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THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF THE MACEDONIAN SOCIETY IN THE CONDITION OF THE CRISIS CAUSED BY COVID 19

By Gjoko Gjorgjevski and Ivan Blazhevski

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Abstract

The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic has influenced all spheres of social life of the Republic of North Macedonia. Introduction of precautionary and restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus impacted on the religious life of citizens-believers. The attitudes of the religious communities towards these measures impacted the behavior of the believers, but also on the opinion and attitudes of the general public. In order to give a clear picture of the religious aspect of the Macedonian society, this paper is divided into two parts. The first part presents the action of the larger religious communities during conditions of the crisis caused by Covid 19. The second part presents public attitudes towards religious communities and the practice of religion after the outbreak of the pandemic. A qualitative analysis was applied in both cases, with the first part analyzing a multitude of public sources, the most common of which were online news and the second part is a thematic analysis of Twitter Platform, particularly the tweets in the period after the appearance and spread of the virus. After the summing up of the results, the impatience towards the religious needs of the believers was evident, as well as the strong criticism and condemnation of the religious communities, despite the fact that in their statements the communities mainly adhered to the government's decisions to deal with the crisis, and called on the believers to comply with the measures adopted in these decisions. Such intolerance and criticism towards religious communities is especially emphasized in the conversation on Twitter, where users are also

advocating the introduction of punitive measures for believers who would attend religious ceremonies.

Key words: religious communities, COVID 19, media, Twitter, restrictive measures.

I. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2020, the world began to completely change the usual rhythm of living. The reason for this is the outbreak of the disease caused by the new corona virus SARS-CoV-2, which first appeared in the city of Wuhan, the capital of the province of Hubei in China, where the epidemic erupted in early December 2019, spreading to other parts of China and then to other countries and other continents.

Soon Italy, and thus Europe, became the next focus of the disease, when on January 31, 2020, two Chinese tourists were tested positive for the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Rome.¹ However, the first European case was confirmed a few days earlier in Bordeaux and Paris in France on January 24, 2020. By March 17, 2020, all European countries (except the Vatican) have already reported cases of the disease and deaths from the virus.

On February 26, North Macedonia confirmed the first case of COVID-19 infection in a woman who had been in Italy and had been ill for some time. After returning to Macedonia, she immediately went to the clinic. On March 6, two more cases were confirmed by a married couple from Centar Zupa, who also lived in Brescia, Italy.² For that reason, first measures were taken for protection at the local level, and then they were applied throughout the country. According to the only database that collects the official data from the institutions, in the next ten days after the first case, not a single new patient had been registered with COVID-19, but from March 6 another trend started. The total number of infected people began to grow slightly after the first ten days of the first case, and then intensified and the number of infected people began to double.

¹Chiara Severgnini, "Coronavirus: Primi due casi in Italia," *Corriere della Sera*, https://archive.vn/20200224200035/https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_gennaio_30/coronavirus-italia-corona-9d6dc436-4343-11ea-bdc8-faf1f56f19b7.shtml?refresh_ce-cp. The beginning of COVID-19 infection was subsequently detected in 16 confirmed cases in Lombardy on February 21, only to increase to 60 the next day with the onset of the first deaths during the same days. Elisa Anzolin - Angelo Amante. "L'epidemia di coronavirus cresce nel nord Italia, 16 casi segnalati in un giorno", Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-italy/coronavirus-outbreak-grows-in-northern-italy-16-cases-reported-in-one-day-idUSKBN20F0UI>.

²"Ковид 19 во Македонија низ бројки," <https://360stepeni.mk/covid-19-vo-makedonija-niz-brojki/>.

On March 10, with a decision of the Government, based on the proposal of the Commission for Infectious Diseases at the Ministry of Health, the educational process in schools and faculties was interrupted.³ One week later, on March 18, the President of the State declared a state of emergency throughout the country.⁴

On March 19 the government decided to "prohibit the gathering in groups of more than five people, in parks and other public places."⁵ From March 22 a curfew was introduced across the country, which changed according to the current situation, with the purpose, according to the government, to prevent or slow down the spread of the virus.⁶

II. REACTIONS OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES REGARDING THE NEW SITUATION

II.1 Macedonian Orthodox Church

Immediately after the first government measures, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church–Archbishopric of Ohrid (MOC-AO) at its session held on March 12, 2020, appealed for compliance with the measures prescribed by the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization. Therefore, the need for increased attention in maintaining hygiene in parish churches and in the monasteries of the MOC–OA was underlined in which they anticipate regular visits and continuous worship service, as well as support and care for "all those who will be in fight with this disease." Regarding the other details, the statement does not hold back, but only points to the strengthening of faith and spiritual struggle in order to overcome the state of alienation from God.⁷ During the next few days, specific instructions were adopted at the diocesan level.⁸

³ https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/zakluchoci_covid-19.pdf. First the decision was made for only 14 days, and then the decision was extended. On March 24, a Decree with legal force on the application of the law on higher education during the state of emergency was adopted, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Northern Macedonia* (No. 76).

⁴ “Вонредно обраќање на Претседателот на Република Северна Македонија, Стево Пендаровски,” <https://pretsedatel.mk/вонредно-обраќање-на-претседателот-н/>.

⁵ Decision adopted at the 23rd session of the Government of the Republic of Northern Macedonia, held on March 19, 2020, <https://vlada.mk/node/20608>.

⁶ Ковид 19 во Македонија низ бројки“, <https://360stepeni.mk/covid-19-vo-makedonija-niz-brojki/>.

⁷ “Announcement from the Holy Synod of Bishops of the MOC-OA“ (12.03.2020 10:50), <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7243>. At this time the Easter Lent has already begun, many Orthodox believers after the one-week fast have already taken communion on St. Todor's Saturday (March 7) and the first week of Lent (March 8). Regarding the communion, the statement only asserts that the Church “keeps the age-old faith in the sanctity of the mysteries of the Church and its ancient, but always current ecclesiological position on Holy Communion as the Cure for Immortality.”

⁸ Announcement of the Diocese of Skopje from March 17, 2020: “Parish priests should stop blessing of the holy water at private homes, and the traditional blessing of the water on the eve of Easter, for this year to move it after Easter. The Holy Baptism, if it is not possible to be postponed, to be performed in the narrowest circle; funerals and memorials

Just a week later, a day after the government's decision to forbid the gathering of more than five people because of the dangerous of infection with the virus, due to an increase in the number of newly infected persons, the Synod issued a new statement on March 20. This contains a concrete appeal to "respect consistently the measures taken by our Government, especially those related to public gatherings, calls for self-isolation, as well as all other active measures by the Ministry of Health and Public Health Centers in the regional units of our country." This clearly indicates that the measures are general and will be implemented, but further action will have to be taken in accordance with the existing conditions in each diocese individually, and this is the responsibility of each bishop.⁹ "Let's be careful and responsible!" was repeated in the appeal to "responsibility to our self and our neighbors, establishing our family in a domestic church,"¹⁰ and prayed for all those "who are infected in the hospitals, health workers, hospital staff, and all those who are fighting selflessly to overcome the pandemic."

A few days later, on March 24, Metropolitan Agatangel of Povardarie issued a separate statement expressing outrage at the restrictions on worship services in the churches.¹¹ In some dioceses only the statement of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew was conveyed.¹² Other metropolitans also have expressed their views,¹³ but mainly in the direction of the official synodal

to be performed only in the open space, at graves, in the presence of only family members. It is forbidden to use church halls and clerical offices for gatherings, religious education classes, meetings of boards and other sporadic activities. In church sanctuaries, at daily services, it is necessary to advise believers to stand at the required distance. Monasteries, according to their typology, should not allow pilgrims, except in case of urgent need, at the call of the faithful; for communion at home, the priests to use it in proper way, observing the measures of protection. Sunday and holiday Holy Liturgies should be kept outdoors." <https://makpress.mk/Home/PostDetails?PostId=335223>.

⁹ "Restrictive measures regarding the worship cycle should be harmonized in the spirit of these government emergency measures, and each bishop should adapt them according to the real situation in his diocese, in the spirit of conscientiousness, enlightenment, sobriety, and one's own responsibility." The Holy Synod of Bishops (SAS) of the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA) from 20.03.2020, <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7246>.

¹⁰ The call for "family reorganization in the domestic church" indicates the preparation for the rearrangement of the regular worship life, instead of in the sanctuary, to be realized in the family circle.

¹¹ <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7249> and http://www.povardarska-eparhija.org.mk/pe//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2483&Itemid=32.

¹² Excerpt from the statement of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew: "Therefore, my children all over the earth, as a father, I urge you to obey completely and with patience all the difficult but necessary measures prescribed by the health institutions and the states. All this is for our protection and for the common good, to stop the spread of the virus. So, our relief from this harm depends entirely on our cooperation. Some of you may have felt that these drastic measures underestimated or hurt your faith. But what is in danger is not the faith, but the believers, not Christ, but our Christians, not the God-man, but we humans." <http://tge.mk/product/obraanje-na-vselenkiot-patrijarkh-ne-e-vo-opasnost-verata-tuku-vernitsite>.

¹³ Announcement of Petar, Metropolitan of Prespa and Pelagonia: <http://www.pppe.mk/2020/veligidensko-poslanie-3/>.

statement,¹⁴ emphasizing the need for struggle, encouragement, and spiritual strength.¹⁵ Additional emergency prayer services were also held in some dioceses.¹⁶

Given the accelerated development of the epidemic, just before the start of Holy Week, when traditional Orthodox Christians visit the liturgies and the church sanctuaries on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and then Easter, on April 6, again the Synod of the MOC-OA issued an additional statement. The Synod reiterated its call for "respect for the established government measures in force, all in order to reduce the spread of the contagious disease," and repeated the "need to continue the emergency measure for public gatherings, which precisely restricts the movement and grouping of people, which will be applied both to these days and to the period of the upcoming Easter holidays." This means that traditional mass holiday celebrations will not be possible, which does not mean that churches will be completely closed. "The Synod underlines that the MOC-OA will not interrupt the liturgical life, because that is its identity and essence of its existence," but still it will adapt to the new conditions and will conform to the emergency situation, respecting them. "Personal prayer of the faithful is strongly recommended, but it is appealed to respectfully comply the required rule by the state authorities regarding the public space, to stay temporarily up to five persons at a certain distance during the permitted hours for public movement." Regarding the necessary services, "funerals should be held in the open, and baptisms, if necessary, in the circle of the closest family." It was also recommended that the "media coverage of church services by national and local media, as well as Internet resources," is useful. The statement follows support and careful treatment of patients and those in a state of self-isolation. Finally, there is an explicit statement that "possible violators of emergency government measures should bear their own responsibility."¹⁷

¹⁴Announcement of Timotej, Metropolitan of Debar and Kičevo: <http://www.dke.org.mk/index.php/3257-2020-04-08-16-52-18>.

¹⁵Announcement of Naum, Metropolitan of Strumitza: <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7251>.

¹⁶ Following the church tradition, when during wars, drought, earthquakes, epidemics and other disasters, processions with icons, crosses, holy water, and holy relics were performed in the past, with the blessing of Metropolitan Agatangel of Povardarie, on March 25, in all the towns and settlements of the Povardarje diocese were sprinkled with holy water on the streets and a prayer was read for an end to the deadly contagion. Following the recommendations of the state authorities, in order not to gather a large number of people, this act was served by the clergy on the move, with the help of vehicles, as it was previously done in other countries and local Orthodox churches. http://www.povardarska-eparhija.org.mk/pe//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2476&Itemid=32.

¹⁷ The announcement contains indications of specific directions: "The Holy Liturgies and all services should be held with several priests, with a maximum of five believers, taking care not to violate the already imposed measure for public gathering. With the blessing of the bishop, in the parish churches the faithful should approach Holy Communion, in a way that has already been established. There is an advice that older, frail, and immuno-compromised

In the traditional Easter Letter of the Synod, which was published a few days before the Feast, in addition to the usual thoughts and messages related to the theme of the Feast, appeals were issued again to "obedience and restraint."¹⁸ Believers are advised to "persevere and not be disturbed because they cannot attend the sacred services in the temples in large numbers and to pray in their homes and hearts." This period should be a time of "repentance and intensified prayer," of a fortification "of faith and spiritual progress."¹⁹ The traditional Easter message, addressed by Stefan, the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia and the Head of the MOC-OA, was headed in the same direction.²⁰

During the celebrations, on Holy Thursday (April 16, 2020), another announcement from the Synod of the MOC-OA appeared, appealing again to "the clergy and the people to fully respect the recommended measures and established guidelines." In the extraordinary conditions of a pandemic, when caring for the health of one's neighbor is extremely important, the Synod calls for this Resurrection of Christ to be welcomed and celebrated with loved ones in the domestic church-in the family."²¹

II.2 Catholic Church

The first statement regarding the new situation by Bishop Kiro Stojanov, who is in charge of the Catholic Church in the country, appeared on March 14, 2020. Based on "the latest provisions adopted by the government, especially for the cessation of all educational activities," he called on "all parishes and monastic communities in the Catholic Church on the territory of our country to stop religious meetings and all forms of activities and gatherings of children and youth in the next 14 days," and all believers "to adhere to the decisions and recommendations given by the competent institutions of the Government and to responsibly approach the implementation of the announced measures." He called that this time of "uncertainty" be turned "into a time of unity and

people, as well as children, stay in their homes. If they have a spiritual need, they should report to their parish priests to receive communion at home. (<http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7254>).

¹⁸ "The appearance of the corona virus in the world, and also in our country, has made us pay attention to ourselves and the health of our neighbors. Therefore, we should adhere to the advice and measures issued by the competent institutions and all together contribute to reducing and preventing the spread of infection."

¹⁹ Easter Letter 14.04.2020 (<http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7258>).

²⁰ Stefan, Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia, Easter Message, <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7266>.

²¹ Announcement of the Holy Synod of MOC-OA from 16.04.2020, <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7260>.

hope and not to forget the most vulnerable groups among us," and for the state recommendations to be "taken seriously."²²

Already on March 19, a new announcement followed the deterioration of the country's health situation, but also with the approach of the Easter holidays (the Catholic Church of the Latin rite celebrated Easter according to the new calendar on April 12, and together with the Orthodox Church the believers of the Byzantine rite celebrated next week on April 19, 2020). The statement said: "The virus continues to spread relentlessly. That is why we are forced, taking care of our health and lives, as well as the well-being of every believer and citizen of our society, to make a decision in the coming period to serve the Holy Liturgies without people. As Diocesan Bishop (CIC c. 87, §1 CCEO c.1538) I release believers from the duty of "going to the weekly and festive Holy Liturgy" and I urge and ask them to use this period and replace it with fasting, family prayer, reading the Scripture and the interpretation of God's Word, and the Holy Liturgy to be followed through media. It was also announced that "all baptisms and weddings will be postponed indefinitely," and other usual celebrations and events will not be held.

The anointing of the sick should be distributed only to those who are dying, and for the patients with coronavirus the priests should use protective clothing prescribed by the medical staff. Funeral services, on the other hand, should be performed at the grave site, in accordance with the instructions given by the competent state authorities, especially for keeping a distance from each other.²³ Such more explicit statements regarding the restriction of the presence of believers on Sunday and festive services are probably due to the even stricter measures that the Catholic Church has already taken in other European countries.

II.3 Protestant Churches

On March 13, 2020, the Evangelical Methodist Church announced that "in order to prevent the possibility of the corona virus spreading, all activities in the church building will be canceled by March 24," but the measures taken will continue to last throughout the crisis, and Sunday and Easter services will be held online.²⁴ Similar announcements followed from other Protestant churches in the country.

²² Announcement, 14.03.2020, <http://katolici.mk/соопштение-од-скопскиот-бискуп-и-стру/>.

²³ Announcement, 19.03.2020, <http://katolici.mk/соопштение-од-скопскиот-бискуп-и-струм/>.

²⁴ Announcement, <http://емс.mk/вести/>

II.4 Islamic Religious Community

On March 17, the Islamic Religious Community in Republic of North Macedonia issued a statement calling for an end to the spread of the pandemic caused by Covid 19. The services will not be performed in mosques across the country, so Islamic believers are obliged to perform the prayers in their homes." Additional guidelines are provided when "in the event of death from the corona virus, the funeral ceremony should be performed by the competent authorities, while the burial of the deceased and other ceremonies according to Islamic *sharia* should be performed after the funeral." The IRC also issued additional recommendations: "Islamic believers are to avoid all mass gatherings... to be calm and in accordance with their beliefs, to follow the recommendations of the responsible people, not to fall victim to unnecessary panic more harmful than the virus itself because it can cause unpredictable consequences."²⁵

On the occasion of the month of Ramadan, the Head of the Islamic Religious Community, Suleiman Rexhepi, in his address on April 23 again reiterated to the faithful to respect the recommendations of the Government adopted for the corona virus epidemic. "I urge you to adhere to Islamic principles about yourself and the health of others around you, while respecting what doctors and experts have to say about the Covid-19 pandemic. Only in this way will we win and we will return to our lives, only in this way will our prayers for salvation that we send to Almighty Allah will be justified" said Rexhepi.²⁶

II.5 Higher Education Institutions of Religious Communities

Based on the conclusions of the Commission for Infectious Diseases of the Ministry of Health, adopted at the session held on March 10, 2020, as well as the Notification no. 3-415/1 dated March 10, 2020, from the Rectorate of the St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, in order to protect the health of students and staff and to increase measures and activities to prevent the spread of corona virus, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology "St. Kliment Ohridski" in Skopje stopped the teaching process during the next 14 days, i.e. in the period from March 11 to 24, 2020. Given the new situation, as well as the provisions for the following period, the implementation of

²⁵ Announcement, from 17.03.2020, <https://bfi.mk/komunikat-per-opinion-soopshтение-za-javnost/>.

²⁶ Ramadan Message of the Head of the Islamic Community, <https://religija.mk/34328-2/>

the study programs from March 18 continued through regular, but distance teaching using a video conference system, according to the established schedule of classes.²⁷

II.6 State and Religious Communities during the Crisis Caused by the Pandemic

On March 16, 2020, the Prime Minister, Oliver Spasovski, accompanied by the Director of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups, Darijan Sotirovski, met with the heads of the religious communities in the country, Stefan, the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia (Macedonian Orthodox Church--Ohrid Archbishopric), Reis Ul Ulema Haji Sulejman Efendi Rexhepi (Islamic Religious Community), Bishop of Skopje and Diocese of Strumica and Skopje, Kiro Stojanov (Catholic Church), the President of the Church Representation, Emil Zaev (Evangelical Methodist Church). According to a statement,

the meeting welcomed the measures and steps taken by the Government in dealing with the corona virus, in order to effectively protect the health of citizens. Gratitude was expressed to the Prime Minister Spasovski for the openness of cooperation and strong support... Prime Minister Spasovski briefed the heads with all important information on the measures taken by the Government, to protect the health of all citizens, as a highest priority. The leaders informed about the measures they are taking for greater protection of the believers. Opportunities for maximum protection of believers are considered. The common view is that the health of citizens is a highest priority and that everyone in the country, including religious communities and believers, should be held responsible in order to help prevent the spread of the disease and its undesirable effects.²⁸

On April 15, 2020, just before the great pre-Easter and Easter celebrations, the Minister of Interior, Nake Chulev, had a meeting with Archbishop Stefan at the Macedonian Archbishopric. The notification of the Minister for the meeting states:

The health of the citizens is the most important for all of us and Archbishop Stefan I informed that during the holiday in the churches only the priests will serve, without the presence of the believers in these services. Together we concluded that this is a time of spiritual cohesion and physical distance, a time when we all need to stay at our homes, and thus contribute to overcoming this condition as soon as possible and returning to normal life... and to prayers and liturgies in the churches.²⁹

On April 13, Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski, accompanied by the Director of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups Darijan Sotirovski, visited the

²⁷<https://pbf.edu.mk/izvestuvnje-covid/>.

²⁸ Announcement of the Commission for Relationship with the Religious Communities, <http://www.kovz.gov.mk/ns-newsarticle-sredba-so-poglavarite-na-verskite-zaednici-vo-vrska-so-sireneto-na-korona-virusot.nsp>.

²⁹ Announcement, <https://makedonskivesnik.com/culev-gg-stefan-sredba/>.

Residence of the Catholic Bishop in Skopje on the occasion of Easter, where he met with Bishop Kiro Stojanov. At the meeting, Easter greetings were sent to the Bishop, the clergy and the believers of the Catholic Church. At the meeting Bishop Stojanov emphasized that the Catholic Church in Macedonia from the very beginning strives to keep all instructions and recommendations of the competent institutions of the Government during pandemic.³⁰

On March 17, Deputy Prime Minister Bujar Osmani met with Reis ul Ulema, Sulejman Rexhepi, at the Islamic Religious Community. Based on Osmani's statement in the media, it was reported that "on behalf of the Crisis Coordination Headquarters, he expresses gratitude to the Islamic Religious Community and its leader Suleiman Rexhepi for the wise and very useful solutions and messages he brought today, which will significantly contribute to faster management of pandemics and return to normal life in the country."³¹

II.7 Controversies

On April 9, 2020, a statement was made to the media by Reis Sulejman Rexhepi, who in a televised interview threatened Deputy Prime Minister Bujar Osmani and the Government that he would withdraw calls for protection from the pandemic if the Government would not provide financial assistance to the IRC.³² Regarding the impact of the situation on the financial situation in the religious communities, the spokesman of the Synod of MOC-OA, Metropolitan Timotej said that "we are also seriously affected by the crisis ... and that for the Feast the Synod will stay to the decision to respect the measures in order to deal with the epidemic."³³

The question was posed, whether Reis Rexhepi could be prosecuted for violating the bans and urging worshipers to go to mosques at the height of the Covid-19 epidemic, after he warned that he would suspend government measures if he did not receive financial help. "The Prosecutor's Office is monitoring the current statements and will follow the further course of the statements and behaviors, so depending on the established conditions, the law will be acted upon," reads the statement from the Public Prosecutor's Office.³⁴ Vice Prime Minister Osani said that it is a

³⁰Announcement of the Commission for Relationship with the Religious Communities, <http://www.kovz.gov.mk/ns-newsarticle-poseta-na-skopskata-biskupija-po-povod-praznikot-veligden.nsp>.

³¹<https://infoalb.mk/bujar-osmani-falenderon-bashkesine-islame-per-kontributin-ne-situaten-pandemike/>.

³² Announcement, <https://lajmpress.org/sulejman-rexhepi-nese-qeveria-nuk-na-i-jep-ndihmat-do-ta-bejme-ketu-bangladesh-me-koronavirus-video/>.

³³<https://nezavisen.mk/timotej-polovina-od-budzhetot-na-mpc-ni-e-od-veligden/>.

³⁴ <https://360stepeni.mk/sulejman-redhepi-mozhe-da-odgovara-i-krivichno-ako-povika-da-ne-se-pochituvaa-merkite/>.

misunderstanding and that "the head of the Islamic Religious Community, Suleiman Rexhepi, did not threaten the government, but asked that a legitimate request be considered."³⁵

The next day, news appeared in the media that, in response to Rexhepi's threats, the government had approved 120,000 Euros for the theological faculties of the IRC and the MOC.³⁶ The Government issued a statement that the Decision on allocation of funds is not related to this and was adopted before the above-mentioned statement, and these are regular funds that the state in accordance with the law adopted to higher education institutions of religious communities.³⁷ The funds were approved a month ago, so that these faculties can provide continuity of the work and the realization of the student programs in the period after the announcement of the elections.³⁸

On April 15, 2020, the Network for Protection against Discrimination strongly condemned the Government's decision to allocate funds to the Orthodox Theological Faculty "St. Kliment Ohridski" in Skopje and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje. According to them, the decision is "discriminatory" and the government's justification is "scandalous and manipulative." In the face of a ban on teaching at higher education institutions "that are not currently operating or carrying out any activities," this is "scattered spending" which "threatens the confidence in the government." This was followed by a request to the Government to reconsider the decision, as well as to the Prosecutor's Office to initiate criminal prosecution.³⁹ Following the initial news in the media that the Constitutional Court will annul the decision on allocating funds to both faculties,⁴⁰ the next day a notification was received that "the Constitutional Court has not formed a case, nor has an initiative for assessing the constitutionality been submitted so far regarding the legality of the government's decree funding these faculties."⁴¹

Shortly before the start of the Easter holidays, numerous accusations and criticisms related to church gatherings arose, but mostly around the traditional way of communing with the same

³⁵ <https://24info.mk/osmani-recepti-ne-se-zakani-tuku-pobara/> and <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/osmani-zaredzhepi-ne-e-zakana-tuku-baranje-za-pomosh-ne-treba-da-pravime-drama-bidejkji-sekoj-e-oshteten/>.

³⁶ <https://irl.mk/korona-prioriteti-vladata-im-dade-120-000-ev/>.

³⁷ Announcement, <https://irl.mk/korona-prioriteti-vladata-im-dade-120-000-ev/>.

³⁸ <https://vlada.mk/node/20937>.

³⁹ Игор Јадровски & Драгана Дрндаревска, "Наместо санкции за непочитување на мерките, верските заедници добија 120 000 евра јавни пари во време на здравствено-економската криза," https://mhc.org.mk/news/namesto-sankcii-za-nepochituvanje-na-merkite-verskite-zaednici-dobija-120-000-evra-javni-pari-vo-vreme-na-zdravstveno-ekonomskata-kriza/?fbclid=IwAR1_убсnnIoDNKwW0yhkzbpZzYZCT_юЕНОj8ELUDkv0S6SiQaNBypTPGKY.

⁴⁰ "Уставен ќе ги поништи парите за СЈО и за факултетите на МПЦ и ИВЗ?", <https://www.vecer.press/уставен-ке-ги-поништи-парите-за-сјо-и-за/>.

⁴¹ „Уставен суд: Нема иницијатива за финансирање на факултетите на МПЦ и ИВЗ“, <https://www.vecer.press/уставен-суд-нема-иницијатива-за-фина/>.

teaspoon. The accusations targeted both the Church and the state, citing the Law on the Legal Status of the Church, Religious Community and Religious Group, which states that "religious belief does not relieve the citizen of obligations as a citizen according to the Constitution, laws and other regulations, unless otherwise provided by law or other regulations" (Art. 4, p. 2) and that "the law may restrict the freedom of expression of religion or persuasion if it is necessary in the interest of public safety, order, health, morality or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others" (Art. 8).⁴²

Several members of the government expressed their opinion, as well as Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski, who called for the citizens to stay at home for the religious holidays, stressing that the government could not close the temples of religious communities in the country, but that they must follow the measures for keeping social distance.⁴³ The director of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups, Darijan Sotirovski, also stated that "worship is not forbidden and should never be stopped ... measures are not a repression of faith, but a preventive system for believers and clergy."⁴⁴ State President Stevo Pendarovski also

⁴² Certain persons called on "any priest who performs a rite during curfew, who gives communion with a spoon and allows kissing of icons, should be prosecuted under Article 205 of the Criminal Code and sentenced sentence of 10 years in prison" (Mirjana Najcevska), or that it is a matter of "unprecedented primitivism" and "if the Government does not adopt a Decree restricting the freedom of expression of religion in the interest of health, citing the Constitution of RSM, Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 8 of the Law on the Legal Status of the Church, Religious Community and Religious Group ... will bear direct responsibility for the dissemination of Covid 19" (Uranija Pirovska, Executive Director of the Helsinki human rights committee).

<https://www.libertas.mk/zhestoki-reakczii-na-socizijalnite-mrezhi-na-najavite-na-sveshteniczite-za-sobirite-vo-czrkvi-i-prichestuvaneto-so-edna-lazhicza-i-pokraj-rizikot-za-koronavirus/>.

⁴³ "We should respect the measure of no groupings and to stay at a social distance for the Easter holidays. Now is the time when we should all celebrate the Easter holidays at home with our families. We have no decision to close religious buildings, nor to not practice the faith because it cannot be made, because it is a right that is inviolable. But, you know, we have decisions and views of both the MOC and the IRC, regarding the respect of the measures of the Government for maintaining social distance. I urge you to stay home for the Easter holidays. Thus, we will do our best to prevent the virus," <https://360stepeni.mk/spasovski-ne-mozheme-da-gi-zatvorime-tsrvkite-no-za-veligden-mora-da-ostaneme-doma/>.

⁴⁴ "Liturgies are not forbidden and should never be stopped. They are the pillar of the living Church and faith. The measures are not repression of faith and dogmas, but a preventive system intended for believers and clergy. The measures prohibit gatherings in order to prevent the possibility of a mass of people already infected transmitting the infection in one of the possible ways to others present. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew rightly pointed out that in this crisis it is not the faith that is in danger, but the believers. Therefore, the clergy, imams, and others should continue to offer services, and the believers, respecting obedience, it is best to pray from their homes. The new generation of technologies enables the transfer of all worship services in the homes, it is certainly not a suitable substitute for personal participation in the liturgy service, but it is still a good opportunity. Other religious rites, needs and rituals should be regulated and communicated by the religious communities to the believers, of course, paying attention to the measures and annulling any possibility of a contagion being transmitted in a crowd by a person who is a carrier, and we may not know it." Interview with Darijan Sotirovski, "Social distancing must not be interpreted as distancing from God," http://www.kovz.gov.mk/ns-newsarticle-intervju-socizjalnoto-distancirane-ne-smee-da-se-tolkuva-kako-distancirane-od-bog.nsp_x

reiterated that religious communities urge believers to adhere to government measures and that on these major holidays they will have to spend time at home and respect the recommendation not to have more than five people in one space, emphasizing that "in our country no one must be either privileged or discriminated against on the basis of religion" and that "no believer could have more rights than non-believers."⁴⁵

However, the whole debate took place despite the awareness that the faithful would not be able to access the churches during the holiday services (except the clergy who had received official permits). Namely, already for ten days a regular police hour was introduced, which was starting in the evening or in the afternoon, and already the previous weekend (for the Catholic Easter and the Orthodox holiday of Palm Sunday), the police hour lasted from Friday night to Monday morning. In this way, the basis for the Government's decision, which it approved at its 40th session on April 14, 2020, was prepared, when it reviewed and adopted the proposal to extend the ban and the special regime of movement on the territory of the country during the upcoming Christian holiday of Easter. The ban on movement started on April 17, 2020 (Friday) from 16:00 and lasted until April 21, 2020 (Tuesday) until 05:00. Under the ban and a special movement regime, "the government has instructed the interior ministry to intensify controls over churches during the upcoming holiday."⁴⁶ On April 23, 2020, when asked by reporters, the health minister Venko Filipce stated that there is no information which he has of a sick priest from the MOC or the IRC.⁴⁷

Regarding the celebrations, the accusations about the manner of the Easter celebration in the Bigorski monastery caused new waves, and one of the strongest criticisms was directed at the party Alliance for Albanians,⁴⁸ which demanded criminal responsibility for that. Namely, the

⁴⁵ "In order not to turn out that I criticize the policy of the leaders of the largest religious communities in our country, we should also say that the leaders of the MOC and the IRC so far in all their public announcements and in all appearances support the measures of the Government and appeal to the believers to spend the holiest holidays at home or by respecting the recommendation that there be no more than five people in one space. There is a time when the pandemic will end and we will return to practicing the religion as each of the religions requires," Pendarovski said. The President said that the regulations apply to everyone, regardless of which religion they belong to ... For members of any religion, the rules, regulations, decrees of the Government apply to them, apply to me, apply to anyone in this state and must be observed without reservation. "It cannot be seen through the fingers of one category of people, and it does not apply to another," Pendarovski said. <https://makfax.com.mk/makedonija/пендаровски-кога-папата-и-саудиска-ар/>.

⁴⁶ <https://vlada.mk/node/21025>.

⁴⁷ <https://makpress.mk/Home/PostDetails?PostId=343153>.

⁴⁸ "This case is a scandal, a violation of all measures, starting with the prevention of movement during the Easter holidays and at the same time disrupting the public health of citizens. Orthodox believers, in addition to not respecting the curfew, did not respect the recommended social distance and did not wear masks and bracelets, so in this case they could be a source of mass infection for the spread of Covid-19," reacted the Alliance for Albanians, demanding that measures be taken against the organizers and participants. The Alliance for Albanians accused the violations of the

festive service in the Bigorski Monastery was broadcast on Kanal5 TV, and was watched by over 250,000 people only through the live broadcast on YouTube and Facebook. But the recordings also showed a large number of people present in the monastery, which was the reason to criticize the lack to respect for the curfew as well as the social distance. The Bigorski Monastery, on the other hand, reacted, claiming that they did not violate the measures, i.e. that they did not accept believers, but that the monks, nuns and volunteer believers, protégés (drugs addicted in process of healing who are residents in the monastery), are all residents in the four monasteries (Bigorski, Rajčica, Prečista, Knezino) and members of the monastic community.⁴⁹

III. REFLECTIONS ON PUBLIC OPINION – THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF A TWITTER CONVERSATION

Health epidemics typically generate burst of attention on social media, and their impact on public opinion is as important as the impact of conventional media.⁵⁰ The period of the appearance of COVID 19 coincided with the Easter fast, which caused various reactions among Macedonian citizens. Later, some controversial statements by the leader of the Islamic Religious Community had an impact on public dialogue. Surveys are the traditional method to understand and measure public attitudes and behavioral responses. Several studies have used telephone, internet, and in-person surveys to elicit such information during previous pandemics. Whereby, Chew and Eysenbach⁵¹ point out that rapid-turnaround surveys best capture changes in attitudes and behavior influenced by specific events and produce the most relevant information for agency intervention. On the other hand, it takes time to gather resources, finances, and appropriate research tools to conduct such surveys.

H1N1 was the first global pandemic that occurred in the age of Web 2.0, so the effort of Chew and Eysenbach⁵² in their study was to illustrate the potential role of social media in public health emergencies. This study was based on manual classifications and preliminary automated

measures and demanded legal responsibility, <https://360stepeni.mk/bigorski-na-bogoslužbata-beshe-samo-monashkata-zaednitsa-ne-gi-prekrshivme-preporakite/>.

⁴⁹ <https://bigorski.org.mk/vesti/mediumi/bigorski-manastir-ili-mnogu-povekje-od-toa/>.

⁵⁰ “Twitter may represent a powerful public health tool for world leaders to rapidly and directly communicate information on COVID-19 to citizens, in addition to more conventional media such as television, radio, and newspapers.” (Rufai, S.R. & Bunce, C. ‘World leaders’ usage of Twitter in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: a content analysis,’ *Journal of Public Health*, April 2020, vol. 42, iss.3).

⁵¹ C. Chew & G Eysenbach. “Pandemics in the Age of Twitter: Content Analysis of Tweets during the 2009 H1N1 Outbreak,” *Plos ONE*, vol. 5, no. 11, 2010.

⁵² *Ibid.*

analyses of H1N1 pandemic-related tweets on Twitter. Later, other authors also used Twitter-based research, and in particular for public health issues related to health epidemics, as well as in many studies of disease-related trends and behaviors.

III.1 Ethical Considerations

A traditional conception of seeking informed consent is a challenge for social media-based research. The research of social media platforms potentially allows access to material relating to a large mass of people, whereby not all participants may be easily recognized as individuals. When a user is creating an account on Twitter, he/she agrees to the terms and conditions of www.twitter.com, allowing their profile demographics and tweets to be freely available within the public domain unless restricted by the user. Twitter's Terms of Service and Privacy Policy are documents that govern how users may access and use the Twitter platform.⁵³ By agreeing to Twitter's terms and service agreement, users consent for their information to be collected and used by third parties.⁵⁴ According to previous researchers the role of research is not precluded under these terms. Many researchers argue this validates access to freely use these data, noting that such material exists in the public domain, and the prominent biographical details are excluded. But, in addition Twitter's terms of service for third-party developers requires that: "If Twitter Content is deleted, gains protected status, or is otherwise suspended, withheld, modified, or removed from the Twitter Applications (including removal of location information), you will make all reasonable efforts to delete or modify such Twitter Content (as applicable) as soon as possible."⁵⁵ In order to reduce potential risk, the methods of this study were developed in accordance with "Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0" published by the Association of Internet Researchers,⁵⁶ whereby all user demographics and metadata were excluded, to ensure anonymity and privacy of each participant. It is important to note that this Ethical Guide raises the question of whether following of website's terms and conditions is a legal requirement for academic researchers whose work impacts the knowledge level of society at large.

⁵³ W. Ahmed, P.A. Bath & G. Demartini. "Using Twitter as a Data Source: An Overview of Ethical, Legal, and Methodological Challenges" in K. Woodfield (ed.) *The Ethics of Online Research (Advances in Research Ethics and Integrity*, Vol. 2, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017.

⁵⁴ 'Twitter terms of service' [website], <<https://twitter.com/en/tos>>, accessed 17.06.2020.

⁵⁵ 'Twitter + Developers' [website], <<https://developer.twitter.com/en/developer-terms/policy>>, accessed 23.06.2020.

⁵⁶ Franzke, *et al.*, "Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0," <<https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>>, accessed 02.06.2020.

III.2 Methodology

This is a qualitative study with thematic analysis of individual tweets between February 26, 2020 and May 31, 2020. The selection for the initial date in this analysis stems from the first confirmed case of COVID-19 infection in Macedonia. According to Braun and Clarke,⁵⁷ thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data ... it also often goes further than organizing and describing the data set in (rich) details and it interprets various aspects of the research topic.”⁵⁸ They also note that “Thematic analysis involves a number of choices which are often not made explicit, but which need explicitly to be considered and discussed. In practice, these questions should be considered before analysis (of the data begins....” For the purpose of this study, we would refer to the clarification from Braun and Clark that” a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the dataset.” In addition, themes can be identified in one of two primary ways in thematic analysis: in an inductive or „bottom up“ way (Thomas, 2003), or in a theoretical or deductive or „top down“ way (Boyatzis, 1998). An inductive approach refers to approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher. This, according to Thomas,⁵⁹ is consistent with Strauss and Corbin’s description: “The researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data.”⁶⁰ While, the deductive refers to data analyses that set out to test whether data are consistent with prior assumptions, theories, or hypotheses identified or constructed by an investigator.⁶¹

For the purpose of this study, only Macedonian language tweets were collected. In doing so, the advanced Twitter search function was used to filter (a set of predefined search terms) all tweets that contained the words “МППЦ”, “ИВЗ”, “Корона/Ковид 19”, “Велигден” and “Рамазан Bajрам.” This study was solely focused on the message content of the tweet.

⁵⁷ V. Braun & V. Clarke. “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, iss. 2, 2006.

⁵⁸ R. E. Boyatzis. “Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code Development,” (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998) cited in: Braun & Clarke, *loc. cit.*

⁵⁹ D. Thomas. “A General Inductive Approach for Qualitative Data Analysis,” *American Journal of Evaluation*, vol.27, no.2, June 2006 cited in: Braun & Clarke, *loc.cit.*

⁶⁰ A. Strauss & J. Corbin. “Basics of qualitative research,” 2nd ed, (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1998).

⁶¹ Thomas, *loc. cit.*

III.3 Data Analysis

Identified tweets were copied as text and imported into an Excel spreadsheet. A total of 427 tweets were extracted as a final sample size for this study, whereby each tweet was independently analyzed. All attached images were reviewed, and a brief description was formulated. No further Twitter user demographics, links, or metadata were transferred to the Excel spreadsheet. Further, it should be noted that in this study a 'retweet'⁶² was treated separately. Multiple entries by the same user that contained the listed words were aggregated to form one entry.

Using a sample of the extracted tweets, keywords facilitated the identification of the basic themes. Various questions arose during this process (e.g. what are the main keywords in particular tweet? How was the tweet transmitted?), but this helped to classify a particular tweet in the most appropriate category. It is important to note that for this study a tweet was only grouped into one category. The next step was dedicated to the grouping of the categories into themes. An inductive approach was applied in data analysis, as the categories and themes were derived from the tweets. From the thematic analysis of the data, the following themes have been defined: The impact of the believers' presence in the places of worship on the spread of the virus; Provision of funds from the Government for Macedonian Orthodox Church and Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia; Believers' communion from shared spoons for Orthodox Easter; Opening of mosques for *Ramadan Bajram*; Government tolerance towards religious communities; Comparison of the restrictive measures for Orthodox Easter and *Ramadan Bajram*.

In the analysis of the underlying themes that emerged from the sample of tweets, this study aims at contextual consideration and understanding of these themes.⁶³ And while the topics are presented as discreet, there is an overlap between them.

The impact of the believers' presence in the places of worship on the spread of the virus

Tweets within this topic are present throughout the analyzed period, unlike other topics where tweets are concentrated around a significantly narrower time frame. In addition, with the appearance of the first cases of infection with COVID-19, the number of tweets is small, and users

⁶² A reposted or forwarded message on Twitter, *LexicoDictionary* [website], <<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/retweet>>, accessed 21.06.2020.

⁶³ A. Bryman. *Social Research Methods*, 4th edn, (Oxford University Press, 2012).

expressed concern about the danger of increased spread of the virus by the presence of Orthodox believers and Muslims in churches or mosques. During April and May, especially before Easter and *Ramadan Bajram*, the number of tweets increases significantly, whereby the communication between users is in conspicuous critical tone towards the decisions of religious communities, as well as condemnation of those individuals who would participate in religious rites. Also, by criticizing the decisions of the religious communities, there is criticism to the Government for the "soft" and unjustifiably tolerant attitude towards the religious communities. The tweets categorized in this topic largely overlap with the tweets from the other topics, and their further analysis would inevitably incorporate content from the other topics whose analysis will follow.

Provision of funds from the Government for Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) and Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia (IRC)

The exchange of tweets from which this topic arose, is a reflection of certain previous events. On April 6, 2020, the head of the Islamic Religious Community, in a television interview for a local television station, appeals to the Government to provide them with financial assistance otherwise it will lift the ban on rallies.⁶⁴ Only two days later, the Government adopted a decision by which the Orthodox Faculty of Theology "St. Clement of Ohrid" and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences are awarded 120,000 euros for realization of study programs. The very next day, the *Reis'* statement was broadcast by several media outlets and became 'viral'⁶⁵ in public. After this, the exchange of tweets in the next few days was incomparably more intense than in the previous period. Most of the tweets were critical of both religious communities, as well as the government. In addition, many users question the moment of passing this decision by the government and threats from the *Reis*, while the tweets of other users emphasize the secular character of the state, citing examples from other countries. Certain users defend this decision, posting links to the page of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia where an explanation is given that such a decision does not represent direct funding of the MOC and the IRC. The period during which the bulk of communication takes place within this topic (09/04/2020 - 13/04/2020), has been just before Orthodox Easter, so that communication between users form the next topic.

⁶⁴ 'Корона приоритети: Владата им даде 120.000 евра на факултетите на ИВЗ и МПЦ,' *Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia*, 10.04.2020, <https://irl.mk/korona-prioriteti-vladata-im-dade-120-000-ev/>. Accessed 27. 06. 2020.

⁶⁵ "quickly and widely spread or popularized especially by means of social media," *Dictionary by Merriam Webster*[website], <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/viral>. Accessed 12. 07. 2020.

Believers' communion from shared spoons for Orthodox Easter

In the period before the start of Easter holidays, the dynamics of the exchange of tweets has increased, but in addition to the expected content related to church gatherings, a significantly larger number of tweets refer to the traditional way of communing the believers with the same teaspoon. This ratio of the content of the tweets is a reflection of the previously introduced restrictive measures that already restricted the believers' access to the churches (for the Catholic Easter, that is the weekend before the Orthodox Easter, a curfew was introduced from Friday night to Monday morning). Also, on April 14, 2020, the Government adopted a decision to ban movement on the territory of the country during the Easter holidays in the period from 16.00 on April 17, 2020 (Friday) to 05.00 on April 21, 2020 (Tuesday).

The content of the tweets within this topic shows a condemning tone and concern about the possible consequences for the increased spread of the corona virus due to traditional way of communing with the same teaspoon. In addition, most of the tweets are critical of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the clergy, as well as the believers who would receive communion. In some of the tweets, a remark is made to the Government due to its indulgence towards the Church, whereby some users propose the abolition of the health protection of those citizens who would take communion, as well as the imposition of monetary sanctions on them. Characteristic of the content of the tweets on this topic are the comparisons with the way of communion of the believers in the Catholic churches.

There is a noticeable change in the content of the significantly smaller number of tweets on this topic, which follow in late April and during May. In addition, most of them point to the declining dynamics of the number of infected with COVID-19 in the period after the Easter holidays, alluding to the tweets in which traditional way of communing is criticized and condemned.

Opening of mosques for Ramadan Bajram

The tweets from which this topic arose are a reflection of the decision of the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia (IRC) from May 7, 2020, on the opening of mosques from May 12, 2020. This decision coincides with the procession in Struga with the relics and the icon of the Holy Great Martyr George, which took place on the same day. In addition, on the procession,

despite the notification from the St. George the Victorious Monastery in Rajchitsa,⁶⁶ as the organizer of this ceremony that this year's procession will be performed without the presence of believers, on the very day several hundred residents of Struga participated in this religious gathering. Also, many of the participants in the procession did not wear face masks, nor did they maintain a distance of two meters. Photos of this event were published on several portals, including Twitter users, whereas some of the media stated that the decision to open the mosques was a reflection of the procession in Struga, which was denied by representatives of IRC.⁶⁷ The sharing of the decision of the Islamic religious community by certain Twitter users was accompanied by criticism of the IRC and the *Reis*, but in many of the tweets the criticism is also directed at the Macedonian Orthodox Church. In addition, some of the users blame the MOC for organizing the procession in Struga, while some rebound to the topics around the Easter holidays. The dynamics of the exchange of tweets increases after the announcement of the IRC from May 18, 2020, that it informed the Government and the Commission for Infectious Diseases that it would not respect a possible curfew during the prayer for *Fitr Bajram*.⁶⁸ In addition to criticism and condemnation of this decision, some of the tweets referred to comparisons with *Ramadan Bajram* practices in other countries, such as Kosovo, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, where mosques remain closed. Another characteristic of the tweets on this topic compared to the previous one is that they almost lack criticism and condemnation of the believers of the Islamic religion who would attend prayers in the mosques. Again, in the content of some of the tweets, there is criticism of the Government, bringing this in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections, which were postponed due to the pandemic.

Comparison of the restrictive measures for Orthodox Easter and Ramadan Bajram

The exchange of tweets from the previous topic also imposes a conversation in which the restrictive measures during the Orthodox Easter and *Ramadan Bajram* are compared. In addition, the content of the tweets compares the situation with the number of patients before and after the

⁶⁶‘Струшката литија ќе се одржи на 7 мај само со црковни лица без присуство на верници поради Ковид 19,’ *Media Information Agency*, 04.05.2020, <https://mia.mk/strushkata-liti-a-e-se-odrzi-na-7-ma-samo-so-crkovni-lica-bez-prisustvo-na-vernici-poradi-kovid-19/>. Accessed 02.07.2020.

⁶⁷‘ИВЗ донесе одлука за отворање на џамиите на 12 мај’, *Nova Makedonija*, 08.05.2020, <<https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/kovid-19/vo-zemjava-19/ивз-донесе-одлука-за-отворање-на-џамии/>>, accessed 02.07.2020.

⁶⁸ *Eid al-Fitr* (Arabic: “Festival of Breaking Fast”) marks the end of *Ramadan*, the Muslim holy month of fasting, *Encyclopedia Britannica*[website], <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eid-al-Fitr>>. Accessed 05.07.2020.

Easter holidays, expressing concern about the danger of increasing the number of infected with COVID-19 after the opening of mosques and the celebration of *Ramadan Bajram*. Following the decision of the Government to ban movement on the territory of North Macedonia during the extended weekend on the occasion of the holiday *Ramadan Bajram* in the period from 11.00 on May 24, 2020 (Sunday) to 05.00 on May 26, 2020 (Tuesday), the succeeding tweets highlight a four-day ban on movement during Easter, when Orthodox believers were barred from attending religious services, in contrast to Islamic believers who are allowed to go to a mosque during *Ramadan Bajram*. In addition, alongside in some of the tweets, photos were posted from the services for Easter and the gatherings for *Ramadan Bajram*, as well as from the group *iftars*.⁶⁹ Some of the tweets criticize the users who denounced religious services for Easter, while they did not take a stand on this decision of the IRC. In the following days, especially after the statement of the Minister of Health that most of the new cases of COVID-19 are from family gatherings,⁷⁰ the criticism of users was directed at the irresponsible behavior of citizens who participated in group/family *iftars*, while in certain tweets users criticize members of both religions for failing to comply with the measures, referring again to communion during the Easter holidays.

Government permissiveness towards religious communities

The decisions of the Government listed in the previous topics, as well as its position on religious freedoms had a reflection on the views of users. Although some of the previous topics have identified tweets criticizing the government's decisions, this topic contains tweets criticizing the government's overall attitude towards religious communities regarding restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Tweets with such content were registered in early April, which was initially prompted by the Government's decision to allocate funds to the Orthodox Theological Faculty and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, after which they are present in communication between users until the end of the analyzed period. At the same time, in most of the tweets, it is noticed that the Government gives a certain "privileged status" to the religious communities compared to the other inhabitants of North Macedonia. Also, some of the tweets

⁶⁹ The evening meal eaten by Muslims after the sun has gone down during Ramadan, *Cambridge Dictionary*[website], <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/iftar>>, accessed 10.07.2020.

⁷⁰ "The Government's decision to ban movement during Ramadan Bajram is not malicious." *Fighting Fake News Narratives (F2N2)*, 23.05.2020. <<https://f2n2.mk/vladinata-odluka-za-zabrana-za-dvizhenje-za-vreme-na-ramazan-bajram-ne-e-maliciozna/>>. Accessed 10.07.2020.

emphasize the secular character of the state, and it is often concluded that this tolerant attitude of the Government is motivated by the expected support of religious communities for the upcoming parliamentary elections.⁷¹ This position is increasingly represented in the tweets after the announcement of the head of the IRC on his “Facebook” profile,⁷² which follows the proposal of the Commission for Infectious Diseases to ban movement in the country in the upcoming extended weekend for *Ramadan Bajram*. In some of the tweets, a comparison is made between the religious communities and the companies, whereby suggestions are made for the application of the punitive measures that apply to the companies for non-compliance with the coronavirus protection measures.

III.4 Limitations

In addition to the advantages (fast exchange of notifications, most recent updates about an event) that social media provides in the analysis of public attitudes, they also impose certain restrictions. The precise identity of participants in this study cannot be verified. Hence, the largest limitation in this respect is the lack of a well-defined population study. Although, our database allows us to link a user with any given tweet, determination of the demographics of users is contrary to the obligations to preserve the anonymity of the participants. Additionally, in this study only Macedonian language tweets were analyzed, given that the majority of members of the Islamic religion in the Republic of North Macedonia speak Albanian, which limits the generalization of the findings.

The restriction that imposes the need for Internet access to participate in the conversation indicates that it is not entirely representative for all the population. Also, in this study only posts on Twitter were analyzed, thereby, our findings may not be generalized to other social media platforms. Furthermore, the findings described in this study are limited only to those that have access to and use Twitter. So, caution is advised before assuming generalization of the results, as Twitter population is not representative of the general population.

⁷¹ The parliamentary elections in North Macedonia were scheduled for 12 April 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic they were postponed and held on 15 July 2020.

⁷² “If a curfew is imposed for the whole weekend, then you, as the competent authorities, will lose the trust of all believers of the Islamic religion. Given that our country is facing parliamentary elections, we as a religious institution exist to serve the faithful and will not carry the burden of canceling the Eid al-Fitr prayers in the mosques. We guarantee you that during the prayer, we will follow all the recommendations that are implemented, as well as when performing the daily prayers for which we have not received any remarks from you so far.” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 21.05.2020, <<https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/30625375.html>>. Accessed 19.07.2020.

IV. CONCLUSION

The positive remark regarding the position and activities of the larger religious communities in conditions of crisis caused by COVID-19 is that they mainly adhere to the state decisions for dealing with the crisis, which used to change on a daily basis, depending on the development of the situation. If we look at it from the point of view of state organization in order to prevent mass gatherings (public and private), especially considering that the crisis occurred in time just before or for the great Christian and Islamic holidays, the creation of the whole atmosphere goes in favor, enabling the implementation of restrictive measures. An additional joint statement of all religious communities may have been missing, as it usually happens in this kind of cases. But based on the review, as well as the extremely unpredictable situation of the spread of the infection, when each of the religious communities continually supplemented and upgraded their views, not to mention the request for physical (which intensified the social) distancing, remains only a common position of the religious communities expressed during the meeting with the Prime Minister at the beginning of the crisis.

Health epidemics typically generate bursts of attention on social media. Given that the crisis occurred before and during the major Easter and then Ramadan holidays, the religious element was heavily exploited in the media and the public, with also pronounced manifestations with elements of anti-religious intolerance by non-religious circles. The emergence of unverified information or tendentious interpretations of statements and events was also not lacking on social media-supported media. The usual defensive attitude of the religious communities from such provocations was noticeable, when they reacted with a short statement, or there was no reaction at all. In any case, the reactions and denials of the religious organizations, as well as the corrected information, were not provided with sufficient visibility.

All this impacted the views of the public, which was reflected in the conversation within the Twitter platform. Despite the still relatively small number of users (compared to other countries or Facebook users), the Twitter platform is nevertheless a dynamic generator of public opinion in Macedonia, which is transmitted by a number of media. The attitudes of the users, which were reflected in the analysis of the separate topics, were emphasized critically towards the religious communities, as well as towards the believers. Such criticism stems from concerns about the danger of an increased spread of the Covid-19 virus, with some users even going so far as to propose special penalties for those who would attend religious rites (although those rites were not

banned by government decisions and were implemented in accordance with the recommendations). At the same time, criticism was levelled at the Government for its 'soft' and tolerant attitude towards religious communities, pointing to the connection of this attitude with the expected support for the parliamentary elections, while constantly emphasizing the secular character of the state. During the analysis of the conversation with Twitter, the impact of the media announcements on the dynamics of the exchange of tweets was once again confirmed, which was significantly intensified after each media post on the mentioned topics.

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