

Religious life in Estonia during the second wave of the coronavirus (November 2020 to June 2021)

Priit Rohtmets

The second wave of the corona virus in Estonia began in early November 2020, when the daily number of new infections was more than hundreds for weeks long. The number of patients in need of hospital treatment also increased steadily during November. The Government did not declare a new situation of emergency, like it had done in the spring of 2020, but chose the path of establishing specific restrictive measures with regional differences. From November 24, it was again mandatory to wear masks in indoor public spaces, including places of religious worship. Governmental decision stated that public worship and other public religious services were permitted only if certain conditions were met. Among other things, the two plus two rule (two metres distance), a maximum of 50% occupancy requirement and a limit of 250 people were introduced. In a venue with fixed seating, the number of visitors could not exceed 400.¹

The spread of the virus was particularly rapid and extensive in Northern and Eastern Estonia. Therefore, as of December 12, the government decided to close all entertainment in Eastern Estonia. The same restrictions were applied to the capital region – Harju County – from 28 December. Between 14 December to 31 December, all schools in Estonia had to be closed, so the Christmas holidays began a week earlier.²

Places for religious worship, on the other hand, remained open and services could continue. During the first wave of the virus in spring 2020, all public services had been suspended, although the churches had been kept open for private prayer. On 29 November 2020, Minister of Population Riina Solman sent a letter to religious associations reminding them of the importance of following the rules established to prevent the virus. During the services people had to wear a mask and follow the two plus two rule. Hand and surface disinfection had to be made possible. Items used for the services had to be disinfected after each use. The Minister of Population paid special attention to the behaviour of clergy as an example. High-risk activities, such as singing, had to be avoided. If the choir singing could not be given up, the number of choir members had to be limited. In view of the forthcoming Advent period, when churches are more crowded than usual, Solman emphasised that no more than 400 people should gather in places of religious worship with fixed sitting. This number was

¹ [Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus, 23. november 2020 nr 417, https://www.kriis.ee/sites/default/files/eriolukord/vv_20417k.pdf.](https://www.kriis.ee/sites/default/files/eriolukord/vv_20417k.pdf)

² https://www.kriis.ee/sites/default/files/eriolukord/vv_20429k.pdf ; see also <https://www.err.ee/1201306/valitsus-paneb-uuest-nadalast-koik-koolid-alates-1-klassist-kinni-erandkorras-sailib-kaugope>

reduced in Northern and Eastern Estonia, where occupancy was set to 50% of all seats or the normal total occupancy of a room. Up to 250 people could meet in rooms without seats.³

The decision to keep places of religious worship open and to allow them to hold services remained in place even after the schools were closed in December. Churches and other places of worship remained open even in Eastern Estonia, where all other public places except grocery stores were closed.

The restrictions implemented were justified by the argument of protecting religious freedom. For example, the Minister of Population Riina Solman, who commented on the government's decision, pointed out that the situation in Estonia was not so critical that the restriction of religious freedom would be justified. Similarly, the Minister of Social Affairs Tanel Kiik also referred to religious freedom, and confirmed that people must be given the opportunity to go to church.⁴ Kiik said that Christmas time was coming, but also added an important clarification regarding the spread of the virus, claiming that no major spread of the virus had taken place in the churches so far.⁵ As during the first wave in spring 2020, the Estonian Islamic Center decided to close its doors during the second wave, on November 12.⁶

Coincidentally, a large outbreak of the virus occurred in an Orthodox monastery in Kuremäe precisely when the decision was taken to keep the places of religious worship open. On the second Sunday of Advent, police visited churches to check whether government orders were being followed. It turned out that, among other problems, the obligation to wear a mask was only selectively followed.⁷

The Ministry of the Interior then warned the public that the churches would remain open only if the restrictions set by the Government were followed. It was repeated that the clergy must set an example, and not ridicule members of congregations nor not create an atmosphere in which wearing a mask was seen as an expression of weakness of belief. It seems that such cases had occurred. In addition, the ministry recommended that older people attend the services distantly via the internet.⁸

The decision of the government to close schools but leave the churches open was met with mixed reactions from the public. On the one hand, the decision was criticised: for example, Marina Kaljurand, a Social Democrat member of the European Parliament, said she did not understand how leaving churches open would save the older people, who were more vulnerable. It was especially problematic because Christmas is the only time of the year when the churches are full.⁹ The representatives of the Estonian Conservative People's Party,

³ <https://www.siseministeerium.ee/et/uudised/rahvastikuminister-paneb-kirikutele-sudamele-ohutusnouete-taitmise-vajalikkust-viiruse>

⁴ <https://www.ohtuleht.ee/1020176/video-puhakojad-lahti-koolid-kinni-ratas-kirikus-kaimine-aitab-hoida-vaimset-tervist-alkklassilastele-leiavad-vanemad-parima-voimaluse>

⁵ <https://etv.err.ee/1164904/aktuaalne-kaamera-ilm>

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/MosqueTallinn/photos/a.385645085421808/680745645911749/>

⁷ <https://www.meiekirik.net/index.php/uudislood/1605-politsei-kontrollib-kirikuid-kandke-maske?fbclid=IwAR3BDwZq2RS1qGJ5CORl0kq5sW35CM4dsFe9oR1VAbgrdceFa8f31MmyGqc>

⁸ <https://www.siseministeerium.ee/et/uudised/kirikud-jaavad-lahti-juhul-kui-tagatakse-koik-ohutusnouded>

⁹ <https://www.postimees.ee/7132459/marina-kaljurand-piirangute-kehtestamine-naib-soltuvat-sellest-kes-kovemini-karjub>

claimed that the closure of churches expresses the anger of the left.¹⁰ The issue of closing churches had become a part of a political struggle, because during the second wave of the corona virus the conservative government had decided to hold a referendum on whether marriage should be only between a man and a woman or could also concern same-sex couples.

According to Urmas Viilma, Archbishop of the Lutheran Church, speaking about the virus and the restrictions, not much attention has been paid to the issue of religious freedom in Estonia, because so far everything had been satisfactory and the freedom had been respected. However, compared to other activities, such as entertainment or sports, which may give the impression that they are very similar to religious activities, they were in fact not universal human rights. Mentioning the Jews celebrating Hanukkah and the Estonian pagan native believers, who were waiting for the winter solstice, Viilma said that it was not just a central issue of the Lutheran Church, as it may have seemed from the Estonian public coverage.¹¹

The situation in Estonia deteriorated steadily in the early months of 2021. As a result, the government decided to ban all public meetings and events, including conferences, theatre performances, concerts and cinema screenings, public worship services and other public services in places with and without fixed sitting.¹² Several other activities were also banned. At the same time, from March 1, for example, study in grades 1–4 was allowed, and shopping malls were still open. Competitions and training for professional and top young athletes and people with disabilities were also allowed. The decision entered into force on 1 March 2021 and the restrictions were implemented from 3 March to 28 March (inclusive).

Several other changes and clarifications were made in March. For example, it was made clearer from 11 March that only public meetings, including public services and other public religious services, were allowed outdoors, provided that no one is present between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. and the number of participants does not exceed 10. No contact with other persons was not allowed. The distance, the availability of disinfectants and compliance with disinfection requirements still had to be ensured. By comparison, museums, for example, were required to have an outdoor occupancy rate of no more than 25%. It was forbidden to be in shopping malls, except for the purchase of food or the provision of courier and transport services, when compliance with the 25% occupancy requirement was ensured.¹³ The order came into force on March 11.

Prior to the introduction of the new restrictions, a new Government, led by Kaja Kallas, had taken office. Instead of two conservative parties and a liberal party, the government now unites two liberal parties - the Reform and the Centre Party. The leaders of the religious associations were disappointed that the new government had not communicated with them before the restrictions were imposed. It was also disappointing that initially the shopping

¹⁰ https://www.meiekirik.net/index.php/uudislood/1610-martin-helme-mis-kius-see-on-et-kirikuid-tahetakse-sulgeda?fbclid=IwAR2a4gfOOLtxi4AAKN9BNZeUBua_7a4q109RX-qghmqohC5kNWK3s5j2Z2o

¹¹ <https://e-kirik.eelk.ee/2020/peapiiskop-urmas-viilma-vastab-miks-on-kirikud-avatud/>

¹² Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 26. veebruar 2021 nr 97 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmise“.

¹³ Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 9. märts 2021 nr 111 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmise“.

centres were left open, but a ban was imposed on public religious services.¹⁴ At the same time, the Chief Chaplain of the Ministry of Social Affairs Ove Sander wrote that people should be attentive and loving towards each other and realise that restrictions will not remain in place forever.¹⁵

In March 2021, a year after the rise of the first wave of viruses, Archbishop of the Lutheran Church Urmas Viilma emphasised the importance of taking care of people's spiritual needs and expressed satisfaction that both the previous and current government, as well as the Scientific Council, had in this respect appreciated the role of Estonian religious institutions. Viilma also noted that "the fact that churches may have remained open to personal visits and prayers, as well as private conversations with pastors and clergy, in addition to moving to the web of public services, is a great spiritual and spiritual support for many people".¹⁶

Following the example of the World Council of Churches, the Council of Estonian Churches called on the Estonian people to pray for the victims of the pandemic and for medical staff around the world. The council stated that Estonian society was in a more difficult situation than ever before.¹⁷ Mid-April, the Estonian Council of Churches submitted a proposal to the Government to ease the restrictions on worship already in April, stating that churches and congregations were ready to do so.¹⁸

As in 2020, the Government started to ease restrictions in May 2021. From 3 May, people were again allowed to stay and move indoors in museums and exhibitions, public worship services and other public religious services, provided that distancing was ensured and that they were not present indoors between 19:00 and 06:00. It was also necessary to ensure that the number of people did not exceed 25% of the entire capacity of a room. In outdoor conditions, these activities were allowed if it was assured that the number of participants did not exceed 10 persons in a group and the total number of participants did not exceed 150 persons, and that people were not present at these places between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m.¹⁹

On 21 April 2021, the Estonian Council of Churches sent a request to the Government of the Republic of Estonia to open the churches a day earlier than promised, i.e. on May 2, for the Orthodox celebration of Easter.²⁰ On April 26, representatives of the member churches of the Estonian Church Council met with Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, and during the meeting, in addition to the general virus situation and the religious activities of religious associations, the matter of lifting restrictions sooner was raised.²¹ Prime Minister Kallas did not promise anything definite at the meeting, and at the cabinet meeting the government decided not to support the proposal of the Council of Churches.

¹⁴ <https://www.err.ee/1608124255/urmas-viilma-las-saada-supermarketitest-pealegi-siis-kirik>.

¹⁵ <https://www.err.ee/1608133732/ove-sander-piirangutest-ja-paastumisest>.

¹⁶ <https://www.err.ee/1608155839/urmas-viilma-kes-hoiab-meie-hingi>.

¹⁷ <http://ekn.ee/inc.uudis.php?id=517>.

¹⁸ <https://www.err.ee/1608175678/kirikute-noukogu-jumalateenistused-siseruumides-tuleks-taaslubada-esimesel-voimalusel>.

¹⁹ Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 22. aprill 2021 nr 146 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmine“.

²⁰ <http://ekn.ee/inc.uudis.php?id=526>.

²¹ <http://ekn.ee/inc.uudis.php?id=527>.

Restrictions were soon eased on state level. From 31 May, indoor public meetings were allowed, and public events, including conferences, theatre performances, concerts and cinema screenings, were once more allowed. The presence and movement of persons at public worship services and other public religious services were permitted, provided that the number of people did not exceed 50% per room, and the total number of participants was no more than 200.²²

Gradually, the restrictions were further relaxed. From 11 June, indoor public meetings, public events, including the presence and movement of persons at public worship services and other public religious services were allowed, provided that the requirement for dispersal was met, the occupancy was no more than 50% per room and the number of participants was no more than 600 in total.²³ As of 23 June 2021, the Government of the Republic of Estonia decided to abolish the 50% requirement for room occupancy.²⁴

²² Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 28. mai 2021 nr 213 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmine“.

²³ Vabariigi Valitsuse korraldus 10. juuni 2021 nr 223 „Vabariigi Valitsuse 19. augusti 2020. a korralduse nr 282 „COVID-19 haiguse leviku tõkestamiseks vajalikud meetmed ja piirangud“ muutmine“.

²⁴ <https://www.kriis.ee/et/uudised/alates-homsest-kaob-covid-19-piirangutest-ruumitaitumuse-noue>.