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Original article

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**The position of religious communities during the coronavirus pandemic and the reflection on the public opinion in Macedonia**

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**Abstract.** The COVID-19 pandemic affected religion and faith in different ways. The interaction between religious traditions, religious freedom and responsibilities in public health is complex, intertwining the cultural and legal dimensions of social reality. Introduction of numerous restrictive measures for prevention and protection against the spread of coronavirus, in many cases, were contrary to the religious practices of religious communities. The views of the religious communities regarding these measures at the beginning of the pandemic were also reflected in the views of the believers, whose behavior had a kind of response in public opinion. The purpose of this paper is to outline and compare the position of religious communities in Macedonian society at the beginning of the pandemic and their views in late 2020 and early 2021. It also provides an overview and comparison of the public reactions which arose from the position of religious communities regarding restrictive measures and the practice of religious services. To meet the objectives, this paper is divided into two parts, where the first part presents the activities and initiatives of religious communities, while the second part shows the reflections from the activities of religious communities on public opinion. In doing so, both views are based on a qualitative analysis, which in the first part analyzes the reports from religious communities, as well as other public sources, while the second part is a thematic analysis of Twitter Platform. The comparison between the position of the religious communities at the beginning of the pandemic and during the holidays at the end of the year indicates that their position is unchanged, and they clearly support the measures for prevention and protection from the coronavirus. However, the public interest in religious practices has drastically decreased at the end of the year compared to the beginning of the pandemic, although the

impatience towards the clergy and believers who attend religious services is identical in both compared periods.

**Keywords:** religious communities; COVID 19; restrictive measures; public opinion; Twitter

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Оригинальная статья

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Позиция религиозных общин во время пандемии  
коронавируса и отражение на общественном мнении  
в Македонии

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**Аннотация.** Пандемия COVID-19 по-разному повлияла на религию и веру. Взаимодействие между религиозными традициями, религиозной свободой и ответственностью в сфере общественного здравоохранения является сложным, переплетая культурные и правовые аспекты социальной реальности. Введение многочисленных ограничительных мер по профилактике и защите от распространения коронавируса во многих случаях противоречило религиозной практике религиозных общин. Взгляды религиозных общин на эти меры в начале пандемии нашли отражение и во взглядах верующих, поведение которых имело своеобразный отклик в общественном мнении. Цель данной статьи – обрисовать и сравнить положение религиозных общин в македонском обществе в начале пандемии и их взгляды в конце 2020 и начале 2021 года. В ней также представлен обзор и сравнение реакций общества, которые возникли в связи с позицией религиозных общин в отношении ограничительных мер и проведения религиозных служб. Для достижения поставленных целей данная работа разделена на две части, где в первой части представлены мероприятия и инициативы религиозных общин, а во второй – отражение деятельности религиозных общин на общественном мнении. При этом оба взгляда основаны на качественном анализе, в первой части которого анализируются сообщения религиозных общин, а также другие публичные источники, а во второй – тематический анализ соц. сети

Twitter. Сравнение позиции религиозных общин в начале пандемии и во время праздников в конце года показывает, что их позиция неизменна, и они однозначно поддерживают меры по профилактике и защите от коронавируса. Однако интерес населения к религиозным практикам резко снизился в конце года по сравнению с началом пандемии, хотя нетерпимость к священнослужителям и верующим, посещающим религиозные службы, одинакова в оба сравниваемых периода.

**Ключевые слова:** религиозные общины; COVID 19; ограничительные меры; общественное мнение; Twitter.

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**Introduction.** Pandemic COVID-19 began in Wuhan, China, at the end of December 2019 and quickly spread across all countries in the world, after which on January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization declared “the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) outbreak a public health emergency of international concern”<sup>1</sup>. This rapid spread of COVID-19 has transformed the social order of mankind, including the lives of individuals who lead a religious life. Since the spread of the COVID-19 virus and disease, churches and religious authorities worldwide at all levels have faced a large-scale emergency situation which is new to most of societies today. They are playing a very important role to respond to the immediate threat to health posed by the pandemic, which is, an epochal shock, one that happens once every generation. There are chapters in history, both personal and collective, in which everyday life enters a sort of suspension, while the horizon narrows until we doubt that there is no longer a future. Johnny Dotti, sociologist and pedagogue, in an interview said: “The traumas to be transformed into change, into new things, first of all need to be named and accepted. And then they need to be interpreted”<sup>2</sup>. This is the reason that so many articles, reflections and editorials have been written in this time of coronavirus, we are living through.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted religion in various ways. Growing number of infections have prompted national governments around the world to implement numerous restrictions. The restrictions applied in particular to all those spheres of human life where people gathered in substantial numbers. This led to cancellation of the worship services of various faiths, as well as the cancellation of pilgrimages, ceremonies and festivals, followed by warnings from religious authorities that gatherings must comply with public health measures taken to mitigate the spread of the disease. The reaction of the religious communities to these measures had a reflection on the behavior of the believers, but also on the opinion and attitudes of the general public.

Macedonia confirmed the first case of the coronavirus infection on February 26, 2020, diagnosed in a woman who returned home from Italy. In the coming days the number of infected begins to grow slightly, but from from March 6 number of infected people begins to double. Given the new situation, on March 10, 2020 the government of North Macedonia, based on the suggestion of the Ministry of Health's Infectious Diseases Committee, made a decision to interrupt the educational process in schools and universities, to close restaurants and coffee bars, and to prohibit all

<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/international-health-regulations/news/news/2020/2/2019-ncov-outbreak-is-an-emergency-of-international-concern> (Accessed 05 March 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Johnny Dotti, “Ripartire dal silenzio”, L'Osservatore Romano, available at: <https://www.osservatore-romano.va/it/news/2020-04/ripartire-dal-silenzio.html> (Accessed 16 April 2020).

events and gatherings<sup>3</sup>. One week later, on March 18, 2020 the President of North Macedonia declared a state of emergency throughout the country<sup>4</sup>.

**Methodology and methods.** *Activities and initiatives of religious communities after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.* In our previous study of religious aspect of macedonian society after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gjorgjevski, Blazhevski, 2021), reactions of the religious communities regarding the new situation were listed. In the conclusion, it was pointed out that in their activities, the larger religious communities in conditions of crisis caused by COVID 19 mainly adhere to the state decisions for dealing with the crisis. Based on the review, it could be seen that an additional joint statement of all religious communities was missing, but additionally the common position of the religious communities was expressed during the meeting with the Prime Minister at the beginning of the crisis. Also, the support of the religious communities was expressed through the intensified humanitarian activities, at local, diocesan level or through their humanitarian organizations. In terms of supporting the adopted restrictive measures for mass gatherings (public and private), given that the crisis arose in time just before and during the great Christian and Islamic holidays, religious communities organized most of the festive services to be held only by the clergy, while the usual public holiday gatherings were hindered, as well as family and private holiday visits and gatherings. In addition, it was pointed out that the religious element was heavily exploited in the media and the public, highlighting manifestations of anti-religious intolerance stemming from non-religious circles. This tendency was transmitted on

social media, to which religious communities reacted with short statements, or there was no reaction at all. But these reactions, as well as the amended and corrected statements by religious communities, were not sufficiently represented in the media.

*Activities and initiatives of religious communities during the holidays at the end of the year.* In the last two months of 2020, when Orthodox Christians celebrate church holidays as domestic holidays and name days, resulting in larger domestic gatherings, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archbishopric of Ohrid (MOC-AO) appealed for compliance with the safety measures for public gatherings, and for domestic celebrations to be celebrated according to the recommendations. It was also pointed out that the parish clergy will have to adhere to the recommended health measures when performing church needs and acts in temples or when visiting homes<sup>5</sup>. This announcement by the Synod was followed by announcements from some dioceses, whereby the announcement of the Diocese of Povardarie from November 1, 2020, for organizing a procession in the church “Ss Cyril and Methodius” in Veles, emphasizes that: “The pandemic of the COVID-19 virus is gaining momentum and a growing number of our Macedonian brothers and sisters are already carriers of this virus, and many have failed to fight it. The recommendations in this evil time we know well and we must all abide by them”<sup>6</sup>. Also, the announcement of the Diocese of Debar and Kičevo from 07.12.2020, on the occasion of the feast of St. Clement of Ohrid, highlights the observance of measures for the prevention and spread of coronavirus<sup>7</sup>. In the period before the New Year and Christ-

<sup>3</sup> available at: [https://vlada.mk/covid19\\_en?ln=en-gb](https://vlada.mk/covid19_en?ln=en-gb) (Accessed 10 March 2021).

<sup>4</sup> “Вонредно обраќање на Претседателот на Република Северна Македонија, Стево Пендаровски”, available at: <https://pretsedatel.mk/vonredno-obracaenje-na-pretsedatелот-n/> (Accessed 05 March 2021).

<sup>5</sup> available at: <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7340> (Accessed 05 March 2021).

<sup>6</sup> available at: [http://www.povardarska-eparhija.org.mk/pe/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2544&Itemid=32](http://www.povardarska-eparhija.org.mk/pe/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2544&Itemid=32) (Accessed 10 March 2021).

<sup>7</sup> “As a physical-spiritual beings, we are obliged to take care of our health, of course, and the physical and the spiritual. Therefore, once again we appeal for respect of the measures from the Government, because the Church is part of this country and takes care of the health, physically and spiritually, of all believers and all people. Hence, we believe that with our attention and care for ourselves, but above all, with the care of our neighbors, we can contribute to a large extent to

mas celebrations, additional notifications followed, and in the appeal of Metropolitan Timothy of Debar, Kičevo, and Plaošnik, from 23.12.2020, addressed to the clergy and the faithful, is perceptible difference in the tone with which reference is made to the observance of the measures for protection and prevention of the coronavirus: “It is noted that a large percentage of people who visit temples and monasteries do not adhere to the recommendations of the competent health institutions in the country. Unfortunately, some priests sometimes contribute to this, ignoring the fact that the virus actually exists and endangers the health and lives of people who are infected with this disease. Therefore we do not ask, but command and order to abide with the recommendations of authoritative medical institutions. Every priest is obliged to warn the believers in the church to wear masks and to adhere to the distance between those present”<sup>8</sup>. The very next day, an announcement from the Synod of the MOC – OA followed, in which it was recommended it was recommended to observe the epidemiological health measures during the celebration of the upcoming holidays, while the Christmas and Epiphany holidays should be celebrated without any violation of the legal norms for public gatherings, set by the Government.<sup>9</sup> Shortly before New Year’s Eve, on December 29, 2020 in the “Members of Parliament Club” in Skopje a working meeting

was held with the heads of the churches and religious communities mentioned in the Constitution, which was attended by the Archbishop Stephen of Ohrid and Macedonia, Director of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups (CRRCG) Mr. Darijan Sotirovski, Reisul Ulema of the IRC Shaqir ef. Fetaj, the Bishop of Skopje and Strumica-Skopje Eparchy Monsignor Kiro Stojanov and the superintendent of Evangelical Methodist Church Mr. Marjan Dimov, while the President of Jewish Community in the Republic of Macedonia, Mrs. Berta Romano Nikolic, was absent due to objective reasons. The meeting emphasized adherence to prescribed measures, as well as the commitment to responsible celebration<sup>10</sup>.

**Research Results and Discussion.** *Reflections on public opinion – impact on social media.* Social media usage is one of the most popular online activities. It is estimated that in 2020, more than 3.6 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost 4.41 billion in 2025<sup>11</sup>. Consequently, social media plays a central role for sharing content and public opinion among the general public. It is a tool that can immediately and effectively embrace the public’s dialogue. In particular, due to its accessibility through smart phones, social media offers the facility of quick data sharing and getting most recent updates about an event. Given the seriousness of

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get rid of the temptation that attacks the human race as soon as possible. Therefore, due to the coronavirus condition, we inform the believers who want to come to the monastery and pray to the great saint, that they will have to adhere to government measures for the prevention and spread of the virus, which means wearing protective equipment (mask, scarf, shawl, etc.), as well as holding the specified distance”, available at: <http://www.dke.org.mk/index.php/3319-2020-12-07-11-35-37> (Accessed 10 March 2021).

<sup>8</sup> available at: <http://www.dke.org.mk/index.php/3325-2020-12-23-07-42-42> (Accessed 10 March 2021).

<sup>9</sup> “It implies that the believers in the temples should wear masks, maintain a decent distance from each other, and the Epiphany consecration of the waters in 2021 should take place in the courtyards of the temples. By adhering to these measures, as a Church we will contribute to the preservation of the general health of our people, in these difficult times when the whole world is facing the challenge of fighting the dangerous virus”, available at: <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7364> (Accessed 10 March 2021).

<sup>10</sup> “Given the upcoming period, religious leaders unanimously appeal to citizens to adhere to all prescribed measures for coronavirus protection prescribed by health authorities, not to lose patience, because in the wake of immunization, responsibility for the control of virus in each of us is the highest. To celebrate responsibly, to be in the family circle and to avoid gatherings, except when necessary, but with consistent adherence to the obligation to maintain a distance and wear a protective mask”, available at: <http://mpc-spe.mk/vesti-i-nastani/soopshstenija/sredba-so-liderite-na-verskite-zaednicidekemvri-2020/> (Accessed 10 March 2021).

<sup>11</sup> “Number of social network users worldwide from 2017 to 2025”, Statista [website], available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/> (Accessed 10 March 2021).



the threat, health epidemics typically generate burst of attention on social media. Also, they are an important source of real-time information exchange, and their influence on public opinion often outweighs that of the conventional media<sup>12</sup>.

Twitter is a free microblogging social media website launched in 2006, with average 192 million monetizable daily active users worldwide<sup>13</sup>. It enables users to communicate in statements, tweets, of up to 140 characters in length, while users are identified by unique user names and can choose whether to reveal their real name and geographical location through the website's preference settings. Privacy settings for accounts are determined by individual users and range from open access accounts that can be identified through general internet searches to closed accounts, which outputs are only visible to users registered as followers. Bruns and Moe (Bruns, Moe, 2014) point out that communication on Twitter is linked to the specific technological affordances of Twitter as a platform, and exists simultaneously on three levels: micro, meso and macro layers of information exchange and user interaction. In micro layer, communication is directed to a specific individual or institution; meso layer refers to follower – followee<sup>14</sup> networks as part of a group conversation; while the macro level covers the vast majority of everyday communicative activity on Twitter, but is complemented by particular forms and formats of tweeting that use specific syntax to indicate an intention to extend or narrow the range of addressees<sup>15</sup>. The specified layers do not exist in isolation from one another. Communication usually takes place across several levels at once, with addition of a hashtag or

subtraction of an @username, user can easily shift the level of conversation. According to Bruns and Moe: “it is this flexibility of Twitter as a platform for public communication at various levels of ‘public-ness’, this versatility of transition between the three major layers of public communication, which serves as the fundament for Twitter’s considerable success as a social media service... The triple-layer model – which, it should be noted, evolved through a co-evolutionary process between the platform developers and their users, who introduced the @reply and hashtag conventions – also constitutes a clear point of distinction from the other global social network, Facebook”. Also other authors, such as Stephen Dann point out that the advantage of Twitter over Facebook is the default public nature of Twitter, versus the default private nature of Facebook. This perception arises from the fact that Twitter accounts default to posting content to the public timeline, and can be viewed from a public website which creates a source of secondary published data (Dann, 2015). Because of these features, twitter audience is highly influential across various topics of social life. Despite the relatively small number of users, compared to Facebook, twitter audience in Macedonia has a constant activity and is a kind of avant-garde in commenting on all major socio-political developments. Their comments and criticisms, although created on Twitter, very quickly reach all other social networks, and even the media themselves<sup>16</sup>.

One the first depictions of the potential role of social media in public health emergencies was stated in Chew and Eysenbach’s (Chew, Eysenbach, 2010) study of tweets during the 2009 H1N1 Outbreak, since H1N1 was

<sup>12</sup> “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, Bunce, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Twitter Quarterly Results: 2020 Fourth Quarter, available at: <https://investor.twitterinc.com/financial-information/quarterly-results/default.aspx> (Accessed 05 March 2021).

<sup>14</sup> To “follow” a Twitter user – to subscribe to the stream of updates originating from that user, and it is not necessarily reciprocal activity.

<sup>15</sup> “Hashtag” – simple key-word preceded by the hash symbol “#” is usually used to mark a tweet as being relevant to a specific topic and make it more easily discoverable to other users.

<sup>16</sup> Time.mk, the website of the most visited news aggregator in Macedonia, which includes articles from more than 100 news sources, also publishes the top tweets from the last 2 and 6 hours.

the first global pandemic that occurred in the age of Web 2.0. In their study, they used manual classifications and preliminary automated analyses of H1N1 pandemic-related tweets on Twitter. In later research of public health issues related to health epidemics, many other authors also used twitter-based research of public opinion.

*Ethical considerations.* The biggest challenge in conducting research in the internet community is the issue of informed consent, that is the risk of violating ethical principles of privacy and confidentiality. As a starting point in such an ethical dilemma, Essaybach and Till suggest that it should be the determination of the material, posted by the internet community, as public or private (Eysenbach, Till, 2001). In addition, Bryman (Bryman, 2012) points out that the more the website is recognized as public, the less the researcher's obligation to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the website users, or the less the respondents's obligation to seek informed consent. But very often, the difference between the public and private sphere of the Internet is vague and disputable. Also, complete protection of anonymity is almost impossible in internet surveys, which arises from the difficulty of knowing who has access to the information. This, according to Bryman, places special ethical concerns on quality researchers, because a message posted on the social networking websites may be available for anyone with a computer and internet connection.

According to the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al.), the increasing reliance on internet platforms and applications for research data collection will lead researchers to increasingly confront the terms of use that dictate the conditions under which such research activities can take place. Twitter data, in comparison with other social media platforms, are more openly accessible, that's why when creating an account on Twitter, each user is introduced to the terms and conditions of

www.twitter.com. Additionally, users are pointed out the Twitter's Terms of Service and Privacy Policy, according to which users are consent for their information to be collected and used by third parties<sup>17</sup>. Hence, many researchers believe that the justification, regarding the ethical and legal implications of using the data without informed consent, stems from the Twitter's Terms of Service, which state that special permissions are granted to academic researchers who share Tweet IDs and User IDs for non-commercial research purposes. However, some additional conditions are listed on Twitter, and when distributing tweets, user IDs must also be provided. Also, Twitter's terms of service require that if a content is deleted, or it gains protected status, or is otherwise suspended, modified or removed from Twitter, the third-party developers should delete or modify that Twitter Content as soon as possible<sup>18</sup>.

In order to minimize ethical risks, the collection and processing of data for this paper were conducted according to the "Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0" published by the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al.). In order to protect the anonymity and privacy of the users whose tweets were used in the analysis, all user demographics and metadata were excluded.

*Methodology.* In the aforementioned study (Gjorgjevski, Blazhevski, 2021), the survey of public opinion reflections was based on a thematic analysis of conversations that occurred on the Twitter platform in the period between 26 February 2020 and 31 May 2020. Starting date coincides with the first confirmed case of COVID-19 infection in Macedonia, while the choice of the final date for analysis coincides with the end of the holiday of Orthodox Easter (April 19, 2020), as well as the Islamic holiday of Ramadan Bayram (May 24, 2020). Also, in this paper is applied a qualitative study with thematic analysis of individual tweets between October 25, 2020 and January

<sup>17</sup> Twitter terms of service [website], available at: <https://twitter.com/en/tos>, (Accessed 27 February 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Twitter + Developers [website], available at: <https://developer.twitter.com/en/developer-terms/policy> (Accessed 27 February 2021).

20, 2021. Hence, the research design in this paper is cross-sectional (Bryman, 2012), because the collection of empiric evidence is performed in precisely determined time interval. The collected empiric evidence makes the creation of “relevant notion in depth” of the perception and explanation of the changes by the researched population possible (Newman, 2014). In addition, in this study we should also take into account the comparative dimension, which is incorporated in the analysis of the collected empirical data, while identical methods were used for their collection. The comparison refers to the data after the outbreak of the pandemic, with the data that emerge from the holidays at the end of the year.

According to Braun and Clarke (Braun, Clarke, 2006), 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” (Boyatzis, 1998). 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 data set”. In addition, themes can be identified in one of two primary ways in thematic analysis: in an inductive or “bottom up” way, or in a theoretical or deductive or “top down” way. 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 (Thomas, 2006), is consistent with Strauss and Corbin’s description: “The re-

searcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data” (Strauss, Corbin, 1998). 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 (Thomas, 2006).

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 “МПЦ”, “ИВЗ”, “Корона/Ковид 19”, “Куќни/домашни слави”, “Божик” and “Водици”. This study focused solely on the message content of the tweet.

*Data analysis.* After the search according to the stated keywords, the identified tweets, that is their content was copied and imported in Excel spreadsheets. In doing so, additional demographics of Twitter users, links or metadata were not transferred to the Excel spreadsheet. A total of 125 tweets were extracted as a final sample in this study, while each tweet was analyzed independently, whereby all attached images were reviewed, and a brief description was formulated. In the analysis all the ‘retweets’<sup>19</sup> were treated separately. Additionally, multiple entries from the same user, that contained the search keywords, were collected to form a single entry.

Samples were formed from the extracted tweets, of which, through the application of keywords, the main themes were identified. Numerous dilemmas arose regarding the recognition of the main keywords in a tweet, or the way in which the tweet was transmitted. However, such dilemmas have contributed to the classification of tweets in the most appropriate category. We would like to point out that, during the analysis, each tweet was grouped in only one category. Then categories were grouped into themes. An inductive approach was applied in data analysis, that is the categories and themes were derived from the tweets. Thereby, from the thematic analysis of

<sup>19</sup> A reposted or forwarded message on Twitter, Lexico Dictionary [website], available at: <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/retweet> (Accessed 02.03.2021).



the data, the following themes have been defined: Exposure of believers to the risk of spreading the virus arising from house celebrations; Adherence to protocols during the Christmas holidays; Intervention of services and inspections to sanction the clergy.

The analysis of the specified themes that arose from the sample of tweets, was in accordance with the established objectives of this study for contextual consideration and understanding of the mentioned themes (Bryman, 2012). Also, despite the presentation of the themes as discrete, there is overlap between them.

*Exposure of believers to the risk of spreading the virus arising from house celebrations.* The tweets from which this topic originated are concentrated in the period of November and December 2020. Within this period are the major holidays of the Orthodox Christian Church dedicated to: St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki (November 7), Council of St. Archangel Michael (November 21), St. Clement of Ohrid, who is also the patron of the MOC (December 8, is a non-working day for all citizens of Macedonia), and St. Nicholas the Wonderworker (19.12.). The Orthodox Christians in Macedonia, starting from the centuries-old tradition, in addition to the attendance on liturgies in the churches, mark these holidays with domestic celebrations or the so-called "slava". Most of the tweets are critically targeted at citizens, that is the believers who organize the domestic celebrations, as well as their increased presence in the temples during those days. Although to a much lesser extent, there is no lack of criticism of the clergy, as well as accusations of their non-compliance with the recommended measures for prevention and protection against coronavirus. A small number of users, in addition to the tweets, have posted photos of the liturgies, as well as photos of domestic celebrations that were posted on other social networks. It is important to note that in the mentioned period, and shortly before it had a significant increase in the number of citizens infected with the Covid 19 virus, which was reflected in the con-

tent of the tweets. Thus users expressed concern and criticism due to the risk of spreading the coronavirus through domestic celebrations, emphasizing the concern for themselves and the health of their loved ones.

In some of the tweets, a comparison is made between the impact of domestic celebrations on the spread of coronavirus, and the presence in restaurants as well as in the workplace.

*Adherence to protocols during Christmas and Epiphany.* The celebration of major Christian holidays Christmas and Epiphany, in addition to the holy liturgy in the temples, is also marked by manifestations attended by a large number of believers. These holidays, in accordance with the Law on Holidays of RS Macedonia, are declared non-working days. But, in compliance with the restrictive measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus, such manifestations were not organized. However, in the period before Christmas and on Christmas, number of tweets increased significantly, with the clergy being criticized for the gatherings during the Christmas liturgy. In addition, some of the users posted photos and links from the media, on which some of the believers and the clergy don't wear protective masks. In the content of the tweets, there was an evident condemning tone towards the believers, referring to their negligence, it was highlighted the risk of increased spread of the coronavirus, even among those citizens who did not attend the temples.

Also for the holiday of Epiphany, the manifestations for the lowering of the Holy Cross in the rivers and lakes were canceled, but during the consecration of the water in Lake Ohrid there was a presence of citizens, who celebrated Epiphany with a traditional bathing in the lake. But unlike Christmas, in the content of the tweets, there was almost no criticism of the faithful and the clergy. Despite the fact that the dynamics of the tweets was identical to that during Christmas, the criticism for irresponsible behavior of the citizens was significantly reduced, while the Macedonian Orthodox Church has hardly been criticized. Addi-

tionally, some users even criticized the sanctioning by the police of the believers who celebrated Epiphany with a traditional bathing in Lake Ohrid.

*Intervention of services and inspections to sanction the clergy.* Tweets within this theme are present throughout the analyzed period, unlike the previous themes where the tweets were concentrated around a narrower time frame. Also, the tweets categorized in this theme overlap with many of the tweets from other themes. Almost all users, whose tweets express criticism and condemnation of the citizens who attend liturgies in the temples, or gather at house celebrations, are also critical of the clergy and the leadership of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Thereby, many users point out that the blame for the negligent behavior of the believers largely arises from the non-compliance with the prescribed measures for protection against coronavirus in the temples by the clergy. Particular emphasis is placed on the neglect of government measures in the performance of religious rites, for which users often attach photographs of temples. The dynamics of the exchange of tweets was significantly intensified in the period before and during Christmas, which was incited by the publication of certain articles in the media, and then posted on the Twitter network. Some of those articles indicate that the Ministry of Interior and the inspection services should take measures to sanction the clergy and the head of the Macedonian Orthodox Church for disobeying COVID-19 prevention measures. Moreover, in some of the tweets a comparison was made with the undertaken activities for sanctioning catering facilities that organized weddings and other celebrations, suggesting that the same punitive measures should be applied for the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

**Conclusion.** The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the introduction of restrictive measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus, had a specific reflection on the religious life of the citizens – the believers. In comparison with the findings of our previous study on the religious aspect of the Macedonian society after the outbreak of the COVID-

19 pandemic, the position of the religious communities at the beginning of the pandemic and during the holidays at the end of the year remained unchanged. In doing so, they clearly and unequivocally support the measures for prevention and protection from the coronavirus. Considering that the analyzed period includes the major Orthodox Christian holidays, position of the Macedonian Orthodox Church was confirmed through several announcements, while in some of them the seriousness of the compliance with measures was highlighted with a commanding tone. However, no additional announcements were made by the other religious communities regarding the observance of the measures for protection against the spread of the coronavirus. Their position was confirmed only in a joint statement shortly before New Year's Eve, which emerged from the meeting of the heads of the churches and religious communities in Macedonia, initiated by the Director of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups.

After the summing up of the findings from the analysis of the Twitter platform it was noticed that the public interest in religious practices has drastically decreased at the end of the year compared to the beginning of the pandemic. The dynamics and the amount of exchanged tweets were also reflected on the number of tweets – 125, that were extracted as a final sample size, compared to 423 extracted tweets in the previously analyzed period. In doing so, it should be borne in mind that the quantity of communication on Twitter was also influenced by the coincidence of the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic with the Easter and Ramadan holidays. However, the impatience towards the clergy and believers who attend religious services was identical in both compared periods. In the attitude of the users, there was still a strong criticism and condemnation of the believers and religious communities. Users justified this position with their concern about the danger of an increased spread of the Covid 19 virus. 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 regarding the behavior of the faithful and the clergy towards the measures for prevention and protection against the spread of the coronavirus. Also, some of the users emphasized the secular character of the state, pointing out that the sanctions that were applied to the catering facilities that did not comply with the measures, should be applied to the religious communities as well.

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