

# THE IMPACT OF THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC ON THE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION. A RESEARCH ON HOW WAS HIS PERCEIVED BY CHRISTIAN ROMANIANS WHO REGULARLY ATTEND RELIGIOUS SERVICES

**Emanuel Adrian SÂRBU, Assoc. Prof., PhD, PhD Habil**

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of Baptist Theology  
Doctoral School of Religious and Intercultural Studies  
easarbu@ftb.unibuc.ro*

**Anca-Georgiana DRAGAN-MOLDOVEANU,  
PhD Candidate**

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of Baptist Theology  
Doctoral School of Theology and Religious Studies  
anca.dragan@s.unibuc.ro*

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Impact of the Covid 19 Pandemic on the Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Religion. A Research on how was his perceived by Christian Romanians who Regularly Attend Religious Services.* The global crisis generated by the Covid 19 pandemic has brought with it, among other things, a series of significant restrictions on some fundamental rights, such as freedom of religion and freedom of expression. The present study, based on a both quantitative and qualitative research, examines the perception of people who regularly attend religious services of different Christian denominations in Romania, regarding the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on these freedoms guaranteed by international conventions and declarations on human rights, as well as by the Romanian Constitution and legislation, but severely restricted for a considerable period of time.

**Keywords:** *Covid 19; restrictions; fundamental rights; freedom of religion; freedom of expression; Christian communities.*

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## Introduction

Since late 2019, humanity has faced an unprecedented global crisis with the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic in Wuhan, China. The rapid spread of the virus led to mass sickness, deaths, and other consequences that shook people around the world. Shortly after its onset, the impact of the pandemic was felt at all levels of society, with the political, economic and social dynamics being profoundly affected.

In the face of the serious threat of disease, it became imperative to adopt and implement measures to control the spread of the virus and protect public health, which led to *lockdowns*, quarantines, restrictions on public gatherings, all of which were considered severe restrictive measures. Obviously, these measures have had significant consequences on the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens, including religious freedoms and freedom of expression, which is the focus of the present article.

After a period characterized by much uncertainty about the future, people had come to call life under the new restrictions the *new reality*, with a considerable proportion of citizens believing that mankind would never return to the pre-pandemic times. Due to isolation, lack of interaction and being fed with fatalistic thoughts, the idea that many people ended up suffering from depression or other mental disorders was relatively common. The idea that there has also been an increase in the suicide rate has also been put forward, a fact which also in Romania seems to be supported by the data found in the annual reports of the Forensic Medicine Network<sup>1</sup>. Thus, if at the national level, 2401 suicides were recorded in 2019, in 2021 the figure rose to 2824 (data for 2020 are missing from official reports). The same trend is also found in Bucharest Municipality, where the number of suicides in 2021 (540) is more than double compared to the 2019 number, when 219 suicide cases were reported<sup>2</sup>.

It can therefore be said that the impact of these limitations has been felt at the macro level. It did not take long for vehement reactions, disagree-

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1 Cf. INML "Mina Minovici" (2020). Report on the activity of the Forensic Medicine Network in the year <https://inml-mm.ro/doc/pdf/dds2019.pdf>, accessed on 21.08.2024; Superior Council of Forensic Medicine (2022). Report on the activity of the Forensic Medicine Network in the year 2021. <https://csml.ro/raportul-privind-activitatea-retelei-de-medicina-legala-in-anul-2021/>, accessed on 21.08.2024.

2 Ibid.

ments based on differences of opinion, the use of insults, derogatory words or even threats to occur.

The same applied to believers from Christian denominations in Romania and abroad. Although the measures were intended to reduce the spread of the virus, however, the closure of places of worship, the limitation of the number of people attending religious services and, at certain times, the banning of religious gatherings, generated controversy and tension. For many believers, these limitations were perceived as a violation of their fundamental rights. On the other hand, a segment of the faithful was characterized by panic reactions, often based on a risible interpretation of biblical passages, which led to gloomy predictions about the end of the pandemic.

People felt trapped in the uncertainty caused by the pandemic crisis, not knowing if and when they would get out of it, often oscillating between a fatalistic attitude or approaching the situation by minimizing its seriousness. Unfortunately, certain measures imposed by state authorities have fueled panic and confusion. As a result, the population displayed an exacerbated reticence towards the state authorities and started having conflictual relations with those who had different opinions, even if they included other believers.

This article aims to analyze the perceived impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on religious freedom and the freedom of expression among believers of various Christian denominations in Romania, exploring the dilemmas and challenges faced by society in trying to maintain a balance between protecting public health and respecting the fundamental rights of citizens<sup>3</sup>. It will also examine international and national regulations that protect these freedoms, how restrictive measures have been implemented in our country, the believers' reactions, and the lessons learned that could guide future responses to similar global crises.

## Theoretical Framework

For a thorough understanding of the pandemic context, we consider it necessary to clarify the general context and the concepts that will be referred to in this analysis. It is therefore important from the very beginning to define the relevant terms: *pandemic* and *Covid 19 pandemic*.

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3 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "A look at how the concept of human rights has evolved over time", *Journal For Freedom of Conscience (Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință)*, vol 11, no.2 (2023), pp.825-874.

Morens et al. define a pandemic as an epidemic that spreads over a very large geographical area, affecting an exceptionally large number of people globally.<sup>4</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) also provides clarification on the parameters that distinguish a pandemic from an epidemic, namely:

... a pandemic is declared when a new disease against which people have no immunity spreads rapidly across international borders with a significant impact on public health. Characteristics of a pandemic include rapid human-to-human transmission and a high capacity to cause severe illness or death.<sup>5</sup>

We note that the distinguishing features compared to epidemics are the rapid and mass spread of the disease and the massive consequences for the health of the population and, by extension, public health. The rapid unfolding of events eventually leads to a loss of control of the situation, which can fuel a predisposition to panic, conflict and mistakes on the part of citizens as well as authorities.

It is also important to understand how the Covid 19 disease is defined:

... a respiratory disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, a coronavirus discovered in 2019 that spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks, with a higher risk of illness in people aged 65 and above with underlying medical conditions.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of the Covid 19 pandemic, it is the coronavirus that causes Covid 19, the origin of which is intensely debated by scientists. However, what we do know is that the Covid 19 pandemic refers to the global spread of the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China.

The World Health Organization declared the Covid 19 outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020, due to the alarming spreading rate and the disease severity. By that date, 118,000 cases had been reported in 114

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4 David M. Morens, Gregory K. Folkers, and Antony S. Fauci. (2009) „What is a Pandemic?”. *The Journal of Infectious and Diseases*.

5 World Health Organization. *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic*, 2020.

6 Centers for Disease, Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/dotw/covid-19/index.html>, accessed 18.12.2022, 18:08.

countries and 4,291 people had already lost their lives. Covid 19 has also caused massive global disruption, affecting public health, economies and the normal functioning of societies.<sup>7</sup>

The Covid 19 pandemic can be considered to have created an unprecedented public health crisis with profound implications for fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom and freedom of expression. Unfortunately, many media information platforms and social networking sites have facilitated and maintained panic among the population, not infrequently even by spreading fake news.

Freedom of religion and freedom of expression are two internationally recognized fundamental rights<sup>8</sup> that are essential for maintaining democracy and an environment in which cultural diversity and pluralism can flourish.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) refers to freedom of religion as:

... the right of the individual to manifest his religion or belief freely, either alone or in community with others, in public and in private, in worship, practice and teaching. This right includes the freedom to change one's religion or belief and to express one's religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance of religious rites.<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the Covid 19 pandemic has imposed unprecedented restrictions on religious freedom by limiting or banning religious gatherings to prevent the spread of the virus, thus affecting collective practices and rituals. Many believers in Romania and other countries have vehemently campaigned against these restrictions. Practices such as participation in Mass and liturgies, communion (Eucharist), baptism, wedding or burial rites and pilgrimages have been suspended, limited or carried out in small circles with small numbers of participants.

Freedom of expression was also severely affected during Pandemic Covid 19, meaning:

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7 WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020.

8 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "The Transylvanian Diet: A Precedent to Human Rights and Religious Freedom - 400 Years Prior to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights". In *Shaping a World of Freedoms: 75 Years of Legacy and Impact of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Nelu Burcea and Liberato C. Bautista (eds.), New York, United Nations Plaza, UNEQUAL World Research Center, 2023, pp. 205-221.

9 United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948.

... the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, without interference and regardless of frontiers. This includes freedom of the press and other means of communication, as well as the right to express opinions critical of government and other public institutions.<sup>10</sup>

Freedom of religion and freedom of expression are therefore fundamental human rights, regulated at international and national level. Both are protected by international and national legal instruments, which set standards and obligations for signatory states.

In addition to the UDHR, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), adopted in 1966 and entered into force in 1976, extends the protection of the UDHR and includes detailed provisions on freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 18) and freedom of expression (Article 19). These Articles emphasize that “freedom of religion and freedom of expression may be restricted only in specific circumstances, such as for the protection of national security, public order, public health or morals”.<sup>11</sup>

At European level, the *European Convention on Human Rights* (ECHR), adopted by the Council of Europe in 1950, is an essential instrument for human rights protection. Article 9 of the ECHR protects freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and Article 10 guarantees freedom of expression. These rights are subject to restrictions similar to those set out in the ICCPR, designed to ensure a balance between individual rights and collective interests.<sup>12</sup>

In Romania, the 1991 Romanian Constitution, with its subsequent amendments and additions, provides in Article 29 for freedom of conscience, which includes freedom of religion, and in Article 30 for freedom of expression. The Constitution states that “freedom of thought, opinion and religious beliefs may not be restricted in any form, and censorship of any kind is prohibited”.<sup>13</sup>

These legal frameworks provide a solid basis for the protection and promotion of religious freedoms and freedoms of expression, and a large

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10 Centers for Disease, Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/dotw/covid-19/index.html>, accessed 18.12.2022, 18:08.

11 United Nations. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1966.

12 Council of Europe. *European Convention on Human Rights*, 1950.

13 *Constitution of Romania*, 1991.

proportion of the population invoked these legal rights during the Covid 19 pandemic. However, an important point to note is that their application may vary depending on the social and political context and legal interpretation, which can create challenges and tensions, particularly in crisis situations such as the Covid 19 pandemic.

Ghanea and Pinto also emphasize that freedom of religion and belief is a conditional right, and in exceptional circumstances it may be limited by state authorities. They also note that although in theory these limitations are well understood by scholars, practitioners and even profane people, in practice controversy always arises in such situations.<sup>14</sup>

Both in Romania and in other countries, believers were divided into at least two major camps: those who considered the restrictive religious measures imposed by the pandemic crisis necessary and useful, on the one hand, and those who perceived them as discriminatory, particularly because of the disproportionate way in which they were applied compared to other social or economic activities, on the other. Measures restricting freedom of expression have also raised concerns about censorship and excessive state control of public discourse.

### **The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on freedom of religion and freedom of expression**

During the Covid 19 pandemic, authorities in many countries ordered the temporary closure of churches, mosques, synagogues and other places of worship and banned religious gatherings to prevent crowding and direct contact between people. Some governments have also imposed strict limits on the number of attendees at religious services, as well as mandatory physical distancing and the wearing of protective masks. Believers were divided on these measures.

For their part, the Romanian authorities have implemented restrictive measures since March 2020, shortly after the first cases of outbreaks, banning public and private gatherings, including religious gatherings, to limit the spread of the virus. Churches were closed and religious services were allowed online only. A good example is the Romanian Orthodox Church, which has moved most liturgical activities online, adapting to the

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14 Nazila Ghanea, Thiago Alves Pinto, 'Limitations to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Theory and Practice', *Religion and Human Rights*, 2020.



new conditions.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, this has also happened in Protestant evangelical communities, which are traditionally more receptive to novelty than the churches considered to be historical, all the more so as some of them were already broadcasting services on various communication channels.

Another example is Italy, which battled one of the first major outbreaks of Covid 19 in Europe and where authorities imposed strict lockdown measures, including closing churches and banning public religious ceremonies. Even during the Easter holidays, one of the most important Christian holidays, services were held without worshippers present and were broadcast live on TV and the internet.<sup>16</sup>

Religious communities around the world have had to adapt to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic while maintaining their practices and support for believers. One of the most common option has been to move religious services online, by streaming services, sermons and other religious activities through streaming platforms, social networks and websites. This has enabled worshippers to virtually access religious services and remain connected to their religious community, even under circumstances of social isolation and distance.

In Romania, churches belonging to various Christian denominations (including the Orthodox Church) have been quick to embrace digital technology, offering online services and spiritual resources accessible via the internet. This has made it easier to stay connected with the faithful and ensured the continuity of religious life in a difficult context.<sup>17</sup>

Also, when possible, churches in Romania and other countries organized services in the open air, such as parks, parking lots and other open spaces, as health safety conditions could be more easily met.

The pandemic also stimulated inter-religious collaboration and solidarity between different religious communities. Religious leaders have worked together to provide moral and material support to those affected by the pandemic, demonstrating that in the face of a global crisis, unity and cooperation are essential.<sup>18</sup>

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15 *Constitution of Romania*, 1991.

16 Nazila Ghanea, "COVID-19 and Freedom of Religion or Belief: The Role of Faith Communities in the Pandemic", *Social Sciences*, 2020.

17 *Constitution of Romania*, 1991.

18 Nazila Ghanea, "COVID-19 and Freedom of Religion or Belief: The Role of Faith Communities in the Pandemic", *Social Sciences*, 2020.



While the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on religious freedom cannot be disputed, the benefits<sup>19</sup> of this crisis lie in increasing adaptability, stimulating creativity to find solutions and even developing tools to spread the Gospel message that are being used post-pandemic.

The Covid 19 pandemic also exacerbated popular feelings about censorship and disinformation, significantly affecting freedom of expression. Many governments implemented strict measures to control information, citing the need to manage public perception and prevent panic as the rationale. However, the effect has not been as intended, often leading to censorship and limiting access to truthful information, leaving the public unable to distinguish reliable information from fake news. Overzealousness or a lack of real knowledge led many citizens to distribute this type of news, which fueled panic. And in religious circles, this was all the more so because it was coupled, as mentioned above, with various correlations with (more or less controversial) interpretations of biblical texts with eschatological references.

Censorship has often been imposed with force, in various forms, from shutting down independent publications and restricting media reporting, to strict monitoring and control of information shared on social networks. In some cases, when it was necessary to justify their actions, the authorities used laws, rulings, decisions or emergency ordinances, arguing that spreading misinformation about Covid 19 could endanger public health and social stability.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, misinformation has soared amid uncertainty and fears about the pandemic. This has been exacerbated by the rapid spread of conspiracy theories and false information via social media, which have undermined the efforts of public health authorities and led to a lack of public confidence in recommended health measures.<sup>21</sup> However, even now, when the pandemic crisis is no longer topical, most adherents of these theories still believe them to be true. Online platforms still abound with news stories about the consequences that will follow the Covid 19 vaccina-

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19 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Spiritual lessons observed through the Coronavirus Crisis", *Dialogo. Issue of Modern Man*, vol.6, no.2 (2020), pp. 71-82.

20 Bretton Bennett, Steven Livingston, "The Limits of Censorship: COVID-19, Misinformation, and the Public Sphere", *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, 2020.

21 Julie Posetti, Kalina Bontcheva. (2020). "Disinfodemic: Deciphering COVID-19 Disinformation." UNESCO.

tion, with many of the sudden deaths or illnesses being blamed on adverse reactions to the so-called *experimental serum*.

As to be expected, a number of abuses also occurred. The pandemic was marked by numerous cases in which journalists, activists and ordinary citizens were marginalized or even persecuted for expressing their critical views on the authorities' handling of the crisis. Social networking sites can be said to have played a crucial role during the pandemic, albeit an ambivalent one, as they facilitated freedom of thought and expression, but at the same time they also became channels for disinformation and censorship.

On the one hand, social media platforms allowed people to express their opinions and share information at a time when access to the truth was essential. They facilitated rapid communication and coordinated community responses, providing an open forum for public debate and digital activism.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, social networks have been flooded with misinformation and fake news, complicating efforts to combat the pandemic. Content amplification algorithms and the lack of effective moderation measures allowed conspiracy theories and false information about the virus, treatments and public health measures to spread rapidly.<sup>23</sup>

In an effort to curb this type of action, social media platforms have tried to implement measures to counter misinformation, such as labeling and removing false content, promoting verified information and working with public health authorities to disseminate accurate messages. However, the (already extremely delicate) balance between protecting freedom of expression and combating misinformation has been a significant challenge.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, in the context of the Pandemic, we can say, on the one hand, that it was the ultimate responsibility of citizens to filter the information they read and distributed to ensure that it is based on the most reliable sources. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the responsibility of the media to adhere to a code of ethics and to be responsible towards citizens, always presenting the truth, without using methods and techniques

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22 Matteo Cinelli et al., "The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic", *Scientific Reports*, 2020.

23 Salman Bin Naeem, Rubina Bhatti, "The Covid-19 Infodemic: A New Front for Information Professionals", *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 2020.

24 Tarleton Gillespie, "Content Moderation, AI, and the Question of Scale", *Big Data & Society*, 2020.

of propaganda, manipulation or disinformation in the transmitted news or information. Unfortunately, in both cases, major leaks or more or less intentional actions have fueled public uncertainty, which in some cases continues to this day.

In conclusion, we can state that the Covid 19 pandemic has created a major dilemma for authorities around the world and, implicitly, in Romania: the quest to balance the public health measures needed to protect the population (often unpopular) versus the respect for fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution and international law. However, we cannot ignore the fact that striking the balance between public health and fundamental freedoms often involves sacrifices. On the one hand, protecting public health requires swift and often drastic measures to prevent the collapse of health systems and to save lives, and on the other hand, there's the need for these measures to be justified, temporary and proportionate to the threat, so as not to undermine democratic principles and fundamental rights.<sup>25</sup>

Assessing restrictive measures from a legal and ethical perspective reveals a number of challenges and controversies. Many governments have invoked a state of emergency to justify restrictions, but these measures have sometimes been criticized and sparked public outrage for violating international human rights standards. In many cases, authorities have been accused of using the pandemic as a pretext to consolidate political control and silence opposition.<sup>26</sup>

For example, in Hungary, the emergency law adopted in March 2020 granted the government extensive powers to regulate by decree without a clear time limit and without adequate parliamentary oversight. This raised concerns about the excessive use of emergency powers and the negative impact on democracy and the rule of law.<sup>27</sup>

The challenges of the Covid 19 pandemic have had the same overwhelming impact in Romania. Therefore, in this article we present the re-

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25 Lawrance O. Gostin, Lindsay F. Wiley, *Public Health Law: Power, Duty, Restraint*, University of California Press, 2020.

26 Martin Scheinin, "COVID-19 Symposium: To Derogate or Not to Derogate?", *Opinio Juris, International Commission of Jurists*, 2020.

27 Judit Bayer et al., "Disinformation and Freedom of Expression: Towards a Unified Framework?", *European Parliament, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs*, 2021.

sults of our study on the perceptions of believers who frequently attend Christian community services regarding the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on their religious freedom and freedom of expression. The data provided is the result of a nationwide sociological survey, based on an opinion poll and an interview conducted among people who guide their lives on the basis of Christian beliefs and values, of any denomination, in Romania, aged between 16 and 80 years (71 being the maximum age of the respondents who completed the questionnaire) and who attend religious services at least twice a month. Although the minimum age of respondents in such surveys is usually set at 18 years, in the present study it was decided to lower it to 16 because, according to Art. 30 paragraph (3) of the Act 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, republished, with subsequent amendments and additions, "a child who has reached the age of 16 has the right to choose his/her own religion"<sup>28</sup>.

## Methodology

For a broader understanding of the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on religious freedom in Romania, mixed research was carried out – a quantitative one, through a sociological survey based on a questionnaire, and a qualitative one, through a semi-structured interview, following all the methodological steps provided in the literature.

The questionnaire was distributed through various channels to religious leaders of various Christian denominations, with the request to disseminate it on WhatsApp groups or other communication networks used to transmit various information to the believers in the Christian churches they belong to. It was also distributed on communication networks and displayed in churches, with the request to be filled in online.

Although the questionnaire was started by 274 people, complete answers were given by only 253 of them; 21 of the respondents could not pass the filter questions, as church services were less than once a month. In addition to the 253 responses, there were also 10 provided through the semi-structured interview, the role of which was to try to clarify a number of issues arising from the quantitative research. Therefore, the present

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28 Law no. 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, republished, with subsequent amendments and additions.

study cumulates the aspects related to the perception of the impact of the pandemic on believers, as felt by a total of 263 respondents.

The research universe was therefore made up of believers of all Christian denominations in Romania, people who come from both the under-age segment of the population (from 16 years of age and above, for the reasons already highlighted) and adults who attend religious services at least twice a month. The final sample comprised 253 people aged between 16 and 71, 126 men and 127 women, taking into account the need to ensure gender balance, but without aiming to ensure the exact proportion within the respective communities. All subjects are Christians who have maintained their religious faith, including during the Covid 19 pandemic, and who attend religious services at least twice a month. In the semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, the criterion of gender balance was no longer considered, but only that of attending religious services at least twice a month, and no notable differences were found in the quantitative research in this respect.

The aim of the research was to explore the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on the religious freedom and freedom of expression of believers from various Christian denominations in Romania.

To achieve the aim of this research the following objectives were set:

**General objective:** to analyze the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic in relation to religious freedom and freedom of expression of believers of various Christian denominations in Romania.

**Specific objectives:**

1. To identify the main negative effects of the Covid 19 pandemic in relation to religious freedom and freedom of expression of believers of various Christian denominations in Romania.
2. To identify the main sources of information for believers of various Christian denominations in Romania during the Covid 19 pandemic.
3. To identify the main lessons learned by believers of various Christian denominations in Romania as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic.

**The hypotheses** considered for the quantitative research were the following:

1. The more severe the restrictions during the Covid 19 pandemic were perceived to be, the more religious believers considered that their religious freedom and freedom of expression were being restricted.
2. The lower the trust in Romanian state authorities, the higher the citizens' perception that the measures imposed during the Covid 19 pandemic were abusive.
3. The more the faithful got information from social media and other unofficial sources, the greater the risk of spreading fake news and public panic.

**The research questions** considered for the qualitative research were the following:

1. What were the main effects of the Covid 19 pandemic felt by believers in relation to religious freedom and freedom of expression?
2. What were the main sources of information for believers during the Covid 19 pandemic?

## **Research results**

A total of 134 men and 129 women, aged between 16-71 years old, participated in the present survey, with more than 95% of the respondents being of Romanian nationality. The level of education varied, with most of the respondents being university graduates (about 40%), but also PhD graduates, Master's graduates, high school graduates, vocational school graduates or people who have completed high school or secondary school.

Respondents' professions are equally diverse, including pastors, priests, teachers, programmers, doctors, economists, social workers, nurses, engineers, civil servants, project managers, NGO workers, data operators, waiters, missionaries, psychologists, sales agents, analysts, IT consultants, students etc.

The largest percentage of respondents, about 40%, came from Baptist churches in Romania, followed by Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, Lutheran, Adventist, Evangelical Christian, Methodist, Reformed, Charismatic and Assemblies of God respondents.

The respondents came from all over the country, from big cities such as Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Brașov, Constanța or Iași, but also from smaller cities such as Câmpina, Năvodari, Târgu Ocna etc.

Since the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic, the impact of the crisis context has been felt, first through increased anxiety and panic caused by the uncertainty of the situation and fear of disease, and later by the massive restrictions that have limited certain rights and freedoms of citizens.

This was also expressed by the interviewed respondents, who confirmed that they have experienced anxieties in multiple areas such as: *fear of death for themselves or their loved ones, fear of a potential economic downfall, fear of potential manipulation by the authorities or the media, fear of the uncertainty of the future and of running out of resources of any kind*, but also *fear that we will never return to normal and that the crisis caused by the virus will cause adaptation to a new reality*. Also, 22.9% of the respondents to the questionnaire said that one of the changes they experienced in their psycho-emotional state was an increase in their sense of fear.

Subsequently, as the number of cases of sickness multiplied, a state of emergency and national lockdown was declared. The government applied increasingly restrictive measures, and citizens reacted by seeing their rights and freedoms curtailed. This can also be seen from the respondents' statements on how they related to the health and social distancing measures, with a higher percentage of those who claimed that they complied with these measures only because they were imposed (43.9%) or even that they tried to "circumvent them", not being convinced of their usefulness (9.9%), while only 37.9% complied with the measures out of conviction.

An important factor behind the citizens' reluctance to the restrictions imposed was also their lack of trust in state authorities. 37.5% of the questionnaire respondents said that their level of trust in the state authorities is very low, 34.8% said that their level of trust is low, while 24.5% had neither high nor low level of trust. The percentage of those who expressed high levels trust in the authorities is overwhelmingly low at only 2.8%.

Therefore, when the respondents to the questionnaire were asked what they thought of the protective measures imposed by the state authorities during the Covid 19 pandemic, 36.8% considered them to be illogical and meaningless, 28.5% considered them to be abusive, while only 24.5% considered them to be appropriate to the situation we were in at the time. Opinions were even more divided when asked about imposing the use of the green certificate as a result of vaccination or illness. Some 44.3% of respondents considered the measure to be abusive, 14.6% considered it to be illogical and senseless, 14.2% considered it to be a measure that led to



segregation of the population, while 22.1% considered it to be appropriate to the gravity of the situation.

One of the major consequences of the restrictions, from the point of view of the present study, has been the limitation of religious freedom. Because of the massive danger of disease, since the state of emergency and the national lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic, churches have been closed and alternative solutions have been needed in the given context.

68% of respondents to the survey said that church services were moved online during that period, while 14.2% said that church services were not held at all.

Also during that period, 51% of the respondents mentioned that the practice of the Eucharist ("Lord's Supper") was not held in their church, while 22.9% said it was held online, and 8.7% said that the pastor, priest or other religious leaders came to their home to bring the bread and wine, the specific elements of the Eucharist. Very interesting, from our point of view, is the fact that this happened also in the evangelical Protestant environment (Baptist, Pentecostal, Plymouth Brethren), despite the fact that, according to their interpretation traditions, the bread and wine are considered only a symbol, unlike the large historical churches, which consider them the real Body and Blood of the Savior (according to the doctrine of transubstantiation).

That was the period when believers suffered the most from a sense of isolation, separation from the community and the inability to carry out the practices that are customary to their spiritual beliefs and values. It was also a time of vehement reactions, especially on social media, with many of the believers considering the measures to be abusive, due to the fact that other structures could continue their activities safe (respecting, for example, measures such as wearing masks, social distancing etc.).

After the state of emergency was lifted, things started to change, especially in terms of the possibility of going to church in person, with 58.1% of respondents saying they went to church only physically, with social distancing measures, while 38.3% preferred a hybrid option, attending both online and in person.

Both interview and questionnaire respondents, therefore, perceived religious freedom to be limited during the Covid 19 pandemic, even if some of them considered restrictive measures as necessary in that context.

In fact, 41.1% of respondents to the questionnaire considered the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic to be negative, while 11.5% considered it to be strongly negative, citing the following effects: *The closure of churches due to the new rules and the isolation of Christians, which for some of them led to depression, the impossibility of physical participation in church services, the organization of religious services online or outdoors, the lack of physical interactions, the isolation of people, the cooling of relationships between church members, segregation and conflicts over vaccination, wearing masks, the restriction of certain rights and even the death of some people.*

Respondents to the interview reinforced these responses by mentioning the *lack of fellowship, the cooling of the relationship between people, the lack of spiritual support and the loss of a sense of community.*

Many respondents attributed these consequences to limitations on religious freedoms, believing that restrictions during the pandemic: *split people apart, and the move of the church online and the limitation of community interactions, suspicions and hygiene rules drove people apart.* Another respondent highlighted that *a little bit of community was lost, the connection I had with the people I used to see at church, anxiety increased, and when the meetings started up again, the number of attendees was not the same. Over time some of us didn't come at all, and in terms of the teenage group I think people didn't get the discipleship, and during the pandemic some of them made more negative long-term decisions.*

However, there were also different opinions. Some 11.1% of respondents to the questionnaire considered the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic to be positive, while 35.6% maintained a neutral attitude, considering that the impact was neither positive nor negative. They perceived the pandemic as *a normal challenge that can occur in the Christian's life or even as a form of sifting between Christians (i.e. differentiating between the "real" and those considered to be "superficial" – [AN]), adapting to new situations, the opportunity to set up their online system and move their meetings online, so that they can now spread the Gospel message in this form, optimizing worship and preaching times, and as a post-pandemic effect - increasing the number of service attendees in some churches.*

Interview respondents also identified positive effects of the Covid 19 pandemic. In addition to those mentioned above, there were other interesting responses such as: *filtering out lying preachers, strengthening of certain relationships because people were forced to react quickly, to basic needs, devel-*

*oping creativity to be able to maintain connection, establishing regular meetings outside of church services where people would talk, eat their favorite dessert together and the fact that people who had taken a break from church came back during the pandemic and continue to do so post-pandemic.*

Another important aspect discussed in the theoretical part was the impact of the pandemic on the freedom of expression. The media and social media networks were tools that played a fundamental role in this respect.

One interesting thing among the interview respondents was that the majority indicated the sources from which they got their information as: WHO, government sources, Bloomberg, internet, news websites, television, newspapers, social media. On the other hand, they all were of the opinion that most of the believers in their churches rather got their information from Facebook, sources that were not credible, forwarding messages on WhatsApp groups, TV, one respondent was even ironic and mentioned that the others probably got their information *from Revelation, how they were talking about the loss of salvation for those who had been vaccinated.*

51% of the respondents to the questionnaire stated that they got information about the pandemic from the websites of official public institutions, 42.7% from specialized medical sources, 37.2% from non-Christian news websites, 32.4% from discussions with family, 30.4% from social media platforms, 30% from discussions with colleagues/friends, 26.1% from Google, 19% from Christian news websites and 18.2% from YouTube.

Some examples of websites, platforms, influencers, public figures, etc. that the survey respondents mentioned were: Facebook, Digi 24, CNN, Bloomberg, Bloomberg, Observator, ProTv, Ministry of Health, Hotnews, Ager Press, Trinitas, Credo Tv, Vladimir Pustan, Raed Arafat, Camelia Smicală, Alexandru Rafila, Dr. Robert Malone, Dr. Drew, Viorel Iuga, Marius Cruceru etc.

Taking into account the complexity of the subject, but also the often opposite opinions, one of the main consequences of receiving information from different sources was the emergence of conflictual situations. Among the questionnaire respondents, 41.5% said that they had come into conflictual discussions, but rarely, 32.8% often, while 25.7% said never. The conflicting themes were topics such as: vaccination, reality of the virus and of the disease, compliance with restrictions, various conspiracy theories, God's involvement in the pandemic.

Unfortunately, at the time of the pandemic, many of the conflicts, problems and dilemmas related to freedom of expression came not from the authorities, but from the people. Many did not have the ability to accept opinions that differed from their own, to argue in a civilized manner, or to critically analyze the situation, despite their personal beliefs. 26.5% of the respondents to the questionnaire said that they felt marginalized at work because of differences of opinion, 22.1% said that they had been called names or other derogatory words, 10.7% said that they had deleted or had been deleted from their friends list on certain social networks, 7.1% had called names or derogatory words to others, while 6.7% had broken off relations with certain people.

Interview respondents also stated that debates on pandemic-specific issues have led to consequences such as: *anathematization among brothers in the Lord, segregation of the unvaccinated from the vaccinated, breaking of relationships, leaving the church* etc. Respondents believe that these conflicts have also negatively influenced the views of people outside the church about believers in ways such as: *they have been fed hate against bigot Christians, we have been called under-developed, they've laughed at us, they've laughed of the apocalyptic slogans, they ridiculed us, they considered us retrogrades* etc.

Social media network platforms have been one of the main tools for transmitting information, which has both allowed fake news to slip through and created the virtual space for wide-ranging debates between people with different opinions. Because legal or common-sense limits were often exceeded, many accounts were deleted or restricted.

Despite all the things that had a rather negative impact during the Covid 19 pandemic, however, looking back, respondents also learned many lessons from that period. A few of those mentioned are:

*... I have learned to be more reserved in my opinions.*

*... I've learned not to take my information and do my homework on Facebook.*

*... I have learned that things may change from day to day, but God remains constant.*

*... I think an important lesson that I want to keep is that things that we thought were going to happen far away in history have happened, and to get past the tendency to think that they won't happen in our generation and that we should be prepared for anything. How unstable the world and everything around us...*

*... we have learned that God is Sovereign and that He has the right to pull the rug from under our feet at any time, and that is when you see how vulnerable we are. And not just over a few, but over the whole world.*

*... I have to be more present in the friendships that I have, in the relationships that mean a lot to me, because you never know when you lose a loved one. To maintain relationships and invest in people and relationships, because they are the most important. And to the non-Christians in my family, to do my best to present the Gospel to them.*

Opinions are, of course, diverse and range from self-victimization to the possibility of strengthening some beliefs or a greater attachment to God and Christian values. On the other hand, however, the cases where respondents felt the need to re-evaluate both their own relationships and their own beliefs and the way they communicate with those around them, whether family members, colleagues, friends or brothers in Christ were not few.

## **Limit**

Certainly, this study could have yielded more insights if the number of respondents had been larger or if representativeness had been pursued, both in terms of sample size and in terms of stratification by criteria such as religious affiliation, residence, age of respondents, etc. On the other hand, however, the issues emerging from the research are sufficiently general to be considered relevant to a population segment beyond our sample size.

Another limitation was the process used to implement the questionnaire. The fact that it was administered online limited, of course, the number of respondents to the segment of the population that is familiar with this virtual environment, that owns an electronic device connected to the Internet and is willing to devote a relatively large amount of time (15-20 minutes) to fill in the questionnaire.

Last, but not least, another possible limitation could be the presence of a QR code on the posters inviting members of religious communities, which could be scanned with mobile devices to instantly access the questionnaire. The measure was designed to avoid the need to type in a link - even in the shortened version provided by the platform used to apply the questionnaire. On the other hand, under the circumstances generated by the pandemic, where even the vaccine was interpreted in an apocalyptic

key by some members of the faith communities (following trends that have included, one by one, other elements such as the use of credit cards, microchips, personal numeric codes, microchip IDs), the mere presence of a QR code could trigger controversial feelings. Implicitly, for possible future applications of such tools within faith communities in order to include as many respondents as possible, we recommend caution in the use of such tools.

## Conclusions

Although guaranteed by the Constitution and the international normative documents ratified by most democratic states, freedom of expression and freedom of religion can be subject to restrictions or limitations, sometimes very serious ones. In this respect, the restrictions during the pandemic were a real shockwave. What is still striking, at a relative distance from the events of the COVID 19 pandemic, is the ease with which the authorities were able to impose these limits at macro level by coercive means, based on nothing more than a series of preliminary results and numerous assumptions, on the basis of which they were insufficiently tested and validated on a large scale. At times, these restrictions have not only struck hard not only at the heart of people's feelings, but they even bordered on the ridiculous in some cases (e.g. measures restricting access to cemeteries or public parks, or extremely drastic restrictions on relatives' access to religious services such as funeral services). On the other hand, however, we should not lose sight from the fact that the Covid19 pandemic has taken the whole of mankind by surprise and, as is often claimed, special events sometimes call for special measures in the desire to save lives, despite the lack of popularity and possible awkwardness in the process. However, there is a clear lack of professional communication, in the true sense of the word, and a lack of transparency to facilitate, as far as possible, an understanding of the scale of the phenomenon we have been confronted with and the real need to impose measures which it was felt could help to limit, if not eradicate, the phenomenon.

Beyond all this, however, a particularly valuable lesson remains: Freedom of religion and freedom of expression, despite being considered fundamental rights, should not be perceived as guaranteed anytime, anywhere and under any conditions. Their fragility, which has been amply demonstrated

during the period referred to in this study, calls for constant vigilance on the part of the society as a whole (ensured by independent *watchdog* organizations) and whenever any lapses occur firm, prompt, well-argued, legally and scientifically sound and well-grounded reactions are needed.

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