptions, or they did not receive them to the same extent as some others, whereas in the second and later waves, by contrast, registered religious groups were afforded most exemptions from generally applicable measures, or strict anti-pandemic measures were relaxed during religious holy days. Non-registered religious groups or people without religious affiliation

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were not taken into consideration in the adoption of anti-pandemic measures or the exemptions from them. The available data from various studies suggest that the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on religiosity in Slovakia was a mixed one but without significant changes in religious affiliation and church attendance.

## Introduction

Slovakia is classified as a post-communist country with a Catholic majority. However, historically, and at present, it is a religiously pluralistic country with a variety of other minorities – mainly Christian churches. It has been an independent state since 1993, since the division of Czechoslovakia.

In Slovakia, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in four waves. Just as the measures taken by the state changed in the different waves, so did the views and attitudes of the public and various collective actors, including religious ones, towards the anti-pandemic measures. Pinterič and Clarič-Jakše (2023) show the distribution of the measures in Slovakia in various phases of the pandemic. The *Financial Times* (2022) illustrates this situation by using a government response stringency index of measures taken by countries, including Slovakia, against the pandemic. It is therefore very difficult to describe any single pattern of relations between the public and the various collective actors during the pandemic period (Coronavirus 2023).

Although during the pandemic there were a considerable number of studies and surveys conducted in Slovakia on public views and attitudes towards the causes and nature of the pandemic, or towards the actions of the state (Čavojová and Halama 2022; Ako sa mate Slovensko? (How are you Slovakia?);<sup>2</sup> Kanovský and Halamová 2020), no specific survey has been conducted focusing on religion as a possible differentiating factor. Only a few anthropological investigations have been done specifically on the topic of religion. One example is the study by Spalová and Gajdoš, who focus on the relationship of *ritual innovations* with the *changes in repertoires of belonging* to these communities (Spalová and Gajdoš 2024, 3). Partial quantitative data on the impact on religious life can be reconstructed from Zeman et al. (2020), the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), or the seventh wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) (Inglehart et al. 2022).

Throughout all waves of the pandemic, there was no specific legislation or action taken regarding religious groups, and all restrictions on religious life were part of general restrictions. Nevertheless, from the beginning of the pandemic, religious groups formed an important part of the legitimisation process of anti-pandemic measures. In the later period, however, their role varied, with some religious actors becoming openly critical of anti-pandemic measures and others not becoming involved in disputes over their form and legitimacy.

### Setting the Context

Slovakia is a country with a predominantly Catholic population but an ever-growing population of non-religious people and a culturally important population of Protestants of the Lutheran confession (historically about 12 per cent of the population, but only 5.3 per cent in 2021), who have been one of the key actors in the building of Slovak national consciousness (Tížik 2021).

In the last four decades, Catholics made up the highest proportion of the population of Slovakia in 2001 (68.9 per cent), but this has continually decreased – in 2021 it was only 55.7 per cent (Population – Basic results 2023). Historically, despite the dominance of Catholicism, the country can be considered religiously pluralistic (on the history, see e.g. Očovský 1993), with significant minorities of Greek Catholics (especially Ruthenians) – 4 per cent in 2021; Calvinists (especially Hungarians) – 1.6 per cent in 2021; and Orthodox (Ruthenians and Ukrainians) – 0.9 per cent in 2021. During the 40-year period of Communist Party rule (1948–1989) and even coexistence in the common Czechoslovak Republic, the religious structure in Slovakia did not change, except an increase in the proportion of non-religious people (from about 1.2 per cent in 1951 to 9.8 per cent in 1991 and later to 23.8 per cent in 2021). Since 1990 (Registered Churches and Religious Societies 2023), several new small religious groups (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Baha'is) have been legalised, but a relatively large number of religious groups are also not registered with the state and thus do not have social and legal visibility (Tížik 2015, 2023b). Smaller registered religious groups in Slovakia are mainly Christian or based on Christianity (Jehovah's Witnesses – 0.3 per cent or about 16,000 affiliated; Christian Congregations – about 18,000 registered; Apostolic Church – about 9,000 registered; Baptists – about 3,800

registered; and a few other small religious groups). In total, about 1 per cent of the population of Slovakia in 2021 declared their affiliation to groups not registered with the state (about 10,800 people to Christian groups, about 3,800 people to Islam, about 6,700 people to Buddhism, and about 4,000 people to various pagan groups) (Population – Basic results 2023).

Despite the state's constitutionally defined neutrality (Berdisová 2019; Constitution of the Slovak Republic), the Catholic Church has a relatively strong influence, especially since the adoption of the international Basic Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See (the so-called Concordat) in 2000, along with the strong position of the 11 Christian churches associated in the Ecumenical Council of Churches (Ekumenická rada cirkví v Slovenskej republike), which, following the model of the Catholic Church, signed a similar treaty with the state in 2001, but only with national validity (Moravčíková 2010; Tížik 2023b).

There is no experience of the separation model of relationship between church and state in the territory of contemporary Slovakia. At the time of the communist regime, religious life was controlled by the state. Since the end of 1989, despite the frequent interference of the Catholic Church in politics and election campaigns, the model of relations with the state has often been described as cooperative (Čikeš 2010). These factors also influenced the reactions of various religious groups to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Slovakia, the COVID-19 pandemic began in early March 2020. The safeguarding measures adopted in Slovakia by the state authorities started before a state of emergency was declared (Na Slovensku platí 2020). On 26 December 2020, the first doses of the COVID-19 Comirnaty vaccine arrived in Slovakia. The first person to be vaccinated was the infectologist Vladimír Krčméry (Slovensko začalo 2020), who was known also as a Catholic dissident from the communist period and a religious activist. At the time of the pandemic, Krčméry was the most publicised face of expert knowledge in the public but also private media about the pandemic and the legitimisation of the state's actions throughout the pandemic.

Changes in public feeling in relation to the unstable political situation and changes of government cast doubt on the relevance of the historical experience of the Slovak population with the communist regime in explaining the public's response to the pandemic, and instead suggest a stronger influence of the current political situation

on the government's acceptance or rejection of action in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mrva 2023). After the first two weeks of the pandemic, the government of Peter Pellegrini was succeeded by the new government of Igor Matovič, but after more than a year of discontent and political conflict that was replaced by the government of Eduard Heger. This third government was already in a state of disintegration by the time of the end of the pandemic, culminating in January 2023 in the calling of early parliamentary elections. Heger's later, only temporary, government was replaced in May 2023 by the so-called 'bureaucratic government' of Ľudovít Ódor, but without gaining the support of parliament. The political crisis culminated in January 2023 with the calling of parliamentary elections for September 2023.

The parliamentary elections were won by the SMER–Slovak Social Democracy (DIRECTION) party, which together with the HLAS–Social Democracy (VOICE) party and the Slovak National Party (SNS) formed a new government headed by Prime Minister Robert Fico.

One of the important pre-election themes of these parties was criticism of the failure of previous governments to cope with the pandemic period. The new government, upon its arrival, nominated Peter Kotlár of the SNS (who had been part of groups protesting against and criticising the government's actions as violating human rights and freedoms during the anti-pandemic measures) as the government commissioner. Even before the election, he declared that he had not been vaccinated during the pandemic, nor had he had his children vaccinated, despite the fact that it was compulsory at the time. In his position as commissioner of the government, he organised a conference in March 2024, where participants noted numerous violations of the rights of Slovak citizens and recalled almost 50 complaints to the European Court of Human Rights in connection with the application of anti-pandemic measures by the government between 2020 and 2022. One of the objections was that the government was also interfering with freedom of religion or aspects of private life, although these cannot be restricted in a state of emergency, by interpreting extensively the restrictions on freedom of residence and movement, or the right of assembly (Tlačová správa 2024).

In April 2024, Peter Pellegrini (who had been prime minister at the beginning of the pandemic) was elected president of the Slovak Republic (he was inaugurated on 15 June). The ways in which his government

managed the incipient pandemic were also positively appreciated by the public till the beginning of 2024.

## Legal Aspects

The first problem in the legislation of the Slovak Republic is the lack of a legal definition of religion. When discussing the possible protection or discrimination of religious groups, it should be noted that, from the point of view of the law (Law 192/1992), there is only a list of state-recognised churches and religious associations to which the state accords various rights. Also, while there is a guarantee of religious rights and freedom for everybody, that comes without any norms apart from the list of recognised churches.

An important aspect of religious life in Slovakia at the time of the pandemic was the three types of religious exemptions from the state's anti-pandemic measures. First, different levels of exception to the restrictions on collective gatherings of the believers (*Masses*) were used in some periods of pandemics. All exceptions were only for recognised churches. Second, special rights (exemptions) for the clergy were adopted during times of lockdowns. These special rights existed only for some recognised Christian churches that play a spiritual role in hospitals and centres of social care or for individual spiritual care during lockdowns (Poslankyňa prichádza 2021).

Third, special rights (exemptions) existed for the believers of recognised churches from the pandemic restrictions at the time of lockdowns. These rights included, for example, to be in contact with priests or spiritual guides in institutions of health and social care or to travel to such services. All these aspects were related to the legal status of religion in Slovakia, i.e. the recognition of a religious group by the state according to the law.

According to Souček (2023), another controversy that gained public prominence was the initiative of a member of the national parliament (from the Christian Union Party) who proposed a health care legislation change to include a statement that health care includes spiritual services (Poslankyňa prichádza 2021). After the amendment of the law, priests would have been included in the category of so-called other health care professionals. However, since this legislative proposal did not receive sufficient support, it was not approved. Similar efforts were made by the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia, which commented on

the proposed change to the health law. In addition, it was claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic made the need for such legislation (including specification of the status of spiritual services and authorised providers) even more pressing (Záborskej návrh sa vracia 2021).

The legal context of the state's action against the pandemic is well illustrated by the complaints received by the ombudsman and the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights (SNSLP) in Bratislava. Neither institution mentions in its report the sources of the complaints. In the first half of 2020, the ombudsman was contacted by a complainant who objected to the inability to freely manifest his religion (Správa o činnosti 2021). The applicant asked the ombudsman to examine the proportionality of the restrictions adopted in relation to the right to freedom of religion under the constitution. The restriction on attendance at religious services had made it more difficult for all believers in Slovakia to exercise their religious freedom, which may be regarded as an interference with fundamental rights. According to the decision of the ombudsman, the restriction did not strike at the heart of religious freedom (Správa o činnosti 2021).

On the basis of the complaint, the ombudsman also examined an objection relating to the measure of 19 May 2020, which regulated the conditions for holding mass events, including religious events. The subject matter of the measure at that time was a prohibition on holding mass events, including those of a religious nature, of over 100 persons, subject to specified exceptions. Among the exceptions were religious acts and even religious services, such as first communion, confirmation, funeral, and marriage ceremonies. The main problem was that the competent authority did not define other mass religious acts generally but in specific terms, with the exception of religious services, funeral, and marriage ceremonies. For this reason, specific mass religious acts of the largest church in the territory of the Slovak Republic – the First Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Confirmation – were permitted, but similar mass religious acts of other smaller and registered religious societies and churches were not. The ombudsman stated that in this respect the principle of equality and the prohibition of discrimination should also apply to the restriction of fundamental rights, including the freedom of religion and the right to manifest a common religion (Správa o činnosti 2021, 36–39).

In relation to religious life, there were also suggestions that restricting access to collective worship in 2021 and later in 2022 for the

unvaccinated was a form of discrimination. According to the 2021 Human Rights Report (*Správa o dodržiavaní 2022*) published by the SNSLP, the Constitutional Court accepted a number of proposals for declaring legislation incompatible with the constitution in relation to vaccination. These legal challenges included, among other things, the violation of the constitutional prohibition of discrimination against unvaccinated persons, with the plaintiffs identifying ‘other status’ as a prohibited ground of discrimination. As of 31 December 2021, the Constitutional Court had not issued any ruling in which it considered the possibility of subsuming the criterion of non-vaccination against COVID-19 under the prohibited discriminatory ground of ‘other status’ (*Správa o dodržiavaní 2022*, 15–17).

In the case of human and civil rights advocacy, the strong position of the traditional Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church, in advocating the protection of religious rights and freedoms, but only in relation to registered churches, was evident in the case of Slovakia during the pandemic. Their activism manifested itself in three basic measures: the inclusion of clergy from registered churches (predominantly Catholics) as part of the staff working in public health, which meant a number of exemptions for visits to health, social, and other state facilities, where access to the public and even immediate family members was restricted during lockdowns. Organisations advocating for the rights of registered churches were primarily Catholic NGOs and Catholics initiatives, supported by the statements of Catholic bishops and the activism of Christian politicians. Defending the rights of unregistered religious groups was only on the agenda of the public defender of rights, the ombudsman, and the public institution established by the state, the SNSLP.

Second, through the Slovak Bishops’ Conference (Catholic) and the Ecumenical Council of Churches (mainly Protestant), the traditional Christian churches pushed for exceptions during the lockdowns so that public worship in churches would not be prohibited.

Third, violations of anti-pandemic measures by the clergy remained mostly an internal matter for the churches and did not become the subject of the state justice system. However, there was a lack of advocates for the religious rights of unregistered religious groups (except in the SNSLP report) and the rights of the non-religious, who were denied various exemptions from anti-pandemic measures such as those enjoyed by Catholics in Slovakia and, to some extent, members

of the other largest registered churches. At the same time, the protection of civil and political rights (the right to public assembly and rights related to decisions on vaccination or measures concerning children) by civil NGOs was weak; this agenda was taken over by opposition political parties in the political struggle.

## Sociological Aspects

From a sociological point of view, two lines of analysis can be distinguished: first, changes in the forms of religiosity of the Slovak population and, second, changes in the relation of churches to adoption of anti-pandemic measures.

Zeman et al. (2020) reported that in November 2020 about 25 per cent of respondents declared that they did not have a religious affiliation and about 75 per cent declared their affiliation with some religious group (Zeman et al. 2020, 196). This research was confirmed by the seventh wave of the WVS (Inglehart et al. 2022), which was conducted in Slovakia in the final phase of the pandemic, in February 2022. Compared with the results of the European Values Study (EVS) from 2017 (which contained the same questions on religiosity), there were no significant differences. Results from the 2022 WVS indicated a slight decrease in the proportion of people with no religion (from 29 per cent to 26 per cent) and a slight increase in the proportion claiming to be affiliated with some religious group (from 71 per cent to 74 per cent) compared to the 2017 EVS results. But the difference can be attributed to the slightly different wording of the question on religious affiliation, which guides respondents more towards subscribing to a church (Tížik 2023a, 439). Towards the end of the pandemic, the *Ako sa máte Slovensko?* (How Are You Slovakia?) survey asked whether respondents were at that time (April 2022) attending church or religious services less often, the same, or more often than in the pre-pandemic period. About 3 per cent said they attended more often than before the pandemic, but about 8.5 per cent said they attended less often than before the pandemic (*Ako sa máte Slovensko? Marec/Apríl 2022*) However, other surveys carried out in Slovakia, such as ISSP 2020, 2021 and 2022, show that the numbers of people who adhered to churches and those who were not religious were both stable and, in the case of attendance at religious services, there was an upward trend, which may be due to the loosening of various restrictions in the second year of the

pandemic and especially after the end of the pandemic (CSES and ISSP 2020, ISSP Slovensko 2021, ISSP Slovensko 2022).

Identical differences are also found when comparing changes in the magnitude of different types of religiosities, combining subscription to religion, self-identity, religious practice, and belief in God. Those who went to church regularly (at least once a week), considered themselves religious, believed in God, and claimed to belong to a church numbered about 25 per cent in 2017 and 28 per cent in 2022, and those with the same characteristics who only went to church occasionally (once a month at most) made up 20 per cent in both surveys (Tížik 2023a, 453).

Slovak society has long had a non-confrontational perception of the relationship between science and religion. In 1968, and again in 2014, almost half of the respondents in a survey stated that both science and religion are of equal importance to human beings. The view that science is of greater importance was shared by around 35 per cent of respondents in both periods, while only around 12 per cent were of the opinion that religion is of greater importance (Tížik and Zeman 2017, 221). Trust in scientific institutions and universities has long been the highest among trust in various institutions in Slovakia, in contrast to a long-term decline in trust in churches. Trust in churches fell from 70 per cent to 51 per cent between 1999 and 2017 (Mrva and Klobucký 2019, 396). Mrva (2023), based on the 'How are you Slovakia?' ('Ako sa máte Slovensko?') survey, reports declining support for the government at the beginning of 2021, when in March, for example, it was only 15 per cent. However, the health sector and scientific institutions managed to maintain a relatively high level of social trust. In May 2021, for example, medical doctors and scientists were the most trusted authorities when it came to information about the COVID-19 vaccination (Mrva 2023, 116). In the case of Slovakia in 2021, there was a stronger relationship between trust in scientific institutions and compliance rates than between trust in government and compliance with measures (Mrva 2023, 125). Similarly, in 2023, trust (full or partial) in scientists and scientific institutions such as the Slovak Academy of Sciences was over 64 per cent and in universities it was over 62 per cent; trust in churches was only 44 per cent (Trendy (ne)dôvery 2023).

Second, religious groups in Slovakia can be analysed during the pandemic in more contexts. The context of public (media) debates about religion and religious freedom was important, because it showed

that visibility here concerned only some of the recognised Christian churches. Religion and its protection were a subject of public controversy in public and private media, without there being a definition of what religion was. The media implicitly associated religion and faith with the largest state-recognised churches. The issue of religious freedom was not an issue in the media for Muslims, Buddhists, Pentecostal Christians, agnostics, Jehovah's Witnesses, atheists, or others. Politicians explicitly associated their agenda with traditional (not just large) registered Christian churches. In the public discourse, there were appeals to the government from only the largest Christian churches. The public media (Slovak Radio and Television) included in its programme a special space for broadcasts of liturgical events of churches, but only registered ones.

Rončáková (2021) summarises the Christian and liberal (mainstream) print media (both private) debate during the first two waves of pandemic towards anti-pandemic measures by drawing attention to some of the most debated arguments. Arguments over responsibility were typical of the secular media. Media with a Christian footing were reluctant to engage in them. The argument that the current situation provides an interesting opportunity for the churches and believers to deepen their faith was often used in Christian media. The argument on the importance and usefulness of religious faith as an integral part of human life was present almost exclusively in media with a Christian background. The argument regarding the safety of churches, which pointed to the level of epidemiological risks related to the functioning of churches, was one of the key arguments of the liberal media in favour of banning public worship. The argument of discrimination was based on a comparison of the treatment of churches/Masses compared to the treatment of cultural or sports events. This argument was in the liberal media discourse; authors pointed to schools, restaurants, fitness centres, or sport stadiums being discriminated against in favour of the churches. On the other hand, conservative media raised concerns over discrimination against churches at a time when restaurants and fitness centres were open. The argument of religious freedom was used with reference to the notion that a ban on public liturgical celebration of masses was an infringement of the freedom of religious expression and practice. This argument was typical of the Christian conservative media. The most controversial arguments were the safety of churches and discrimination – both with a significant proportion of negative

vectors presented in the media (churches are dangerous/churches are favoured). On the other hand, there was liberal and conservative consonance in the argument of responsibility – that is, that it is responsible to close the churches due to public safety concerns (Rončáková 2021).

It is important to look at the context of dealings with the state on exemptions from restrictions. All exemptions were focused on only by some recognised (Christian) churches, mostly the Catholic Church. Throughout all waves of the pandemic, restrictions on religious life were part of the general restrictions. The differential treatment of religious and other actors was more evident in the case of various exemptions from measures, where in the early periods state-recognised religious groups were not part of such exemptions, or were not exempted to the same extent as some others, but in the second and later waves, by contrast, registered religious groups were part of most exemptions from generally applicable measures, or strict anti-pandemic measures were relaxed during religious holy days. The state gave exemptions from the measures during Christian holidays (Christmas), but only to churches of Western Christianity, or in connection with the visit of Pope Francis to Slovakia. Non-registered religious groups (for example, followers of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and various small evangelical or free churches) and people without religious faith were not taken into consideration in the adoption of anti-pandemic measures or exemptions from them.

### *The Situation in Various Religious Groups*

From the earliest days (the first announcement was on 6 March 2020), the Catholic Church, through declarations of the Bishops' Conference of Slovakia, called on the Catholic faithful to comply with the instructions of the Office of Public Health and Public Administration, and also granted a number of exemptions from normal customs and rituals: exemption from the obligation to attend services, not to shake hands after services, not to organise pilgrimages, and so on. 'Protecting health is a Christian duty ... Collective events other than liturgical celebrations should be restricted' (Odporúčanie predsedu 2020).

In the context of violations of restrictions, this was the case for only some recognised (Christian) churches. Despite the support of Catholic church leaders for the government's anti-pandemic measures, there were a number of instances of violations of anti-pandemic measures

by specific priests or parishes during the course of the pandemic. Violations of the ban on public worship took place, for example, in the Roman Catholic parishes of Michal nad Žitavou (15 March 2020), Hronský Beňadik (15 March 2020), Trenčianská Teplá (22 March 2020), Hlohovec (28 March 2020), and Pribiš (21 April 2020). Roma illegal worship (perhaps an unregistered Protestant community) took place in Žehra (26 March 2020). Later in the Orava region there were more cases in January, February, and autumn 2021.

On 20 March, a private plane was flown, on board which, besides the pilot, was the Catholic vicar general of the Diocese of Nitra Peter Brodek, with the relic of the Blood of Christ (Slovensko požehnané... 2020).

Within the church, statements by priests and theologians began to circulate that the pandemic was 'God's punishment'. On 20 March, Bishop Marián Chovanec declared such statements to be a simplification and the theology that saw 'God's punishment' in such a situation was 'superficial and therefore unacceptable' (Je pandémie 2020).

Protests and appeals by bishops and Christian politicians against restrictions started in 2021 (List biskupov 2021), later supported by a petition of Christian activists (Spustili petíciu 2021). The government granted an exemption from the ban on midnight Mass (Catholic) on 24 December 2021 and exemptions during Pope Francis's visit to Slovakia on 14–16 September 2021.

However, approval for the temporary closure of churches to the public by the highest representatives of the four largest Christian churches in Slovakia (Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist) was not shared by the Orthodox bishops, who reacted to the government measures on 10 March 2020 (Pravoslávna cirkev omše 2020). The statement also rejected any change in the form of receiving the Eucharist – that is, the administration of the Eucharist to believers by priests from the same chalice with the same spoon. They also urged the clergy to encourage worried believers to believe that such a method of administering the Eucharist 'has never posed and will never pose any danger to anyone' (Kováč 2020, 41). The Orthodox bishops' statement provoked a wave of criticism from the public and from the prime minister (Pravoslávna cirkev omše 2020). As early as 11 March 2020, the Orthodox Church revised its approach and with immediate effect ordered the cancellation of all its public services except for 'necessary ceremonies'. In spite of this decision, illegal public worship attended

by about 100 believers took place at an Orthodox church in Bratislava on Easter Sunday, 19 April 2020 (Bratislava: Aj napriek zákazu 2020).

On 1 February 2022, representatives of state-recognised Christian churches and Jewish religious communities joined together to alert the public and political leaders on the importance of celebrating public worship. They claimed that this observance was an essential part of the expression of faith for believers. They called for worship to be included among the basic human needs to which all people should have access without distinction. This included the unvaccinated. The letter, signed by the president of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, the general bishop of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, the president of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities, and the president of the Bishops' Conference of Slovakia, was handed over during a meeting with the prime minister (*Výzva náboženských* 2022).

Different charismatic groups and Pentecostal movements exist in Slovakia, some of which are parts of the traditional state-recognised churches (e.g. the Catholic Church). According to Souček (2023), representatives of charismatic Christianity announced during the pandemic that their followers should rely on the medium of prayer, the Holy Spirit, and supernatural grace when seeking protection and healing. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement used web-based sermons to call on followers to 'advocate for an end to the pandemic, for the healing of the sick, and for the salvation of the souls of those who [had] succumbed to the disease' (*Katolícka charizmatická obnova* 2023). Similar initiatives were rolled out by other charismatic groups and movements in Slovakia, advocating participation in global spiritual activities until COVID-19 was eradicated. Moreover, the Protestant charismatic movement 'Word of Life' attracted significant public attention after a video<sup>3</sup> went viral that depicted a woman speaking in tongues, praying for the minister of health (who also belongs to the charismatics) and the rest of the government to receive wisdom and strength (Souček 2023).

The largest registered churches and Jewish religious communities made several joint statements or protests during the pandemic period (*Do obchodov môžu* 2022). Despite the fact that most of them are members of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, the statements were usually presented as the joint positions of particular churches. But the Ecumenical Council of Churches (the Catholic Church is not a full member) also commented on the situation on several occasions; for

example, in the framework of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity on 23 January 2022 it expressed its protest against the restriction of collective religious worship (Vyhlásenie ekumenickej rady 2022).

Neither the other small registered groups nor unregistered ones formed structures to issue joint statements or jointly promote their interests.

## Conclusion

An overview of the changes in the field of religious life can be summarised in a few general conclusions.

The two-year period of the pandemic, which included several sets of state measures and the regulation of the possibility of participating in religious services, appears to have had an ambiguous effect on the religious practices of the Slovak population, with some studies pointing to an uptick and others to changes in the content of religiosity. Even so, as Spalová and Gajdoš conclude in their research, it may be that the pandemic's main impact on Slovakian religiosity will be an acceleration of pre-existing trends toward religious privatisation (Spalová and Gajdoš 2024, 27). At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the problematic position of different religious and worldview minorities in Slovakia; the various legal measures and exemptions from the pandemic restrictions on religious life applied only to those religious actors who were recognised by the state as churches or religious communities.

Despite the constitutional declaration of the protection of freedom of religion and non-religion, members of unregistered religious groups or adherents of non-religious philosophical or humanistic worldviews were not allowed to exercise their individual or collective spiritual or philosophical practices at the time of the restrictions on collective events.

The pandemic has thus demonstrated challenges associated with the universal exercise of the right to freedom of religion and worldview within a constitutionally defined and religiously neutral state.

## Notes

- 1 This study was carried out within the framework of projects APVV-22-0063. The author wishes to thank the editors and reviewers for the many comments and suggestions that helped to finalise the chapter.
- 2 The results of surveys conducted from March 2020 (Ako sa máte Slovensko? Marec 2020) onwards are available through the Slovak Archive of Social Data (SASD): <https://sasd.sav.sk/en/>. First results are in Bahna et al. (2020).
- 3 The video became very popular in the first few days after its release, and many parodies were made, but at the suggestion of believers in the community it was taken down from YouTube.

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