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The different approaches of Christian confessions to COVID-19

in Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

This report examines the differing approaches to COVID-19 by the largest Christian churches in Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine. It does so by assessing their relationships to, and communication with, state authorities and religious adherents. The first wave of COVID-19 in 2020 coincided with Easter, the most significant and sacred period in Christian churches' calendar. COVID-19 consequently tested the churches' ability to adapt quickly to challenging situations.

The Armenian Apostolic Church took a responsible attitude and complied with government-imposed COVID-19 related countermeasures, despite an uneasy relationship with Armenia's current government. The Belarusian authorities' politics of denial and their reluctance to adopt adequate countermeasures left local churches to decide on approaches on their own. Eventually, the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus took a more proactive and coherent approach than the Orthodox Church to fighting the pandemic.

In Ukraine, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church both sided with the state authorities and conveyed anti-coronavirus policies to the general public. However, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate was poorly committed to this mission.

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INTRODUCTION

As for any social institution with traditions of mass gatherings, COVID-19 brought great challenges to religious communities all over the world, including the Christian confessions in post-Soviet countries. The churches had to rethink the priorities in their activities, the role of the public worship for the communal life, and re-evaluate relations with the authorities and limitations on freedom of religion or belief.

Scientists consider some Greek Orthodox Church rituals particularly dangerous from an epidemiological point of view. For instance, Communion involves dipping a spoon into the chalice of bread and wine and putting it into the mouth of the first person in line. The priest then repeats the same procedure, using the same spoon, through the entire congregation. The continuation of such rituals in some parishes amid the epidemic turned them into “superspreader events” for COVID-19, as this report shows.

Given that the church has always been one of the most trusted social institutions in Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine, the key to success in combatting COVID-19 was fruitful cooperation between the state

authorities and religious institutions. This report examines this parameter in each of the three mentioned post-Soviet countries.

The section on Armenia focuses on the response of the Armenian Apostolic Church since this is the dominant religious institution; 94 percent of the country’s population identifies with this church. The report also reviews the Armenian Apostolic Church’s relationship with the public authorities and discusses the church’s highly politicised nature.

The next section studies the attitudes of the Belarusian Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Around 80 and 12 percent of Belarusians adhere to these churches respectively. The report analyses differences in their rhetoric and communication with their faithful and state authorities on COVID-19 issues.

The section on Ukraine reviews the COVID-19 policies of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Again, the report discusses their relationship with public authorities in the country.

I. Armenia: COVID countermeasures promoted despite a troubled relationship with public authorities

1

Bitter relationship

Over 90 percent of the Armenian population identifies as Armenian Apostolic, the national church known for its uneasy relationship with the current state authorities. The largest minority group is the Yezidis.

For a long time now, government policy has not recognised a threat to the Yezidis' unique cultural identity. Moreover, the Yezidis are not used to discussing public policy as a group. Their spiritual leaders are either neutral towards state policies or supportive of them. As regards smaller Christian and other religious groups, they also generally adhere to state policies unless, as with Jehovah's Witnesses or other

smaller stigmatised groups, such policies are at odds with their teachings. Military conscription is one such policy that has proven incompatible with many religious group teachings.

Relations between the incumbent government of Armenia, led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and the Armenian Apostolic Church have been troubled because of events going back more than a decade. In 2008, after a fraudulent presidential election on 19 February, mass protests resembling Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003 and Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004 began in Armenia. The outgoing president, Robert Kocharyan,

ordered the use force and dispersed the protesters so as to make sure his successor Serzh Sargsyan would be able to take office.

As a result of clashes on 1 March 2008, ten people were killed and numerous others were imprisoned. At that time Garegin II – the Supreme Patriarch-Catholicos of All Armenians – supported the incumbent authorities, in his usual manner, and blamed the opposition for the bloodshed. Pashinyan – then an opposition activist – publicly called him “the Supreme Gangster of all Armenians”, most notably in an [article](#) published on 9 April 2008, the day of Serzh Sargsyan’s inauguration.

Later on, while the general rhetoric became calmer, the Haykakan Zhamanak daily edited by Pashinyan, as well as other media critical of the regime, criticised the Catholicos and other members of the church’s establishment for their extravagant lifestyles, ownership of untaxed businesses (usually by proxies), and politicised pro-government stance. The church authorities were also criticised on account of an informal concordat, which started during the Kocharyan presidency. It was never codified since that would be an open breach of the constitution. It was particularly true in respect of the secondary school curriculum which included a subject euphemistically called History of the Armenian Apostolic Church, but was, as a matter of fact, used for religious indoctrination. Moreover, the concordat made worship as a de facto requirement for conscripts

serving in the army and gave several other preferences to the church.

After the Velvet Revolution of 2018 and Pashinyan’s rise to power, relations between his government and the church remained strained. A vicious [propaganda campaign](#) began against Pashinyan’s cabinet by a network that included a number of media outlets, blogs and supporters of ex-presidents Kocharyan (who since July 2018 has been under criminal investigation in relation to the 1 March 2008 events) and Sargsyan, and their proxies. The government was portrayed as an enemy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, along with other accusations such as “betraying national values”, supporting LGBT rights (which presumably contradict church teaching), and being members of a malign “Soros network”.

One of the fake stories circulated by [Sputnik Armenia](#) in July 2018 alleged that that some activists, supported by the government and backed by the Ministry of Justice, would attempt to force the Catholicos to resign as he refused to sign an edict supportive of LGBT rights. Minister of Health Arsen Torosyan was also [specifically targeted](#) by that propaganda campaign as some of his policies threatened the shadow economic interests of Serzh Sargsyan’s in-laws. Torosyan – an open atheist, an unusual case among Armenian politicians, most of whom at least pay lip-service to religious rites and attend church services – was [presented](#) as a sworn enemy of the church and its followers.

The church itself got involved in some political disputes as well, particularly as its interests in the sphere of education were involved. In a [case](#) that drew wide public attention in January 2019, Minister of Education Arayik Harutyunyan was targeted because, during a working visit to a public school, he demanded an explanation about a priest's activities in the school and mentioned the need to adhere to the constitution. In the autumn of 2019, several priests and bishops, together with radical opposition groups, instigated protests against a [planned education reform](#) which would merge the teaching of the History of the Armenian Apostolic Church with the general history course. According to the priests, the reform would cause detriment to children's national identity, and the possibility of voluntary Sunday schools for children (upon parents' choice) would not be enough to compensate.

One view is that national identity is strengthened by the specificity of the

Armenian Apostolic Church; it is autonomous of the Catholic or Orthodox churches. According to the traditionalist point of view, the concept of national identity should be inseparable from the church's teaching, and the latter, despite the secularist principles embedded in the constitution, should amount to a part of state ideology.

In this fundamentalist worldview, discrimination against other religious groups, including Catholic and Evangelical Armenians, is justified since they are not the "true Armenians". At the same time, the principle of a neutral, non-denominational state, and attempts to remove the possibility of evangelising through state institutions and ending privileges for the church are considered discrimination against the church's followers. Such policies are openly opposed by some representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church's establishment.

2

The church's attitude to pandemic-related policies

Despite the troubled relations between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the government, the church's reaction to governmental policies and guidelines regarding the COVID-19 pandemic was reserved and less politicised than in many other spheres. Soon after confirming the first case on 29 February 2020, the church discussed the need to suspend religious ceremonies.

On 13 March 2020, a congregation of bishops presided over by the Supreme Patriarch-Catholicos of All Armenians, Garegin II, called upon priests and their congregations to abide by regulations issued by the authorities. They also encouraged church members to use preventive measures, particularly during Sunday masses which are usually attended by large numbers

of worshippers in the period preceding the Easter. The press secretary of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Vahram Melikyan, [stated](#) that the church would close exhibitions and suspend its education and certain other activities.

A [state of emergency](#) was declared on 16 March 2020, when the number of registered active COVID-19 cases reached 45. The state of emergency introduced a ban on gatherings of over 20 people, including religious ceremonies. The Armenian Apostolic Church did not openly criticise that decision. Some priests violated the regulations, but that resulted from the general lack of discipline and control. This lack of discipline and control also failed to stop some family gatherings, large wedding and birthday parties at restaurants, and other mostly non-religious events.

3

Pandemic-related policies aside, the church remains politicised

In the meantime, the church establishment remained politicised and demonstrated its habitual political preferences on various occasions. Two days after Easter, on 14 April 2020, in his [public statement](#) the Catholicos advocated for ex-president Kocharyan's release from pre-trial detention, stating that such a humanitarian action would be appropriate during the pandemic. It should be added here that previously, since his enthronement in 1999,

Later on, from late April 2020, as economic restrictions were gradually relaxed, the church did not object to continued restrictions on public gatherings for anything but small groups. Objections were mainly voiced by opposition political groups, mostly linked to representatives of the former regime, who claimed that the ban on street rallies and demonstrations was the decisive factor preventing them from toppling the government. Even so, they did not claim that pandemic-related policies were against the church.

Pandemic-related propaganda efforts were mostly focused on either [repeating](#) the allegations found in Russian propaganda, particularly about the novel coronavirus being artificially produced in the U.S., or [panic-mongering](#) about imminent hunger, mass revolt, and purported dangers of future vaccination programmes.

the Catholicos had not shown similar care towards other prisoners.

Samvel Mayrapetyan, another defendant in the 1 March 2008 case, was released from pre-trial detention. In January 2019 he was allowed to go abroad for medical treatment upon personal guarantees [provided](#) by the press secretary of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Vahram Melikyan, and has not returned to Armenia since.

After the devastating defeat of the Armenian side in the recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh (27 September – 9 November 2020), the radical nationalist opposition, centred around Kocharyan and Sargsyan, has been blaming Pashinyan for alleged treason and demanding that the ruling My Step coalition transfer the premier's post to their preferred candidate. The coalition is, despite a number of defections, currently just short of a two-thirds majority.

In December 2020, the [Catholicos Garegin II](#) and several bishops, as well as the [heads](#) of some dioceses of the Armenian church abroad, also demanded Pashinyan's resignation, thereby openly getting involved in political processes. Despite Pashinyan's miscalculations and shortcomings, including the inept and unsuccessful negotiations before the war, the religious establishment's attitude looks more like revenge based on an old, well-nurtured resentment.

II.

Belarus:

The different approaches of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches

1

Orthodox Church: No clear guidelines and inconsistent communication

Belarus's authorities infamously denied the threat of COVID-19. They captured attention for their deeply flawed communication, widespread censorship, and extreme manipulations of COVID-19 statistics.¹ In contrast to many countries, the Belarusian authorities did not introduce explicit restrictions on religious events. Visiting a monastery in the village of Liady on the day of the Orthodox Easter, 19 April 2020, the country's ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka [stated](#), "I must tell you I do not welcome those who closed the path to church for people.

I do not welcome this policy <...> As soon as this psychosis – [it's] not even an illness - came into sight, everyone rushed not to the church, but away from it. It's not on." A number of religious organisations and their leaders heartily supported state policy, preferring their usual Easter celebrations over public health concerns.

The COVID-19 related communication of the Belarusian ecclesiastic authorities has been inconsistent. On 10 April 2020, the Holy Synod of the Belarusian Orthodox Church

¹ The state policies in Belarus are examined in EAST Center's earlier reports "The coronavirus outbreak in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine: Responses by the state, business and civil society" and "Government communication and public resilience to propaganda during COVID-19 in Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine."

issued a statement which encouraged both priests and worshippers – without putting obligation upon them – to observe sanitary norms as recommended by the Belarusian Ministry of Health. According to the statement:

“Orthodox Christians should be an example of common sense and social responsibility for society <...> The churches of God will not be closed down, particularly during Easter, and this places greater responsibility on bishops, priests, and all church workers.”

The Holy Synod declared that failure to participate in religious services for the sake of loved ones’ health does not amount to a sin. The statement encouraged the followers to join online broadcasts of religious services. In his pre-Easter address, Metropolitan Paul of Minsk and Slutsk, who led the Belarusian Orthodox Church between December 2011 and August 2020, [called on followers](#) to avoid attending churches or at least to maintain social distancing. Hence, the Orthodox Church authorities did not obligate the parishes to follow certain measures, but did place a burden of responsibility on church leaders and attendees.

The Holy Synod also [tasked](#) all churches and monasteries of the Belarusian Orthodox Church to ring the church bells four-times daily until the end of the pandemic: “[ring] twelve times with a large bell, then a 10-minute-long peal of all the bells.”

It is worth mentioning that several media outlets known to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus, particularly [Teleskop](#)

and [Vecherniy Mogilev](#), published the May 2020 article “Bell-ringing against coronavirus.” This text provided non-scientific disinformation, claiming that “ultrasound waves at 1–1.3 MHz frequency provide 100% bactericidal and anti-virus protection [after ten minutes’ exposure], proven in lab conditions with the use of specific equipment.” The publication suggested that synchronous bell-ringing on the “canonical territories of the Russian Orthodox Church” has “the strongest potential for therapeutic and preventive effect against COVID-19, moreover it does not require extra resources, costs, and investment.”

Since the Orthodox Church authorities failed to provide clear uniform guidelines, the policies adopted by different parishes varied. One of the Orthodox communities in Minsk, which uses the Belarusian language in liturgy, [cancelled](#) public services due to the epidemiological situation and held non-eucharistic prayers online instead. The parish of the [Minsk Spiritual Academy](#) and a number of [monastic communities](#) announced a temporary interruption of services following the detection of COVID-19 cases. Meanwhile, the St. Theophany parish (in the Minsk district Loshyca) and others opted for open-air religious services.

Some parishes required believers to wear face-coverings and keep social distance at religious services. On occasions, the churches changed the way Holy Communion was distributed. The usual practice has been to distribute the sacramental bread and wine to liturgy attendees from the same spoon. As a precautionary measure,

some parishes used individual spoons and allowed the taking the communion bread by hand. In other cases, the spoon was disinfected with alcohol and sacramental wine was served in individual plastic cups, and the priests did not present their hands to attendees for kissing. Such measures were [recommended](#) by the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church in his Instruction for the Moscow Diocese of 17 March 2020.

Lower-ranking clergy and the faithful became hostages to the higher clergy's attitude to COVID-19. Where no countermeasures were adopted by a parish, some worshippers opted to attend another parish, others avoided participation

in religious services during the pandemic. At times parishioners petitioned the higher church authorities to intervene, pressurised priests and even blackmailed them. In one Orthodox Church parish, churchgoers took a more proactive approach: the webmaster responsible for the parish website temporarily shut it down and made its restoration online conditional on the introduction of a set of countermeasures to COVID-19.

Numerous Orthodox parishes continued business as usual and attempted to cover up localised COVID-19 outbreaks. The next section focuses on the irresponsible policies of the Orthodox St. Elizabeth's Convent in Minsk and other church institutions.

2

Orthodox COVID deniers: "Against all the odds"

Over a thousand people took part in the Easter celebration at the St. Elizabeth's Convent in Minsk, without taking any COVID-19 countermeasures. There was no social distancing and no mask wearing. Furthermore, the Orthodox churchgoers received holy communion with the same spoon. A week after the celebration, over a half of the convent's inhabitants of 130 nuns, as well as several priests, [reportedly had COVID-19 symptoms](#). As a consequence, a few nuns were treated with artificial lung ventilation in intensive care units and at least one nun, as well as a number of lay sisters of charity, died from COVID-19.

Despite grave consequences, the convent's leadership persistently denied the problem. They kept to the position [announced](#) on 26 March 2020, when the Convent's spiritual leader Andrei Lemiashtonak insisted that "a person coming to the church will never get ill with anything bad - this is our position and our faith." He also resorted to Chernobyl-related disinformation, [claiming](#) that: "In the Chernobyl contamination area, where radiation levels went off scale, no radiation was observed in the churches."

Despite the outbreak, the priests, nuns, and lay workers of the convent were

obliged to participate in religious services. They worked as usual under threat of dismissal. Those who realised the dangers of the pandemic anonymously alerted the media and independent bloggers, hoping that public attention would force the leadership into changing its policies.

However, reluctant to disrupt Easter services, religious leaders and parish activists preferred silencing the outbreak. The situation attracted closer attention from the ecclesiastical and state authorities only following a [Facebook post](#) by Russian journalist Marina Akhmedova. Her post, based on information she received from three Belarusian nuns, revealed the grave consequences of COVID-19 in the convent. The post was shared over 1,600 times and generated thousands of engagements, finally prompting the authorities to isolate part of the convent.

This was a rare case where the COVID-19 situation became public. In fact, similar censorship and denial policies were widespread in many other Orthodox Church parishes in Belarus. The ecclesiastical authorities insisted on continuing communal services and Easter celebrations as usual, despite localised COVID-19 outbreaks.

Alexander Shramko, an Orthodox priest and religious analyst, [described](#) the situation in the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Minsk in late April 2020:

“Nearly the whole choir is ill, some have been formally diagnosed with COVID-19. There are no singers left, this was the only reason to stop services during workdays.

An akathist was sung on Saturday evening and a liturgy took place on Sunday.”

He gave similar short overviews of the COVID-19 situation in a number of other Orthodox churches. COVID-19 outbreaks in Orthodox parishes were discussed by parishioners in blogs, Viber chats, and by word of mouth.

In response to the St. Elisabeth's Convent case and irresponsible policies of many other Orthodox Church parishes, a group of Orthodox believers created an online petition to the church authorities in late April 2021. The petition, signed by over 40 persons including well-known theologians, church and church-related organisation workers, called for more proactive measures to fight the spread of COVID-19. It pointed to the absence of reliable official information and asked the press service of the Belarusian Orthodox Church to provide systematic information about COVID-19 outbreaks in religious institutions and to share information on COVID-19's risks and the need to follow the recommendations of the World Health Organization and the Instruction of the Russian Orthodox Church of 17 March 2020.

On 30 April 2020, Metropolitan Paul [issued](#) a statement about COVID-19. This was a reaction to the online petition, the St. Elisabeth's Convent case, and a number of other incidents, including the death of Hienadz Bucko, a Minsk priest in his fifties, and a COVID-19 outbreak in the Minsk Theological Seminary which brought over 40 hospitalisations. In the statement, the then-leader of the Belarusian Orthodox Church recognised the “careless attitude to our appeal

to follow sanitary norms and precautionary measures, and irresponsible attitude of certain clergy to instructions of disease prevention." He also warned the clergy that, "in cases of blatant disregard of sanitary norms, [you] will be subject to the strictest canonical injunctions and can be brought before an ecclesiastic court." However, no such cases have been reported as of February 2021.

The April statement did not change much in the Orthodox Church's response to COVID-19. Despite archpriest Andrei Lemiashonak being officially instructed about the need to follow the COVID-19 countermeasures, which followed the August 2020 petition of St. Elisabeth's Convent workers to Metropolitan Veniamin, the convent's policies largely remained unchanged. Generally, COVID-19 countermeasures at parishes, theological schools and monasteries weakened even further following the September 2020 appointment of Metropolitan Veniamin as a new head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. In January 2021 the aged Metropolitan Filaret, honorary Patriarchal Exarch of all Belarus, died from COVID-19.

The Orthodox clergy continued to support Alyaksandr Lukashenka's policy of downplaying the threat of COVID-19. Andrei Lemiashonak credited COVID-19 state policies as a justification of his pro-regime position during the post-electoral crisis of August 2020. In his address posted

on the convent's Facebook page, Lemiashonak [said](#), "I am grateful to our President for not closing churches." During another gathering with Orthodox followers, he [also said](#), "It was such a challenge he put in front of Putin and all Europe! Not closing churches and letting us pray, against all the odds... I respect him for this."

In contrast to massive secular civic campaigns in support of medical workers and institutions², only sporadic small initiatives appeared among the Orthodox Churches. An [April report](#) by the state-owned TV channel ONT showed the nuns of the St. Elisabeth's Convent – an institution claiming to provide widespread social work services – helping the medical workers in the form of the Easter cake deliveries. As explained above, the St. Elisabeth's Convent strongly contributed to the overcrowded hospitals as a result of its continuous disregard of preventive measures.

In a rare example of a volunteer campaign within the Orthodox Church, a movement emerged to provide 100 protective suits and medical masks to the oncological hospital. This was [organised](#) by the parish in honour of Theotokos icon "Pantanassa". The initiative, which lasted throughout April 2020, engaged other parishes and Orthodox believers in the campaign, which resulted in supplies of 80–100 masks daily.

The COVID-19 pandemic and response to it by the Belarusian Orthodox Church

² Within three months of the coronavirus emerging in Belarus, the BYCOVID-19 civic initiative assembled around US\$360,000 and delivered PPE to hundreds of hospitals across the country. See our earlier report "Responses by the state, business and civil society. The coronavirus outbreak in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine" for details.

showed that many church leaders chose not to prioritise the health of parishioners and that the church was unwilling or incapable of maintaining sufficient discipline and control over parishes. It eventually resulted in a decreased public trust towards

the Orthodox Church in Belarusian society. Whereas two thirds of Belarusians tended to trust the church in early 2019, the level of trust among Belarusian urbanites towards the Orthodox church had decreased to 45% at the beginning of 2021.

3

The Catholic Church and COVID-19: Care for wellbeing of the faithful

From the very beginning of the pandemic, the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus identified itself as “the one which cares for the spiritual and physical wellbeing of its faithful.” On the basis of this declaration it introduced obligatory sanitary measures on 13 March 2020, similar to the ones in force in other European countries. They included a policy banning the kissing of icons, crosses or relics during their veneration, the removal of holy water from fonts, stopping physical contact when offering the sign of peace, erecting protective screens in the confession boxes, and additional hygiene measures before and during Eucharist.

The concepts of “care for spiritual and physical health of the faithful” and “prudence of the priests” played an important role in COVID-19 related documents of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus. The communique of the Conference of Catholic bishops, the highest institution of the Catholic Church in Belarus, announced that “restrictions on

organisation and participation in mass events in the present situation of the coronavirus pandemic is not a restriction of human freedom, but expression of mercy to one’s neighbour, to not infect anyone with a dangerous illness.”

The measures extended “dispensation from duty of participation in mass on Sunday and festive days” not only to vulnerable groups of population, but to all individuals who “feel fear of infection.” Live radio and video streams of masses, published on the website of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus, were suggested as an alternative for worship. The bishops also called on parish priests and the leaders of monastic communities to exercise “prudence” when considering the necessity of events like catechisms. Priests were asked to consider the cancellation or postponement of these events.

A number of the planned events by the Catholic Church in Belarus were cancelled. A traditional Lenten vigil for

young people was organised in an on-line format, First Communion and Confirmation celebrations were postponed, as well as the annual all-national pilgrimage to Budslau sanctuary, and mass processions for Corpus Christi were cancelled. The restrictions also affected the main celebrations in Holy Week and Easter: Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday were encouraged to be celebrated in the open air and in the shortest possible form. The adoration of a cross with a kiss was only allowed to priests, and the faithful brought their own water in individual containers for blessing. The then leader of the Roman Catholic Church archbishop Tadeush Kandrusевич appealed to the faithful to participate in Holy Week services from their homes via online media.

The Catholic Church launched a media campaign calling on believers to wear masks in church and interpreted refusal to wear a mask as indifference to the health of others. They also spoke positively of those who temporarily stopped their church attendance due to COVID-19.

Tadeush Kandrusевич repeatedly addressed the problem of COVID-19, advocating for a serious attitude to it and insisting on the need for the church to adapt to new circumstances in order to become successful in its mission of salvation. He strongly condemned those in Catholic parishes that disregarded precautionary measures, calling such behaviour a sin against the fifth commandment that “you shall not kill”.

The ecclesiastic authorities also publicly deplored very poor state communication pertaining to the necessary precautionary measures that religious institutions should have followed.

Compared to the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church in Belarus was more proactive in organising a nationwide movement to aid the health workers. The Conference of the Catholic Bishops of Belarus started a crowdfunding campaign for this purpose, which accumulated around USD \$30,000. With additional help from foreign church donors, Caritas Belarus provided hospitals in many Belarusian regions with PPE. Some parishes, including in Shchuchyn and Salihorsk, and monastic communities were involved in the aid campaign. Based on the campaign for hospitals and medical workers, Caritas also supported church volunteers who provided care for self-isolated vulnerable groups, and exhorted their humanitarian mission to the people in need.

The dispensation from church attendance was cancelled in late August 2020 when the epidemiological situation improved. It was reintroduced in October when the second wave of the pandemic arrived. In their statement, Catholic bishops insisted that the faithful “have to wear masks or shields, disinfect hands before entering the church, and keep social distance and respiratory etiquette.” The leadership of the Catholic church also banned many additional Christmas events such as traditional singing and theatre competitions.

Therefore, the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus took a more proactive and coherent approach than the Orthodox Church to fighting the pandemic. Its measures included cancellation of mass events, online broadcast of religious services, awareness raising campaigns on the issue COVID-19 risks disseminated through sermons and the

Catholic Church media, and a large-scale aid campaign for medical institutions. Accompanied by the religious imperative of “loving one’s neighbour” and Christian prudence as a prerequisite for the compliance with sanitary requirements, these measures must have shaped more responsible behaviour of the faithful in the face of the pandemic.

III.

Ukraine:

The different approaches of Orthodox confessions

1

Favourable responses from Orthodox confessions

In 2019, Bartholomew I of Constantinople granted autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), thereby recognising its independence from the Moscow Patriarch. The other major Eastern Orthodox ecclesiastical body in modern Ukraine, alongside the OCU, is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which contests the name of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

As of early 2020, over a third of Ukrainians [identified](#) with the OCU. About 14% of Ukrainians [claim](#) to belong to UOC-MP, while almost 28% of Ukrainians say they are Orthodox Christians but [do not affiliate](#) with a particular branch of the church. The church has always been one of the most trusted social institutions in Ukraine (51% [as of early 2019](#)), therefore it was important for public authorities to ensure

religious institutions' compliance with COVID-19 related decisions. This mission largely succeeded with the OCU and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, but largely failed in respect to the UOC-MP.

The Ukrainian authorities managed to secure support from the OCU in adopting government quarantine guidelines. Although many representatives of the Church were reluctant and unenthusiastic, [taking their time with cancelling religious services](#) because of quarantine, eventually they agreed to conduct services without parishioners. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine encouraged worshippers to stay at home during quarantine, offering broadcasted services online and via TV. Moreover, at the end of March, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine adopted its own

set of COVID-19 guidelines for representatives of the church and parishes, promoting self-isolation and social distancing.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine's leader made homophobic claims, featuring Western media headlines with claims that same-sex marriages had caused the pandemic which had already killed thousands of Ukrainians. However, in contrast to the UOC-MP (see below), in most situations the Orthodox Church of Ukraine complied with the state lockdown restrictions.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the largest Eastern Catholic church in Ukraine with around 8.2% of parishioners among all Ukrainians who consider themselves believers, showed similar flexibility. It also asked

believers to follow the lockdown guidelines and switched to online services. In fact, the Head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, His Beatitude Svyatoslav, was the first among all confessions in Ukraine to move religious services online.

The Ukrainian authorities tried to show the public ways of altering their religious traditions during the pandemic. The presidential office launched a project called "Easter at home," advertising online church services. Moreover, the Ukrainian postal services *Ukrposhta* offered the delivery of Easter bread blessed by the churches free of charge. Modern solutions found only partial success among the conservative part of Orthodox believers.

2

Problematic relationship with the OUC-MP

Communication between the Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate was doomed to fail from the beginning. Since the Ukrainian state claims to be secular and the church is proclaimed independent from the state, the leverage of state executive powers over the church is limited. Given the strained relations between the UOC-MP and the Ukrainian authorities, as well as the conflictual relationship between the UOC-MP and the recently established independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the UOC MP's disobedience was expected by many.

The UOC-MP openly resisted state-imposed countermeasures and tested the patience of the Ukrainian authorities. Though some of the UOC MP's leaders recommended that their parishioners be more careful, unlike the OCU the UOC-MP did not publish any guidelines regarding COVID-19 restrictions. It decided to continue live religious services during the lockdown. The UOC-MP's Primate, Metropolitan Onufry, did not ask believers to stay at home or to change their religious practices. Moreover, he encouraged parishioners to come to the churches and listen to Easter services from the street

outside, saying that believers will hear prayers through a loudspeaker. He was later hospitalized and tested positive for COVID-19, although the UOC-MP repeatedly denied this in official statements. Some UOC-MP representatives disseminated fake stories about vaccines, claiming them to contain “microchips aimed to control the people through 5G.” The heads of the Russia-backed wing of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, including Metropolitan Pavel, repeatedly claimed that “coronavirus was a result of human sin and could be fought with hugs, prayers and fasting.”

Meanwhile, the UOC-MP’s Metropolitan Antony called upon believers to come to a church in Kyiv to witness the Holy Fire from Jerusalem. Over time the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, a famous Orthodox Christian monastery with an elaborate system of 11th-century catacombs, headed by Metropolitan Pavel, became a coronavirus hotspot. According to Kyiv officials, over 140 monks and other attendees to Lavra have been contracted with COVID-19, at least three people died. Metropolitan Pavel was also hospitalized with severe COVID-19 just a few days after delivering recommendations for “prayers and hugs” to fight the virus.

Other UOC-MP monasteries, including the Holy Dormition Pochayiv Lavra, a major UOC-MP monastery in western Ukraine, and the Holy Mountains Lavra in the eastern Ukrainian city of Sviatohirsk, witnessed similar COVID-19 consequences as a result of blatant disregard for epidemiological norms. In Pochayiv Lavra, during Easter celebrations many believers

and priests disregarded social distancing rules and did not wear masks. Local police opened a criminal case against lockdown violations in Pochayiv Lavra. Another criminal proceeding was started by police in Sviatohirsk, where hundreds of worshippers attended a service without face coverings and kissed the hand of Metropolitan Arseny at the end of the prayers. No media reports were available as of February 2021 concerning the status of the opened criminal cases.

The state responded only mildly to UOC-MP parishioners’ open disregard for the official COVID-19 regulations. During the Easter celebration, police opened five criminal cases and issued five administrative charges for COVID-19 quarantine violations by the representatives of UOC-MP. This was hardly an adequate punishment given that the UOC-MP leaders’ calls upon the worshippers resulted in church attendances at Easter of over 130,000 people. Given that thousands of people spent hours in cramped conditions without personal protection and proper distance between them, the epidemiological situation could have proved far more deadly than it eventually did.

Prior to the 2021 Christmas holiday season all the major churches, including OCU, UOC-MP, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, came up with a joint statement asking the government to let them continue their services during lockdown. Churches agreed to limit their capacities to 50%, follow the Ministry of Health guidelines and social distancing. The leaders of the churches stated that, “It is crucially important to let

people have access to religious buildings during the week and on holidays.”

At the beginning of December 2020, the Ukrainian government introduced a new set of lockdown measures that would be in effect from 8 January to 24 January 2021. They were not as strict as in 2020: public transport was not interrupted, and grocery stores, pharmacies, and banks remained open. Churches were not obliged to close their doors to parishioners either. Moreover, the new quarantine measures were enforced after two weeks of public holiday, when most of Ukrainians cele-

brated the New Year and the Orthodox Christmas. If the restrictions were to help reduce the burden on the health care system, as was originally [stated](#) by Health Minister Maxim Stepanov, the timing could not have been any worse. During the holidays, many Ukrainians disregarded the social distancing and face-covering policies, including [some of those](#) who attended the Orthodox Christmas services. However, unlike during the Easter period, the Ukrainian media did not report mass gatherings in any of the Ukrainian churches on Christmas eve.

CONCLUSIONS

Christian confessions in Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine approached the COVID-19 health crisis in different ways. It tested their readiness to adapt quickly and overcome differences with state authorities for the benefit of their faithful and public health.

The Armenian case proved generally more positive in this respect. Despite its troubled relations with Pashinyan's government, the Armenian Apostolic Church showed a relatively responsible attitude towards complying with government-imposed COVID-19 related countermeasures.

In Belarus, the Orthodox and Catholic Churches were on their own because the state authorities resorted to a politics of denial and silence about the risks of COVID-19. Due to the absence of clear guidelines and inconsistent communication by the Orthodox Church, many of its parishes did not adopt adequate measures and turned into hotbeds of COVID-19. The irresponsible policies of many Orthodox Church parishes provoked an online petition to the church authorities signed by well-known theologians, and church and church-related organisation workers. However, this and other public

attempts to influence church authorities were largely unsuccessful.

The Catholic Church in Belarus adopted a more proactive approach to countering COVID-19 and even publicly deplored poor communication from the state authorities. Accompanied by the religious imperative of love to the neighbour and Christian prudence as a prerequisite for compliance with sanitary requirements, the Catholic Church helped shape more responsible behaviour among the faithful in the face of the pandemic.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate, that around 14% of Ukrainians belong to, continuously disrespected lockdown measures and spread non-scientific information. It contributed to making religious institutions the weakest link in Ukraine's COVID-19 confinement strategy. Given the strained relations between the UOC-MP and the Ukrainian authorities, the UOC-MP's disobedience was anticipated. Many thousands of the UOC-MP followers ignored the national lockdown rules during Easter and organised gatherings outside churches across the country without following social distancing guidelines. As a result, a number of UOC-MP

parishes, including historic Kyiv Pechersk Lavra or "Monastery of the Caves," became COVID-19 hotspots.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church turned out to be more flexible and cooperative with the public authorities. The latter was the first among all confessions

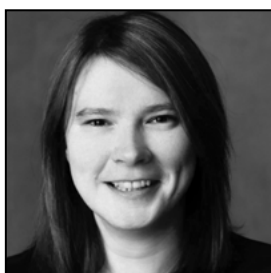
in Ukraine to move religious services online. Despite the Orthodox Church of Ukraine being quite unenthusiastic about the adoption of lockdown measures and a number of unscientific COVID-19 related claims by its leaders, the church largely complied with the state regulations and guidelines.

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