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RELIGIOUS FACTOR DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN RUSSIA AND BELARUS

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In times of social turbulence and non-linear historical development, the religious factor plays a special role. The paper is focused on the activities of religious structures in Russia and Belarus during the Covid-19 pandemic. Preliminary results of the still ongoing research show that despite diametrically opposed strategies of fighting infection (radically strict in Russia and extremely liberal in Belarus), religious organizations in both countries acted as loyal and disciplined allies of the authorities in calling for obedience to government decisions and opposing conspiracy theories and dissident anti-vaccination activist movements. In addition, the need to conduct services online has provided a significant impetus for the use of new digital technologies in predominantly conservative religious practices.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, religions, digital technologies, Russia, Belarus.

РЕЛИГИОЗНЫЙ ФАКТОР В ПЕРИОД ПАНДЕМИИ COVID-19 В РОССИИ И БЕЛАРУСИ

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В периоды социальных турбулентностей и нелинейного исторического развития религиозный фактор играет особую роль. Внимание автора статьи привлекла деятельность религиозных структур в России и Беларуси во время пандемии Covid-19. Предварительные результаты еще продолжающегося исследования показывают, что, несмотря на диаметрально противоположные стратегии борьбы с инфекцией (радикально строгие в России и крайне либеральные в Беларуси), религиозные организации выступили в обеих странах лояльными и дисциплинированными союзниками властей в призывах к послушанию решениям правительства и противостоянии конспирологическим теориям и диссидентским движениям активаторов. Кроме того,

вынужденное проведение богослужений в онлайн формате дало существенный импульс к использованию новых цифровых технологий в преимущественно консервативных религиозных практиках.

Ключевые слова: Covid-19, пандемия, религии, цифровые технологии, Россия, Беларусь.

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For at least a generation, secularization has been the dominant paradigm for understanding the role of religion in Western societies. Some versions of the secularization thesis seemed to assume that religion would become so individualized and privatized as to have no public significance. More recent scholarship has highlighted the continued vitality of religion in non-Western settings as well as examples of religious persistence and complexity in Western societies. So, there has been greater recognition across the humanities and social sciences of the necessity to understand the “religious factor” across social and political settings. Outside the academy, policymakers and media in secularizing societies often lack understanding of religion, so scholars have begun to use their research as a basis to promote “religious literacy” among these groups.

To gain a comprehensive picture of the social change caused by and in Covid-19 pandemic the role of religious organizations and groups during this time must also be considered. The role of religion has changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, taking on renewed significance in many societies. Religious practice and interest in spirituality has increased globally, and faith leaders have been identified as “key players” in many countries. While some religious groups have defied lockdown restrictions or opposed vaccines, others have worked with governments and civic groups to promote resilience and inclusion.

Religions played important roles during the pandemic in three key areas:
1) Constructing discourses around health, illness and science, including promoting

the observance (or not) of lockdown restrictions and public health measures like vaccines; 2) Lobbying and liaising with governments and policymakers, including how religious and inter-religious groups have contributed to debates emerging from the pandemic and 3) Incorporating digital innovations to religious practice.

The pandemic move of religion online has increased interest in digital religion [12; 22], enforcing the debates on whether or to what extent online religious practices are contributing to religious change, producing a fragmented religious individualisation and decline, and challenging or bolstering religious authority [20]. Campbell [9] claimed the pandemic “marked a unique and important moment for contemporary religion” as religious groups embraced technologies with unprecedented enthusiasm and on previously unimagined scale.

Faith communities adopted blended online and in-person approaches, a trend that was underway before the pandemic but has been accelerated by it.

The question how the role of religion has changed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in different countries is becoming more important even after the pandemic is over. This paper examines Russia and Belarus focusing on some unique socio-political factors (the political structure, state domination over religions, different religious landscape, low number of practicing believers and therefore comparatively weak “religious factor” and anti-vaccine movements, theological “innovations”, the rise of superstitions and quasi-religious worships, apocalyptic discourse in social media, new rites of burying the dead, new approaches of ministering to the sick, etc.).

The paper presents some preliminary answers on on-going project to the following research questions:

1. Has the role of religion changed during the pandemic in Russia and Belarus?
2. What are the key similarities and differences a) between Russia and Belarus and b) in comparison to “global north” countries?
3. What factors have contributed to change in particular directions in different settings?

Pandemic strategies in Russia and Belarus

Concerning Covid-19 pandemics Russia and Belarus followed different strategies: Russia announced the lockdown while Belarus chose no limitations policy. The Russian government has imposed restrictions on large gatherings, including religious gatherings, so religious practices have been greatly affected by the pandemic, with many churches and other religious institutions having to close their doors. In March 2020 the Moscow Patriarchate, the governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church, issued a statement urging parishioners to refrain from attending church services in person and instead participate in services remotely [3; 10]. Muslims, Buddhists and Catholics followed the same policy, but Protestants were critical on the restrictions and some of their leaders have been arrested for in-person services [1].

The government of Belarus has taken a unique approach to dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike many other countries, the government has not implemented strict lockdowns or widespread testing and contact tracing measures. Instead, President A. Lukashenko has downplayed the severity of the virus and encouraged citizens to continue with their normal daily activities, even holding large public events and rallies, so religious communities in Belarus have continued to hold services and other gatherings in-person. Belarusian approach has faced international criticism, with many accusing the government of not taking the pandemic seriously enough and putting its citizens at risk. What is important for further research - in both countries religious leaders almost fully followed the state policies: churches in Moscow were empty while in Minsk they were full [26].

The religious structure in Russia and Belarus differs from some western countries (see *table*): the significant majority belongs to the Orthodox Church and this difference gives an opportunity for comparative analysis of Catholic and Orthodox answers towards the Covid-19 challenge.

Religious structure in selected countries

	Majority religion I	Majority religion II	Minority religion I	Minority religion II
Canada	Catholic Church (38.7%)	Protestant (11%)	Islam (3.2%)	Judaism
Germany	Catholic Church (28.6%)	Protestant (25.8%)	Islam (3.5 %)	Evangelical
Ireland / Northern Ireland	Catholic Church (78%/36%)	Protestant (6% / 43%)	Islam(2%/1%)	Evangelical
Poland	Catholic Church (87.6%)	N/A	Orthodox (0.41%)	Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical
Russia	Russian Orthodox Church (71%)	Islam (10%)	Buddhism (1%)	Judaism, Evangelical
Belarus	Belarusian Orthodox Church (80%)	Catholic Church (15%)	Evangelical (2%)	Islam

Moreover, in contrary to Canada, Germany, Ireland and even Poland the religion tradition in Russia and Belarus has been interrupted for 70 years by atheistic Soviet policy: churches were closed and confiscated, religious leaders killed or imprisoned, the channels for faith transferring were limited mostly to the inner context of family. According to a recent survey, more than 70% of Russian citizens consider themselves to be Orthodox, but just up to 8% pray and attend the Church services regularly. Therefore, the religious identity and faith comprehension are still not matured enough to make the 'religious factor' strong and visible in the public sphere.

Fake-news context

Amid uncertainty and a sharp breakdown of social behavioural stereotypes (lockdowns, mandatory vaccination, new methods of digital control, etc.), people in all countries have found themselves virtually defenceless against an “avalanche” of misinformation. S. Shomova, a researcher at the Higher School of Economics in

Moscow, has identified three types of fakes about Covid-19 [6].

1. “Frightening” fake-news. Since the pandemic turned out to be a vital threat to the human community, the natural reaction to any negative information was fakes that further “amplify” the degree of danger and provoke the desire to warn loved ones about this danger. In some people, increased anxiety led to Covid-scepticism and Covid-dissidence as a natural protective reaction of denial: both to the increased complexity of everyday life and to the attempts of the state to restrict the freedoms of society [25].

2. “Conspirological” fake-news. Covid-19 has been interpreted as the result of a conspiracy of interested and influential groups, with reference to secret information hidden by them [14]. The psychological impact of such beliefs is based on the fact that conspiracy theories help people protect fragile egos by exaggerating the importance of themselves and their groups; conspiracy theories make people feel like legitimate actors by rationalizing their beliefs and behaviour; and belief in conspiracy theories entertains people by making them active participants in a compelling tale [22]. As a result, the space of “hate speech” has rapidly expanded – online and offline, in the rhetoric of officials, and in rumours.

3. “Quasi-expert” fake-news. The public’s inquiry reflects the low level of medical literacy of the population and the inability to make clear distinction between genuine expert knowledge from fake knowledge. In addition, the Russian audience’s traditional distrust of official sources of information was revealed here.

Fake news was often disseminated in a religious environment and had a religious justification (pandemic as a harbinger of the “end of the world”, as a manifestation of a “satanic” conspiracy, as punishment of mankind for its sins). Consequently, religious leaders were often positioned and quoted as experts in this field.

Religious practices dynamics in Russia and Belarus

Religious majority and minority interplay in Russia and Belarus has its specific features. It is determined a) *geographically* (there are regions in Russia with the majority of Muslim or Buddhist population and there are Catholic majority enclaves

in Belarus) and b) *politically* (there is legislative distinction between so called “traditional” religions with some privileges and preferences and “non-traditional” without).

Preliminary observations show that the religious factor in Russia and Belarus during the pandemic was not a serious obstacle to the implementation of state policy to combat Covid-19 (very strict one in Russia and very liberal in Belarus). Covid-19 has triggered in both countries the politicization of religion, the subordination to the power [2; 24]. While in western countries lockdown restrictions has been framed in terms of religious freedom [7], including debates about the proportionality of restrictions on religious practice given that freedom of religion or belief is considered a fundamental human right [11; 23], in Russia and Belarus they have been explained by religious leaders in terms of duty, obedience and even God’s will [5].

At the time of Covid-19 pandemic Russia and Belarus found themselves facing two choices: 1) between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment and 2) between nationalist isolation and global openness. The government in both countries chose total isolation, and the religious communities did not show any resistance [4; 13]. Moreover, by subordinating themselves to the state, the religious leaders lost their position of moral authority and became allies of the authoritarian form of government [18; 19]. “Grassroots” questioning on keeping traditional forms of religiosity, about the limits of “virtuality” in religious life and also the limits of political intervention into the strictly religious sphere were not welcomed by religious hierarchy.

A global vibrant debate about whether or to what extent online religious practices are contributing to religious change, including sparking revitalisation, producing a fragmented religious individualisation and decline, and challenging or bolstering religious authority also involved scholars in Russia and Belarus [4; 21]. Studies in Poland [8] and Italy [22] found increased levels of prayer and online religious practice, but in Russia and Belarus the research of such kind have not been conducted in a comparative way.

Normatively, digitalization as such does not contradict the dogmatic of any

religion in Russia and Belarus. In Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism it is theologically considered to be a neutral process with good or bad consequences depending on human will. Therefore, functionally digital technologies are seen by religious communities first of all as one more facility (channel, tool, space, network) for effective preaching [15; 16; 17].

According to preliminary research, Covid-19 pandemic made a positive impact to religious life in both countries providing a chance for the modernization of non-functional institutions and has also become a trigger for the development of “post-pandemic theology” [13].

The preliminary findings of how religious leaders in Russia and Belarus have framed issues of health, illness and science in their public statements show that *the role of faith leaders* in promoting the observance of public health measures in both countries was affected by:

a) Their position as majority or minority religions (the voices of Orthodox Patriarch Kirill and Muslim muftis will be louder transmitted, more often quoted in public sphere and have bigger impact than voices of Jewish or Protestant leaders).

b) Pre-pandemic theological ideas about health, healing, science were more articulated in Catholic social teaching and Jewish commandments than in Orthodox tradition.

c) The relationship between religion and the state, the level of support and loyalty towards governmental policy (higher for Russian Orthodox Church, Muslims and Jews and lower towards minorities).

Faith leaders in Russia and Belarus (by themselves or in cooperation with other leaders) tried to lobby governments to re-open religious buildings for public worship and also to prevent inequalities during Covid-19 pandemic.

The analysis of formats in which different religious communities in Russia and Belarus moved online during the pandemic and whether or to what extent they have incorporated blended online/in-person approaches to religious practice after the lockdown restrictions are very important for understanding Covid-19 as a trigger for digital innovation in religious life.

Most religious groups retained at least some aspects of their online communication as lockdown restrictions ease, opening new and innovative avenues for faith practice, but some groups were not benefitted from digital innovations (older people, believers from rural areas) that leads to “digital divide”.

All the results obtained in Russia and Belarus will become the object on on-going comparison of the datasets obtained in other countries. They are be focused on three levels, consolidating comparative work that has been on-going throughout the project: (1) the findings between the different religious organizations, (2) the datasets from within the different countries will be compared and (3) differences between the position in pandemic and post-pandemic time will be analysed. This data will allow to compare what pandemic-related issues religious organizations have chosen to focus on, including differences in priorities and uses of religious/theological arguments to support their views.

Digital technologies have been central to the adaptation of religious practices during the pandemic in Russia and Belarus. Moreover, the digitalization has already facilitated positive adaptations during the pandemic for religious communities. They are intended to continue to use online religious practices. Digitalization changes the ways people to practise their religion, contributing to changes in patterns of in-person religious attendance, as well as changes in perspectives on how religious authority is held and wielded within groups, challenging or strengthening religious authority.

The further research should explain how digital technologies can support more inclusive innovation among those groups, asking what context-specific religious values, norms, cultures, and principles should guide the continued or expanded application of digital technologies.

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