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**ADDRESSING COVID-19 “EX CATEDRA”:
HOW RELIGIONS IN RUSSIA AND BELARUS FACED THE PANDEMICS**

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The paper examines the strategies employed by religious institutions in Russia and Belarus during the on-going pandemic, analysing their arguments in official discourse and interactions with the governments. The results of the research indicate that, despite the stark contrast in governmental strategies for combating the pandemic (Russia’s approach being markedly stringent, while Belarus’ has been markedly lenient) shows how religions have called for compliance with government directives and have opposed conspiracy theories and dissident anti-vaccination activist movements. Minority religions also followed this approach. The necessity to conduct services online has provided a significant stimulus for the utilization of new digital technologies in predominantly conservative religious practices in both countries. The study revealed that the official documents under examination exhibited a clear predominance of theological elements over rational scientific elements in their argumentation. This finding highlights the inherent difficulties in the mediatization of the Russian Orthodox Church narrative for the general public, which were already apparent but have become more pronounced during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, religions, Orthodox Christianity, digital technologies, Russia, Belarus.

**ПРОТИВОДЕЙСТВИЕ COVID-19 «EX CATEDRA»:
КАК РЕЛИГИОЗНЫЕ ОБЩИНЫ РОССИИ И БЕЛАРУСИ
ПРОТИВОСТОЯЛИ ПАНДЕМИИ**

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В статье рассматриваются стратегии, использованные религиозными институтами в России и Беларуси во время пандемии коронавируса, анализируются их аргументы в официальном дискурсе и взаимодействие с правительствами. Результаты исследования показывают, что, несмотря на

разительный контраст правительственных стратегий борьбы с пандемией (в России жестких, а в Беларуси мягких), религии призывали к выполнению правительственных директив и выступали против теорий заговора и диссидентских движений против вакцинации. Религии меньшинств также придерживались этого подхода. Необходимость проводить богослужения онлайн послужила значительным стимулом для использования новых цифровых технологий в преимущественно консервативных религиозных практиках в обеих странах. Исследование показало, что в изучаемых официальных документах наблюдается явное преобладание теологических элементов над рациональными научными в их аргументации. Этот вывод свидетельствует о трудностях медиатизации нарратива Русской Православной Церкви для широкой общественности, которые были очевидны уже тогда, но стали еще более заметны во время пандемии.

Ключевые слова: COVID-19, пандемия, религии, православное христианство, цифровые технологии, Россия, Беларусь.

Introduction

This article is based on the ‘Religion in Societies Emerging from COVID-19’ (RECOV-19) research project, which is a three-year multidisciplinary project that analyses the roles of religions in societies emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic; specifically Canada, Germany, the island of Ireland, and Poland. It has three areas of investigation: 1) discourses about health, illness and science; 2) religions’ relationships with governments and policymakers; and 3) digital innovations.

Russia and Belarus were not originally included in the project focused on Canada, Ireland, Germany and Poland. However, we have used the project’s structure to conduct the complimentary research and frame the analysis, based solely on religious documents. The project’s rationale, approach, methods and data sources have already been described in my previous paper [31].

The question of how the role of religion has changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in different countries remains a significant area of inquiry. The

multifaceted and multi-level changes in religions globally and locally have already been examined by scholars in different countries [q.v.: 1; 19; 24; 36]. Some scholars have gone beyond the acute phase of the health crisis [23; 28].

This paper examines Russia and Belarus with a particular focus on the unique socio-political factors that characterize these countries. Additionally, it explores theological ‘innovations’, new rites of burial for the deceased and approaches to ministering to the sick are also examined as part of the changing religious landscape in response to the pandemic.

The article is comprised of three sections, which are organized according to a logical sequence. Initially, the national context is described. Subsequently, the primary findings of the study are presented. Finally, a comprehensive examination is conducted on one of the primary issues identified, namely, the use of argumentation.

1. National context

1.1. Timeline of the pandemic in Russia and Belarus

1.1.1. Russia

On 31 January 2020 the first two cases COVID-19 were confirmed in the Russian Federation among Chinese nationals in the Siberian region. The relevant authorities promptly isolated the patients and implemented a series of rigorous measures, including the closure of the border with China and the restriction of international flights.

In March 2020 the government began advising the public to practice social distancing and Moscow ordered mandatory self-isolation. Soon after Russia suspended international flights and imposed a nationwide “non-working period” to curb the spread of the virus.

In April 2020 Russia imposed a partial lockdown with Moscow and many other regions introducing QR codes for travel and mandating the use of face masks in public spaces. This was accompanied by a rapid rise in cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), reaching over 10,000 daily cases by early May, which made Russia one of the most affected countries at that point.

In August 2020 Russia became the first country to approve a vaccine for the

novel coronavirus, named “Sputnik V”, under emergency-use regulations before completing phase-3 clinical trials. This decision attracted international interest and scepticism. The vaccination programme initially targeted healthcare workers and teachers. By early 2021 vaccination became available to the wider population, although uptake was initially slow due to hesitancy.

In the spring and summer of 2021 Russia experienced a second wave of the pandemic, which was further exacerbated by the emergence of the “Delta” variant. This led to the implementation of more stringent lockdown measures in regions that were particularly affected, such as Moscow. In an effort to control the spread of the virus, some regions introduced vaccine mandates, requiring individuals to present proof of vaccination or negative tests before entering certain public spaces. In October 2021 Russia took the additional step of implementing a national “non-working week” with the aim of containing the surge in cases and deaths.

The “Omicron” variant reached Russia during the winter of 2022, resulting in an unprecedented surge in cases. In order to curtail the spread, Russia reaffirmed its vaccination campaign and numerous regions implemented booster shot mandates.

In March 2022 as cases began to decline the government of Moscow lifted the majority of the restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic, including mandates for the use of masks and the implementation of QR codes, indicating a shift towards a policy of living with the virus. This shift was subsequently adopted by many other regions over the course of the following months.

In late 2022 and early 2023 post-pandemic adjustments were introduced. Subsequently, pandemic-related restrictions were lifted nationwide, with the government shifting its focus from emergency measures to routine healthcare.

1.1.2. Belarus

In Belarus the initial case was confirmed on 28 February 2020 in a student who had recently returned from Iran. Those in close contact were placed under quarantine, yet overall restrictions remained minimal.

In March and April 2020 the Belarusian authorities, under the leadership of President Alexander Lukashenko, largely downplayed the severity of the novel

coronavirus (2019-nCoV) disease. Lukashenko suggested that activities such as sauna use, alcohol consumption, and farming could protect against the virus. In contrast to other countries, Belarus did not implement nationwide lockdowns or strict social distancing measures.

On 9 May Belarus held a large-scale Victory Day military parade one of the few countries to do so in 2020, despite rising case numbers. As the summer of 2020 progressed, case numbers continued to increase, yet schools, businesses and public spaces remained largely open. In September 2020 Belarus continued to experience ongoing cases as the government avoided implementing strict measures, instead focusing on limited mask mandates and recommending but not enforcing social distancing. As cases grew, more citizens voiced discontent with the government's handling of the pandemic, contributing to the existing political protests in the country following the disputed August 2020 presidential election.

Belarus began vaccinating frontline healthcare workers with the "Sputnik V" vaccine from Russia in January 2021, later expanding to other groups. As vaccines became more widely available, the government encouraged vaccination without mandating it, reflecting a pattern of limited intervention throughout the pandemic. Vaccine uptake was relatively low due to both vaccine hesitancy and scepticism towards government guidance.

The "Delta" variant in October 2021 led to a new surge in cases, prompting the government to enforce some public health measures, including mask mandates in certain areas and workplace temperature checks. During spring 2022 the "Omicron" variant drove up cases and Belarus continued to promote vaccination campaigns. Limited quarantine measures for those testing positive were implemented but were less stringent compared to neighbouring countries.

In 2023 Belarus returned to a pre-pandemic level of normalcy, with a focus on routine healthcare and public health maintenance rather than pandemic-specific measures.

In January 2021 Belarus commenced the vaccination of frontline healthcare workers with the "Sputnik V" vaccine, originating from Russia. This was

subsequently expanded to other demographic groups. As vaccines became more widely available, the government encouraged vaccination without mandating it, reflecting a pattern of limited intervention throughout the pandemic. The uptake of the vaccine was relatively low due to both vaccine hesitancy and scepticism towards government guidance.

Following the emergence of the “Delta” variant in October 2021, the government introduced a series of public health measures, including the imposition of mask mandates in certain areas and the implementation of workplace temperature checks. During the spring of 2022 the “Omicron” variant led to a further increase in cases, yet Belarus continued to promote vaccination campaigns. Limited quarantine measures for those testing positive were introduced, but they were less stringent than those observed in neighbouring countries.

In 2023 Belarus reverted to a state of normalcy that existed prior to the pandemic, with a renewed emphasis on routine healthcare and public health maintenance, rather than on pandemic-specific measures.

Evidently, Russia adopted a more proactive public health response in the early stages of the pandemic, including lockdowns and the rapid development of a vaccine, while Belarus largely ignored the pandemic initially, underplaying its seriousness.

1.2. The role of religion in Russia and Belarus

Religion plays a multifaceted and pivotal role in the political, cultural and social landscapes of both Russia and Belarus. The religious structure differs from that of some Western countries. The majority of the population adheres to the Orthodox Church, which provides an opportunity for comparative analysis of Catholic and Orthodox responses to the challenges posed by the Coronavirus pandemic.

In contrast to the situation in Canada, Germany, Ireland and even Poland, the religious tradition in Russia and Belarus has been interrupted for 70 years by the atheistic Soviet policy. This has involved the closure and confiscation of churches, the killing or imprisonment of religious leaders and the limitation of channels for the transfer of faith, which has largely been confined to the inner context of the family.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has witnessed resurgence in

religious observance, with an increasing number of individuals identifying as Orthodox Christians. Nevertheless, actual religious practice (such as regular church attendance) remains relatively low. Orthodoxy is often perceived as a cultural identity rather than a matter of devout religious practice. A recent survey revealed that 74% of Russian citizens identify as Orthodox [17]. This indicates that the religious identity and understanding of faith among the Russian population is still evolving and not yet sufficiently mature to exert a significant influence in the public sphere.

The interplay between the religious majority and minority in Russia and Belarus is characterised by a number of distinctive features. Firstly, the distribution of religious groups is shaped by geographical factors, with regions in Russia having a Muslim or Buddhist majority, and Catholic majority enclaves in Belarus. Secondly, the legislative framework differentiates between ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ religions, conferring certain privileges and preferences on the former.

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is the most powerful and influential religious institution in Russia. The Church frequently characterises its mission as the protection of Russia from the moral decline of the West. While the Church does not officially dictate policy, it exerts influence over the legislative agenda. For instance, laws limiting LGBTQ (banned in the Russian Federation as an extremist movement), curbing abortion access and promoting religious education in schools have been aligned with the Church’s conservative positions.

Russia has a diverse religious landscape, encompassing a range of faiths including Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Catholicism and Protestantism. The Muslim population in regions such as Chechnya and Tatarstan plays a significant role in these areas, yet the ROC remains the dominant religious institution at the national level.

In Belarus the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) constitutes a branch of the ROC and exerts a considerable influence within Belarusian society. Similarly, a close relationship exists between the BOC and the state, mirroring the relationship observed in Russia.

Belarus is distinctive in its substantial Roman Catholic population, particularly concentrated in the western region of the country. Roman Catholicism has historically

been associated with Polish and Lithuanian influence, and Catholics often constitute a more politically independent demographic than Orthodox believers. The government has generally allowed Catholics to operate freely, though it remains wary of its influence and potential opposition to state policies.

As in Russia, Belarus experienced a religious revival following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, the proportion of the population engaged in religious practice remains low. In a manner similar to that observed in Russia, many Belarusians identify with religion as a cultural marker rather than as devout practitioners. The BOC continues to exert a dominant influence over the religious landscape, but the Catholic Church remains a significant force, particularly in areas situated in close proximity to Poland and Lithuania.

In numerous countries, religious leaders have been identified as “key players”. However, in Russia and Belarus, they have largely transmitted an official state approach, equipping it with theological arguments, with a few exceptions.

Scholars addressing the religious response to COVID-19 in Russia and Belarus are mainly focused on how Russian Orthodox and other religious communities adapted their practices, balancing public health restrictions with religious obligations. The religious reactions ranged from cooperating with public health measures to scepticism and resistance, influenced by religious doctrines, political contexts, and the unique relationships between church and state in each country are analysed by S. Andreeva [3], V. Demydova [26] and N. Vasilevich [37]. M.M. Mchedlova and D.B. Kazarionva [11] discuss the theological and practical tensions that arose, as some Orthodox believers viewed the virus as a divine test or punishment.

This body of literature highlights debates over religious doctrine, such as the sacraments’ physical aspects, which presented unique challenges for implementing pandemic health protocols like mask-wearing and social distancing during communion. The monograph discusses the shift from traditional, in-person worship to digital platforms, analyzing how ROC leaders and other faith communities managed the balance between religious obligations and pandemic restrictions.

Nevertheless, the overview of ROC reactions to scientific guidance during the pandemic does not reflect the arguments and does not answer the core question of this paper: why religious leaders in Russia and Belarus prefer theological arguments over scientific ones? The attempt to answer this question in more detailed form is presented below.

2. Religious responses to COVID-19 in Russia and Belarus

The ROC firstly had a mixed response to the pandemic largely aligned with the Russian government's stance but faced some minor internal tensions. At the start of the pandemic, there was significant hesitation within the ROC regarding the suspension of religious practices [7; 27]. Many clergy and believers expressed resistance to closing churches or limiting access to sacraments, viewing them as essential for spiritual protection. Some clerics argued that religious services and rituals, such as Holy Communion, could not be sources of contagion because they were sacred. Early on, the Church continued to hold services, which led to several virus outbreaks in monasteries and among clergy [5; 18; 21].

Despite initial resistance, the ROC ultimately complied with government health directives. By April 2020, as the severity of the pandemic became clear, the Church suspended public services in many regions, closed churches to large gatherings, and encouraged believers to pray from home. Major religious events, such as Easter services, were held with minimal attendance or streamed online.

The ROC introduced measures such as sanitizing icons, encouraging social distancing in churches, and modifying the way Holy Communion was administered to reduce the risk of transmission. Instead of sharing the same spoon, individual spoons were sometimes used during communion. Believers were encouraged to participate in online services, particularly during key holidays. Patriarch Kirill led several televised services, urging people to follow public health guidelines while maintaining their spiritual life [15; 16].

The Church officially supported the "Sputnik V" vaccine and encouraged believers to get vaccinated, framing it as a moral responsibility. However, there was also considerable vaccine hesitancy within the Church, especially among more

conservative or fundamentalist factions. Some priests and believers expressed scepticism about the vaccines, viewing them as either unnecessary or potentially harmful, reflecting broader mistrust of the government and medical authorities in Russian society. Patriarch received the vaccine and publicly endorsed vaccination.

Some ultra-conservative factions within the ROC and Old Believers (a traditionalist Orthodox group) openly resisted public health restrictions. A few radical clerics dismissed the virus as a punishment from God or a conspiracy, and they continued to hold services without observing any health precautions, causing tension within the broader religious community.

Russia's Muslim communities, particularly in regions like Tatarstan and Chechnya, initially hesitated to close mosques but eventually complied with public health regulations. Religious leaders in these regions also encouraged vaccination and supported public health campaigns, although, like the ROC, they faced some resistance from conservative believers.

Buddhist spiritual guide Dalai Lama XIV has declared the world is entering an age of disease, but urged scientists, doctors, and all people to remain courageous in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. This coronavirus pandemic is “the result of bad karma we have accumulated in previous lives” [4]. The Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia with the spread of COVID-19 from March 18, 2020 has introduced high security measures in all datsans from March 18, 2020. Pandito Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev said that they cannot prohibit visiting datsans. However, lamas, khuvaraks and datsan staff should be more vigilant and attentive. Altai and Buryat clergymen jointly held a seven-day prayer service against the spread of coronavirus infection. Online prayers of varying demand are sent to the faithful on demand. Various messengers, such as “Viber”, “WhatsApp”, “Telegram” are also used. The head of Kurumkan datsan Yeshe Namzhil lama held an online prayer service. In the datsan, fumigation with antiseptic natural composition “sanzai”, based on crushed juniper, which has purifying properties, is constantly conducted [6].

In Belarus, the religious community's response to COVID-19 was influenced by President's dismissive attitude toward the pandemic, what complicated the

relationship between religious institutions and the state in terms of public health measures.

The BOC faced challenges in navigating the pandemic due to Lukashenko's refusal to impose strict health measures and the public's growing distrust of the government's response. Initially, the BOC followed the government's lead by continuing services as usual and not implementing significant health restrictions. As the pandemic worsened and public criticism of the government grew, the BOC started to implement limited public health measures. Some priests took it upon themselves to encourage mask-wearing in churches and promote social distancing, although these measures were less strictly enforced than in Russia. Online services and the reduction of large gatherings were introduced in some regions, particularly in urban areas.

The Roman Catholic Church response to the pandemic was more aligned with international public health standards, but this also placed it at odds with the government. Catholics introduced online services, promoted social distancing, and encouraged masks. The Church also advised believers to refrain from attending mass if they were feeling ill and to observe public health protocols. The Roman Catholic Church's proactive response to COVID-19, coupled with its criticism of the government's mishandling of the pandemic, led to tensions with the state.

While in western countries lockdown restrictions has been framed in terms of religious freedom, including debates about the proportionality of restrictions on religious practice given that freedom of religion or belief is considered a fundamental human right [34], in Russia and Belarus they have been explained by religious (Orthodox, Buddhists, Jehovah Witness) leaders in terms of duty, obedience and even God's will.

The analysis of religious official documents (statements, press-releases, homilies etc) issued during COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) by ROC, BOC, Muslim and Catholic authorities in Russian and Belarusian has been conducted with MAXQDA software (91 documents in total). The results show that despite diametrically opposed strategies of fighting COVID-19 (radically strict in Russia and extremely liberal in Belarus), major 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.

2.1. Russia

2.1.1. ROC: following the governmental restrictions

At the onset of the pandemic in early 2020 the ROC was reluctant to close churches or restrict services. Many church leaders and believers argued that faith in God would protect worshippers, and religious rituals, including communion and the veneration of icons, continued unchanged. There was a belief among some that church attendance should remain uninterrupted, seeing it as essential to spiritual life [22; 33].

After St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov issued a decree on March 26, 2020, banning people from visiting temples and other religious institutions until April 30. In response, the Moscow Patriarchate first stated that acts of government bodies (including acts of government bodies of constituent entities of the Russian Federation and municipal bodies) may not restrict freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, including the right of citizens to visit religious sites in order to participate in worship services, since such acts do not have the status of federal law.

On March 29, 2020 Patriarch Kirill publicly urged the faithful to pray at home. “The Church calls today to strictly fulfil the obligations that are being offered today by the sanitary authorities of Russia. I urge you, my dear ones, in the coming days, until there is a special patriarchal blessing, to refrain from visiting churches”, he appealed to the believers [15]. Adjustments were made to prevent the spread of the virus. For example, some churches used disposable spoons for Communion and disinfected icons after veneration. Online worship became more common.

The position shift was exposed more evidently again by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeev in less than one month: he said on 4 April 2020: “We will have to limit ourselves to watching the broadcast of the Patriarchal service on the central TV channels, but we will not be able to come to the Church”. One year after on the 4th of December, 2021 the highly positioned metropolitan (number two in ROC that time)

made a strong call for obedience towards state regulations: “Russian Orthodox Church takes measures to punish those who do not comply with sanitary requirements. I do not want to name names, but when sanitary requirements were ignored in a number of monasteries, personnel decisions followed: the heads of these monasteries were dismissed” [2]. Patriarch Kirill framed the pandemic as a spiritual challenge, encouraging the faithful to view it as a time for repentance, reflection, and renewal of faith. He urged believers to see the crisis as a reminder of humanity’s vulnerability and a call to deepen their relationship with God [16].

Unlike other Orthodox countries, where secular authorities immediately closed churches after the first people contracted the COVID-19, the leadership of the ROC did not immediately decide to take such drastic measures. The first calls for believers to refrain from visiting churches and to pray at home in Russia came from secular authorities, and were immediately met with sharp protests from the Orthodox public and church leadership. In most ROC dioceses, metropolitans and bishops have issued similar circulars and appeals in line with the Church policy urging the faithful to stay home for Holy Week and Easter Sunday.

However, some bishops of the ROC have openly opposed the authorities’ orders and Patriarch Kirill’s statements on sanitary measures against the coronavirus pandemic, ranging from denying the pandemic phenomenon itself to calling for sabotage of secular authorities’ decisions. For example, Archbishop Pitirim of Syktyvkar on his “VKontakte” page said that the Orthodox community of the region protests against the prohibition to attend Churches. And Bishop Mefodii of Kamyshlov complained in his sermon during the Palm Sunday service that the temple is “too empty” and said: “They will bring us to the temple anyway [for the funeral], it’s better to come to the temple with your own feet anyway” [12].

2.1.2. Muslims: radical decisions

Russia’s Muslim population, primarily concentrated in regions like the North Caucasus, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, also faced challenges during the pandemic. Early in the pandemic, many mosques were closed in compliance with government regulations, especially during Ramadan and other major Islamic holidays. Friday

prayers were suspended in several regions and community gatherings were limited to prevent the spread of the virus [10].

Muslim leaders in Russia, including the Mufti of Russia, encouraged followers to take the pandemic seriously. They emphasized that Islam teaches the protection of life, supporting measures like social distancing and mask-wearing as part of a broader religious obligation to avoid harm to others. Imams of mosques recited prayer in mosques alone. Marriage and naming ceremonies in mosques have been suspended. Muslim leaders have allowed autopsies and cremation of the dead, which are generally forbidden in Islam. Muslims of Tatarstan issued a fatwa prohibiting Friday prayers online.

Theologically, Islamic leaders framed the pandemic within the context of patience (Sabr) and trust in God's plan. While acknowledging the challenges, they encouraged Muslims to view the pandemic as a test of faith and an opportunity for spiritual growth. Charity, a key aspect of Islamic practice, was emphasized, with Muslims encouraged to help those affected by the crisis.

Muslim leaders in Russia supported vaccination, referencing Islamic teachings that prioritize health and safety. Fatwas (Islamic legal rulings) were issued, endorsing vaccines as permissible under Islamic law.

2.1.3. Buddhists: pandemic as accumulated karma

The reaction to the COVID-19 infection on the part of Buddhists was determined mainly by the position of the spiritual leader Dalai Lama XIV, who delivered a special message on March 30, 2020, translated into Russian and published on Russian Buddhist web portals. Dalai Lama emphasized the need for quarantines imposed around the world. He said that the COVID-19 pandemic was caused by past accumulated karma and that what had happened could not be changed [6].

The Buddhist community in Russia, concentrated in regions like Kalmykia, Buryatia and Tuva, also took measures to adapt to the pandemic. Buddhist monasteries and temples were closed during government-mandated lockdowns, and communal rituals were suspended. Religious leaders encouraged followers to practice their faith at home and to focus on meditation, prayer, and acts of compassion during

the pandemic [9]. Some Buddhist leaders turned to online platforms to deliver teachings and sermons, helping the community maintain spiritual practice during isolation.

Buddhist teachings on compassion (Karuna) became a theological approach to frame the pandemic as an opportunity to practice Karuna toward others. They encouraged Buddhists to help those in need and to approach the crisis with a calm and compassionate mindset. The principle of non-harm (Ahimsa) was invoked to encourage adherence to public health measures. By following guidelines like social distancing and mask-wearing, Buddhists were seen as practicing non-harm by preventing the spread of the virus to others.

2.1.5. Digital shift

Normatively, digitalization as such does not contradict the dogmatic of any religion in Russia. In Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism, it is theologically considered to be a neutral process with good or bad consequences depending on human will [q.v.: 20; 25; 35]. Therefore, functionally digital technologies are seen by religious communities first of all as one more facility (channel, tool, space, network) for effective preaching [29; 30; 32].

According to research, COVID-19 made a positive impact to religious life providing a chance for the modernization of non-functional institutions and has also become a trigger for the development of ‘post-pandemic theology’. Religious organizations in Russia had to go digital under the pressure of COVID-19. Non-digital media were low profiled in the documents, since press, for example, presumes physical contact with the paper – that should be avoided during the pandemic. In contrary, digital tools and platforms have been promoted, named and even linked with their URLs in official documents. Most of them are Russian based and state or church controlled. In some documents leaders inspire young generation to help older people to handle Internet technologies [18].

Some virtual religious rituals and practices were dogmatically doubtful, but considered to be acceptable. For example, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeev suggested that confession by phone or via Internet is possible in case of emergency and

mentioned several cases from the time of Communist persecutions.

Digital innovations impact on religious authority and community, as well as impact on religious organization and society in general are low profiled in official documents. Attitudes towards digital technologies in the time of COVID-19 are strongly positive in hope to save the communities and to keep them connected.

2.2. Belarus

In general, the Belarusian religious authority's public statements discourse regarding the COVID-19 was inconsistent. President under evaluated the threat of COVID-19 many times. For example, being screened by national TV in ice hockey uniform, he said: "There's no virus in here! You didn't notice them flying around, did you?" So any voices against are not politically correct. Therefore, with some exceptions, the silence on commenting the president's position became for most religious leaders the *modus operandi*.

But in fact religious organizations and their leaders used the state ignorance towards pandemic in order to have their usual Easter celebrations in crowded churches over public health concerns.

2.2.1. Orthodox: no restrictions, no obligations

Despite of the President's ignorance, the Belarusian Ministry of Health issued the document containing very basic sanitary norms in March 2020. Since Lukashenko was not very much interested in health policies, being focused on economics and being concerned with the non-stop work of the industry, he did not intervene into anti-pandemic regulations of the government (basically masks, personal disinfection and social distance).

The Holy Synod of the Belarusian Orthodox Church issued a statement which encouraged both priests and worshippers to observe these norms. According to the statement, "Orthodox Christians should be an example of common sense and social responsibility for society The churches of God will not be closed down, particularly during Easter, and this places greater responsibility on bishops, priests, and all church workers" [14]. The Holy Synod declared that missing religious services during the pandemic is not a sin. Moreover, Orthodox leaders encouraged the followers to join

the services online broadcasts. Metropolitan Paul of Minsk and Slutsk in his pre-Easter address called on followers to avoid attending churches or at least to maintain social distancing [13].

During all the pandemics the Orthodox leadership did not obligate the parishes to follow certain measures. Therefore the COVID-19 policies adopted by different parishes varied. One of the Orthodox communities in Minsk, which uses the Belarusian language in Liturgy, cancelled public services due to the epidemiological situation and held prayers online instead. After COVID-19 cases a number of monastic communities announced a temporary interruption of services following the detection of COVID-19 cases.

In this unclear policy Orthodox Christians in Belarus became disoriented, because ROC (the Mother-Church) had clear and obligatory policy towards COVID-19. Where no countermeasures were adopted by a parish after March 2020, some worshippers in order to avoid risk opted to attend another parish, others avoided participation in religious services during the pandemic.

Belarussian scholar Natalia Vasilevich came to the conclusion: “It eventually resulted in a decreased public trust towards the Orthodox Church in Belarusian society. Whereas two thirds of Belarusians tended to trust the church in early 2019, the level of trust among Belarusian urbanites towards the Orthodox church had decreased to 45% at the beginning of 2021” [37, p. 15].

2.2.2. Catholics: following the Pope

The Roman Catholic Church in Belarus from the very beginning of the pandemic, not commenting the government policy, took another path contra COVID-19. Catholics introduced obligatory sanitary measures on 13 March 2020 by the document of Belarusian Catholic Bishops Conference [8]. They directly banned the kissing of crosses or relics during their veneration (some believers did it pretty often under the influence of the Orthodox Christianity). The document also obliged to remove the holy water at the entrance of the churches (fonts were dry), stop physical contact when offering the sign of peace. Moreover, Catholics installed protective screens in the confession boxes and obliged priests to disinfect their hands before and

during communion. In contrary to Russia, in Belarus there were no regulations with regard to the number of worshippers in the church.

The principle of the common good has been emphasized by Catholic leaders in Belarus during the pandemic. They quote Pope Francis who promoted vaccination as an “act of love” for the common good, arguing that protecting the health of others, especially the vulnerable, is a moral responsibility.

So, Catholic COVID-19 policy in the official documents was explicitly clear. Two principles: “care for spiritual and physical health of the faithful” and “prudence of the priests” were declared in these documents. The Conference of Catholic bishops declared, that “restrictions on organization and participation in mass events in the present situation of the COVID-19 pandemic are not a restriction of human freedom, but expression of mercy to one’s neighbour, to not infect anyone with a dangerous illness”.

Practically, the parish priests were obliged to organize live internet streams of masses, which were constituted as the sufficient alternative for real mass in the Church. The bishops also called on parish priests and the leaders of monastic communities to exercise “prudence” and minimize face-to-face activities during the pandemic. Many events planned in advance, were cancelled.

Refusal to wear a mask was considered by Catholic Bishops as indifference to the health of others, therefore Catholics launched a campaign calling on believers to wear masks in churches. Those who temporarily stopped their church attendance due to COVID-19 were not blamed as sinners - official dispensations have been issued.

The dispensation from church attendance was cancelled in late August 2020 when the epidemiological situation improved, but it was renewed in October 2020 when the second wave of the pandemic arrived. During all the pandemics, Catholic bishops insisted in their statements that the believers “have to wear masks or shields, disinfect hands before entering the church, and keep social distance and respiratory etiquette”. Catholics cancelled many Christmas-related traditional events.

When it comes to vaccination, Catholic bishops following Pope Francis have publicly received COVID-19 vaccines, framing it as a moral and ethical example for

their communities. Their actions encourage believers to follow suit.

The Archbishop of Minsk Tadeush Kondrusevich addressed the problem of COVID-19 many times calling to take it very seriously. He also called the Church to reflect new circumstances theologically and adapt to them practically in order to become successful in its mission of salvation. He strongly condemned those in Catholic parishes that disregarded precautionary measures, calling such behaviour a sin against the fifth commandment – “do not kill”.

The main difference between the official documents of the BOC Synod and Belarusian Catholic Bishops Conference is the modality, the level of demand: in the case of Orthodox the document *recommends and advises*, while Catholic document directly *bans, prohibits and demands*.

2.2.3. Theological arguments over rational

Despite general public in Belarus is not well-educated in theology and is oriented mostly on positive science arguments, theological arguments prevail over rational in official documents with minimal use of medical research data and expert voices are not used in documents. Roman Catholics mostly translated and quoted Pope Francis' texts.

Freedom of belief references are not used, no conflicts with governments and policymakers and the level of cooperation is very local (hospital, medical doctors, access to ill people, help and assistance for older and alone). No court cases, documents underline societal impacts of COVID-19 (not of restrictions).

Roman Catholics were more active in calls to their ill and older followers to use digital technologies in order to keep connections with the church communities. But the dominant call was on church attendance observing all the rational measures to avoid being infected. Digital tools and platforms have also been promoted in Belarus, no difference with Russia. Moreover, the digitalization has already facilitated positive adaptations during the pandemic for religious communities.

3. Conclusion

Religious reactions to COVID-19 in Russia and Belarus varied across different faiths with the ROC, Islamic Catholic and Buddhist communities each responding in

ways that reflected both their religious teachings and the practical challenges of the pandemic. Their approaches evolved over time, was marked by initial hesitation but gradually aligned with public health measures as the pandemic progressed. Religious leaders across faiths framed the pandemic as both a spiritual challenge and an opportunity for reflection, while urging their followers to prioritize health and the well-being of others. Although there was some resistance, particularly around changes to religious practices and vaccination, most religious communities in Russia adapted their rituals and teachings to meet the demands of the crisis.

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.

Preliminary research hypotheses were generally confirmed:

1. ROC – after some verbal attempts to resist during first weeks of COVID-19 – fully followed the government line.
2. In official documents, justification by theological arguments dominated over scientific and moral ones (while general public is poor in theology).
3. Attitudes towards vaccination are totally positive and negative towards those who prefers not to be vaccinated.
4. COVID-19 became a trigger for digital innovation in religious life. Digital technologies have been central to the adaptation of religious practices during the pandemic in Russia and Belarus.
5. Orthodox bishops in Belarus found *silence as a modus operandi* in order to survive between lockdown policy of Moscow Patriarchate and ignorant policy of Belarusian president.

Both the ROC and the BOC initially struggled to balance the spiritual needs of their congregations with public health directives. The centrality of communal worship in Orthodox Christianity, particularly rituals like Holy Communion, made it difficult for these institutions to fully embrace pandemic restrictions. However, as the pandemic progressed, both churches adapted by introducing modifications to rituals, promoting online worship, and supporting public health campaigns, though not

without significant internal resistance. The analysis of formats of religious communication in Russia and Belarus shows that faith communities opened new and innovative avenues for practice.

While the official stance of the Orthodox Churches was generally in favour of vaccination, significant portions of their congregations, especially in rural or conservative areas, remained sceptical of vaccines (what is not reflected in official documents, totally pro-vaccinate).

The political contexts of Russia and Belarus significantly influenced how religious communities responded to the pandemic. In Russia the ROC and other major communities (Muslims, Buddhists) aligned closely with the government, supporting its public health measures. In Belarus the BOC silently followed the open-doors policy trying to prevent virus infections in churches with no limits to attend, while the Roman Catholic Church was more strict and demanding towards their followers.

Orthodox, Muslim and Catholic leaders in Russia and Belarus used theological arguments to justify public health measures, such as emphasizing the Christian duty to protect the vulnerable and promoting social responsibility. However, the message was often inconsistent and therefore potentially less effective towards general public.

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