

Impact and challenges of COVID-19 in Hungary - Case study

Summer School on Human Rights: Webinar 3

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Let me start my short contribution with a clear and disappointing statement, as it regards the actual theme of this panel discussion. When I have a look of the church life in those 2 months when the state of emergency, or according to the Hungarian legislation, the state of danger was declared and was in effect, with its special legal order and practical restrictions that affected our everyday life and obviously the life of any worshipping community seriously, I can say that the Human rights aspect of religious freedom, and free practice of religion was never raised. Certainly there were talks and discussion within the churches about certain issues, like how do we celebrate communion in a virtual setting and similar, actually theological questions or issues related to church order, but those discussions never raised the question whether there have been unnecessary restrictions which would jeopardize religious freedom as basic right.

And I also believe that in such an extraordinary Pandemic situation which put governments, decision makers on national and local level, government agencies and authorities into a very difficult position of protecting lives and at the same time keep running societies and economies, the usual way of worshipping or enjoying religious freedom is not necessary the first concern.

Hungary declared a state of emergency on 11th March, and reintroduced border checks, and issued entry ban from foreign countries. As of 16th March, universities and schools were closed. All public events were banned, pubs, cinemas and other cultural facilities were also closed, except of food stores, pharmacies and drug stores. 'Business as usual in unusual times'.

The Church's reaction was to support the efforts of the government regarding social (better to say physical) distancing and lock down and comply with the extraordinary regulations of the state of danger. On the same day when schools were closed, Church's leadership addressed congregations, ministers and church members with the request to [suspend all church events](#) and activities until further action. All community events were cancelled, including Sunday worships.

This situation of lock down ended on the 11 May on the countryside, and a week later in the capital, Budapest. Altogether 8 Sundays on the countryside and 9 weeks in Budapest there was no gathered community and physical worship. Including Easter.

Let me quote the [Easter message](#) of the Presidium of RCH which reflects the Church's attitude:

“On this holy feast of Easter, God was pleased to put us at test by letting go everything that was part of the customs and practice of how we normally celebrate Easter. At this Easter, church bells invite us to sit in front of our televisions and screens, we do not receive the sacrament out of the hands of the pastor, and there are no festive greetings and handshakes. There is only one thing left; to embrace the redemption we gained in Christ and the joy of the

Savior. This is how we can still be in community without actually gathering, this is how homes can turn to temples, and this how everyone who shares in the joy of Easter can come together and join in spirit.”

Again, I have to emphasize that with all the critical voices or speculations around COVID-19 pandemic itself and the impact of the preventive measures to control the spread of the virus, human rights aspects, or the claim of human rights violations was not part of the public discussion, especially not the aspect of the religious freedom.

If you look at the map of Europe you will see that in the Eastern part of the continent, the level of infection and the number of detected cases, and death rate proved to be way lower than in Western-Europe. It has many reasons, obviously, and the timely and swift action of governments and the self-discipline and cooperation of citizens is just one of those.

During the Pandemic Hungary made headlines in the International Media repeatedly. These critical coverage of the political situation addressed the issue of rule of law and democracy, not directly human rights aspects or violation.

Authorization Act, eG., adopted by the Hungarian Parliament on 30 March 2020, provided the Hungarian Government with a carte blanche mandate without any sunset clause to suspend the application of Acts of Parliament, and take other extraordinary measures until the “state of danger” declared on 11 March by Government Decree is in place. “The Authorization Act fails to comply with the democratic set of criteria for a special legal order that also derives from Hungary’s Fundamental Law.” This was the critical understanding of some of the NGO’s. The claim was that the Authorization Act, which was revoked, terminated since, allowed the Government to introduce significant restrictions, without any time limit, without any debate in the Parliament, and without any guarantee for the swift and effective constitutional review. Government officials, on the other hand, claimed that the Hungarian legislation was in accordance with EU laws and other European countries’ legislation and judicial policies.

Anyway, taking a partisan position is not my job, and we need some distance in time to evaluate whether this Authorisation Act was necessary at all, and how far it was meant to challenge again the “liberal” forms of democracy which has been openly questioned in Hungary in the last years.

Vulnerable communities

Instead of this, let me, at last, point out the fact, that regarding human rights in general, vulnerable, underprivileged and marginalized communities in our societies are at high risk, especially in extraordinary situations like the one due to COVID-19.

We have seen this evidenced at least in the case of two vulnerable groups of people.

Asylum seekers: Though it was almost impossible to access Hungary over the borders and file valid asylum claims since 2018, new refugee recognitions still happened on a very low level (the official statistics for 2019 are not public, the assumed numbers are : 468 asylum application, 53 recognitions in 2019). Due to COVID one of the first action was to fully close the borders for Asylum seekers. The connection between the spread of the virus and illegal immigration is also part of the public communication. Through our Refugee ministry we did our best that Refugee kids get the support they needed to keep up with online education and

financial aid and housing for those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic were secured. This we did in cooperation and with the support of American and German partner churches.

This effort was supported from the solidarity fund which has been [coordinated by the Hungarian Reformed Church Aid](#).

Roma families: as we have a national Roma ministry and a strong network of Roma communities, we have understood, that in most of the cases underprivileged Roma people's access to healthcare and education, especially in the days of the pandemic, is seriously at risk. We therefore started an initiative in our communities and after schools [to equip the Roma students with digital tools](#) so that they can access online education, and offered other kind of humanitarian support, again in solidarity and cooperation of our Western-European and American partners.

In these cases, even if there is no direct and blatant violation of human rights, there is an obvious risk for a spontaneous degradation of rights and access of vulnerable communities. Let me finish with a quote from a [Roma student of our special college](#), student in political sciences, whose reflection, or cry [we have published and widely shared](#) in the days of COVID.

“Roma people are overrepresented among socially disadvantaged communities in Hungary. Most of the time they are living in segregation, in houses without any comfort at the margins of settlements. ... Healthcare professionals recommend proper hygiene, frequent hand wash, and social distancing. Measures that are hard to implement under segregated living conditions. If the virus penetrated these closed communities, it would have serious consequences. It is well known that COVID-19 can be life-threatening especially for people with weak immune system. Now, the general state of health of those living in segregations is even worse than the Hungarian average. In addition to all this, the Corona crisis can potentially incite hatred against Roma communities. And we cannot tolerate people's rights be restricted under the pretext of the coronavirus as we already have evidences for this in Bulgaria.”

Don't let COVID-19 divide our people and deepen already existing social fault lines even more!

For me personally, this virus has revealed that people are able and willing to join forces – as they should. We are experiencing the biggest crisis of our lifetime; we don't know how long it will last, and what consequences it will still have. We can already see that the crisis and uncertainty particularly affect the poorest and the most vulnerable people. We all suffer from this situation, still we shouldn't let them down!”

All in all, during the days of the Pandemic, as all churches we have been confronted with challenges we never experienced before. It still need time and distance to evaluate the consequences. The swift and successful change to online worships and live streamed church events, the missional impact of the “church life in the digital, virtual space” where church event were “attended” by way more people than before (numbers have doubled or even tripled), the theological question of eG. how to understand and celebrate holy communion “virtually”, are just few of the many questions churches have to address in Europe and worldwide. The Pandemic remains with us, most of the local churches introduced “hybrid

forms” or worship and community life – meeting physically still keeping the “virtual space” open. Human rights aspects have been raised, as I mentioned earlier, related to the most vulnerable groups of society. In this regard we understood that churches and faith communities have an inevitable duty and responsibility both in terms of advocacy, awareness raising and swift and concrete actions of solidarity.

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