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Relations of the Catholic Church and the Government of the Republic of Lithuania relations  
during the Crisis of Covid-19: partnership or dispute?

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## Introduction

The religious liberty is one of the most profound and fundamental deep freedoms in the West World. The vast majority of the modern democracies recognize the people's right to worship God according to the particular traditions and norms of the different religious communities.

The state of Lithuania belongs to this family of democracies where the religious liberty plays a significant role in the legal system of the Lithuania. The rights to express and practice each one's faith are established in the Article 26 of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania<sup>1</sup> and in the bilateral treaties with the Holy See. Moreover, Lithuania approved the Law on Religious Communities and Associations, which purpose is to establish the legal relations between the different religious communities and associations and the State of Lithuania, Besides, It is an attempt to implement the human right of religion freedom embedded in the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, in other laws and in international documents and agreements.<sup>2</sup>

From the past, the dynamics of the history of religious liberty and some related questions has been an important discussion topic among famous Lithuanian scholars.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Algimantas Kasparavicius wrote the monumental work *Between Politics and Diplomacy: the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania*, in which the bilateral relations between Lithuania and the Vatican during the period between Interwar and Our days were widely described.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the religious liberty plays a significant role in this book. Another great example is the book *Ensuring Equal Opportunities for Religious Minorities in Lithuania: Problems and Recommendations*, written in 2014 by two scientists of the Vytautas Magnus University: prof. Milda Alisauskienė and dr. Jurga Bucaite Vilke.<sup>5</sup> The principal aim of this book is to evaluate the religious minorities' situation in Lithuania and to suggest ways to improve it. Hence, all the mentioned studies make important contributions, which provide scientific knowledge on the situation of the religious liberty in Lithuania. However, the global pandemic of Covid-19 signifies a new era, not covered by former studies. The dramatic changes require a thoroughgoing scientific analysis. Under normal circumstances, the Government of the Republic of Lithuania respects the people's right to worship God, attending to the Mass and similar. Unfortunately, the global pandemic cannot be defined as "normal circumstances". It is not daring to say that the Covid- 19 is the most dangerous global health crisis in the twenty first century, which touched many spheres of the Lithuanians' lifestyle. During the global pandemic of Covid-19, Lithuania has had two different governments with

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<sup>1</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania "The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania"  
<https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.21892>

<sup>2</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania "The Law on Religious Communities and Associations" <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.385299?jfwid=16j6tpgu6w>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Algimantas Kasparavicius *Between Politics and Diplomacy. Holy See and Republic of Lithuania*, (Vilnius: LII, 2008),

<sup>5</sup> Milda Alisauskienė, Jurga Bucaite, *Ensuring Equal Opportunities for Religious Minorities in Lithuania: Problems and Recommendations*. (Vilnius: New Religions Research and Information Centre, 2014), 6-10. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12259/59437>

slightly different approaches on the fight with the virus. The first one is seventeenth Government of Lithuania, led by the Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis, while the second is current Government, chaired by the Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte. The similarities and differences among both government strategies on the management of the health crisis will be discussed later. At this stage, it is enough to say that, due to lockdown, many rights have been firmly restricted in Lithuania. For instance, during the first wave of the pandemic, the movement right was restricted by the prohibition to go to abroad, while during the second wave of Covid-19 the adopted measures were even stricter and the government of Ingrida Simonyte approved the prohibition to move from one municipality to another and from one household to another.<sup>6</sup> Among the rights which were touched by figures the right to attend to mass. The believers have not participated in the mass since 2020 December 16<sup>th</sup>. Their right to participate in the mass and to receive communion were also limited from March 15<sup>th</sup> to April 26<sup>th</sup>, in 2020.

The main goal of this article is to evaluate how the lockdown influenced the situation of religious liberty in Lithuania and describe the relations among Roman Catholic Church, which is represented by Lithuanian Episcopal Conference, and the Government of Lithuania. The current research analyzes the situation of the religious liberty in the case of Catholicism, focusing specifically on the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Government of Lithuania.

Due to the fact that religious liberty is deeply rooted in the legal system of the Republic of Lithuania, I will look to the issue of religious freedom from the perspective of historical institutionalism. One of the most important features of historical institutionalism is the importance of the path dependence. Because of this reason and the nature of the study, I prefer to use the process tracing method for a deeper understanding of the current situation.

### **Historical institutionalism**

First of all, some words must be said on the concept of Historical Institutionalism, which will be used in this article. It is not enough to say that historical institutionalism plays a significant role in the modern political sciences and that has been used by numerous great researchers. Indeed, the historical institutionalism, together with the sociological institutionalism and the rational choice institutionalism, is understood as the most important type of institutional analysis. The institutional analysis always focuses on the influence of the institutions on the actor's behavior. The most widespread way to define the term "institution" is to consider it as the rules, which can be either formal (e.g. the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania) or informal (e.g. some for instance, social norms).<sup>7</sup> Both the formal and the informal institutions are important for the people,

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<sup>6</sup> Simona Voveriunaite, "Official: Restrictions on movement between municipalities remain until 31 January" *Delfi*, January 3, 2021, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/oficialu-judejimo-ribojimai-tarp-savivaldybiu-lieka-iki-sausio-31-dienos.d?id=86142221>

<sup>7</sup> Sven Steinmo, "What is Historical Institutionalism?", *Approaches in the Social Sciences* Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 159

due to their ability to shape who will participate in decision making process and in the strategic behavior of the participants. At this stage, I could not continue without mentioning some great authors, who used the approach of historical institutionalism for their research.

One of them is Gregory M. Luebbert, who wrote a superb book *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Interwar Europe*, published in 1991.<sup>8</sup> This research gives us a great explanation of the political mobilization of the peasantry. According to the author, in those places where the working-class-based parties allied with the landed peasantry, the necessary critical mass for the establishment of the social democratic regimes was achieved. By contrast, in those places where the social democrats failed to forge this alliance, the landed peasantry turned against the working class and provided the critical mass on which fascism grew.

Another example is Theda Skocpol and her book *States and Social Revolutions*, which deserves to be recognized as a great study on how the combinations between the state structures, the international forces and the social class relations, make an impact on social revolutions.<sup>9</sup>

Some Lithuanian scientists also use this scientific approach in their research. A really great example is come-across the study by Liudas Mazyliis and Vaida Lescauskaitė of *Direct Elections of Mayors in Lithuania: Ongoing Debates and Fresh Experiences*. The main goal of this research was to discuss the history and consequences of a new political innovation – the direct elections.<sup>10</sup>

Although these studies differ from each other in the topic or the level of analysis, still one element unites them: the specific focus on the impact of history on the phenomena, which are observed by each scholar. Professor Sven Steinmo in his book *What is Historical Institutionalism* pointed out: “Historical institutionalism is best understood as an approach to studying politics. This approach is distinguished from other social science approaches by its attention to real world empirical questions, its historical orientation and its attention to the ways in which institutions structure and shape political behavior and outcomes.”<sup>11</sup> This quotation covers the three main features of historical institutionalism.

The first feature is the fact that the historical institutionalism emphasizes the significance of the institutions. Therefore, the concept of institution should be defined. In this article we will use the broadest definition for institutions: rules<sup>12</sup>. Professor Sven Steinmo points out: “Whether we

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[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sven\\_Steinmo/publication/238092065\\_Historical\\_Institutionalism/links/02e7e5332f52b24c1c000000/Historical-Institutionalism.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sven_Steinmo/publication/238092065_Historical_Institutionalism/links/02e7e5332f52b24c1c000000/Historical-Institutionalism.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Gregory M. Luebert, *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Interwar Europe* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 159.

<sup>9</sup> Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 5-20

<sup>10</sup> Liudas Mazyliis, and Vaida Lecauskaitė, “Direct election of mayors in Lithuania : ongoing debates and fresh experiences”, *Politikos mokslu almanachas*, no.17, 2015, 38-56  
<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12259/602>

<sup>11</sup> Sven Steinmo, “What is Historical Institutionalism?”, 159-165

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

mean formal institutions or informal rules and norms, they are important for politics because they shape who participates in a given decision and, simultaneously, their strategic behaviour.”

In second place, the academicians, who use historical institutionalism, are convinced that history is a chain of dependent occasions.<sup>13</sup> In other words, they believe in the path dependency. There are at least three important aspects why history matters<sup>14</sup>:

1. the political events happen within historical context;
2. the actors or agents can learn from the experience;
3. our expectations are also shaped by the past.

The last feature of the historical institutionalism consists in the premise that human beings are *both* norm abiding rule followers *and* self-interested rational actors. According to Professor Sven Steinmo, the way one behaves depends on the individual, on the context, and on the rule.<sup>15</sup> Those features of historical institutionalism have a concrete impact of this study. Firstly it caused the selection of the scientific method employed in this analysis. In order to discuss the current situation of the religious liberty in Lithuania I decided to use the method of process tracing. According to David Collier: “Process tracing can contribute decisively both to describing political and social phenomena and to evaluating causal claims”<sup>16</sup>. It can be noticed a clear parallel between the historical institutionalism and the process tracing method. Vatican and Lithuania during Interwar period

I will start from creation of modern Lithuania. It is a widely recognized fact that the modern state of Lithuania was created on the February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1918, by the Act of Independence, which proclaimed Lithuania as an independent state and the successor to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.<sup>17</sup> It was not enough to declare the independence and Lithuania needed the recognition from other countries. The Vatican was one of them. It is logical to separate the recognition *de facto* and the recognition *de jure*.

Lithuania achieved its *de facto* recognition from the Holy See in 1919, when the Vatican allowed to establish the first diplomatic mission in Apennine Peninsula.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it was essentially important to find a great person to implement that mission. The minister of Foreign

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 166

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 165-164.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 163

<sup>16</sup> David Collier “Understanding Process Tracing” *Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 4 (2011):823-30

<https://polisci.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/people/u3827/Understanding%20Process%20Tracing.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Vaidotas A. Vaicaitis, Leonard Besselink, Paul Bovend’ Eert, Hansko Broeksteeg, Roel de Lange (Eds) “The Republic of Lithuania”, *Constitutional Law of EU Member States*, (Kluwer 2014) 1027-1082 [https://www.tf.vu.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/V\\_Vaicaitis\\_Constitutional\\_law\\_of\\_EU\\_member\\_states\\_Kluwer\\_2014.pdf](https://www.tf.vu.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/V_Vaicaitis_Constitutional_law_of_EU_member_states_Kluwer_2014.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Algimantas Kasparavicius *Between Politics and Diplomacy. Holy See and Republic of Lithuania*, (Vilnius: LII, 2008), 55

Affairs Augustinas Voldemaras decided that the best candidate for this task was a priest called Jurgis Narjauskas.<sup>19</sup> He was chosen for this responsible task due to several reasons. Firstly, Jurgis Narjauskas was a well known person among the political elite of Lithuania and the politicians trusted in him. Secondly, he held a doctoral degree in Canon law from Pontifical Gregorian University.<sup>20</sup>

On the one hand, the development of relations between Vatican and Lithuania achieved new heights in 1922 when Pope Pius XI recognized Lithuania *de jure*.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the bilateral relations between the Holy See and Lithuania sometimes were really complicated. A good example is the article *Lituanorum gente: Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis – Conciliator of the Church and the State*, by Kestutis Zemaitis. The author explained how the Apostolic Visitor Antonius Zechini left Lithuania and decided to reside in Riga, because he perceived that the approach towards nunciature was becoming hostile.<sup>22</sup> Another source of the problems between the Holy See and Vatican and Lithuania arose from Poland, which tried to use all the available diplomatic instruments to legally institutionalize the annexation of Vilnius. Kestutis Zemaitis points out: “In 1925, Poland, bypassing Lithuania, signed the Concordat with the Apostolic Capital. By a Concordat the Vilnius Dioceses attributed to the Polish Diocese”<sup>23</sup>

Although some serious misunderstandings existed, the consequences of *de jure* recognition remained solid and long lasting. Because of judicial recognition, the Holy See started searching solutions to solve the ecclesiastical administrative questions of Lithuania. Therefore, Pope Pius XI announced the apostolic constitution of the Lithuanian people (“*Lituanorum gente*”), which stated the creation of the Lithuanian Church Province with new dioceses. The dioceses were the following: Kaunas Archdiocese, Telsiai, Vilkauskis, Panevezys and Kaisiadorys Dioceses.<sup>24</sup> Kestutis Zemaitaitis emphasized: “The most important problem of the ecclesiastical affiliation of the Archdiocese of Vilnius was solved as favorably as possible for the Lithuanians. Although it was not satisfactory for the Lithuanians that it was appointed to the Polish dioceses, it was a clear favor for the Lithuanians to be excluded from any particular Polish metropolis. Furthermore, its status as a separate metropolis testified that, under other political and territorial circumstances, this archdiocese could be restored to the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Lithuania, which was *de facto* restored after regaining Vilnius in 1939, and *de jure* after the restoration of Lithuania’s independence in 1991 thanks to Pope John Paul II”<sup>25</sup>. Besides, the Holy See showed<sup>26</sup> a very

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 56

<sup>21</sup> Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania to the Holy See and to the Maltese, “Lithuania ant the Holy See”, 2014, <https://va.mfa.lt/va/en/welcome-to-lithuania/lithuania-ant-the-holy-see>

<sup>22</sup> Kestutis Zematis, “*Lituanorum gente: Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis – Conciliator of the Church and the State*” *Logos*, no. 99 (2019):208-215 <https://etalpykla.lituanistikadb.lt/fedora/objects/LT-LDB-0001:J.04~2019~1585665542714/datastreams/DS.002.1.01.ARTIC/content>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 211

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 201

<sup>25</sup> Ibid,211

<sup>26</sup> Ibid,213

favorable approach on annexation of Klaipeda region.<sup>27</sup> These great achievements would not have happened without the efforts of the Apostolic Visitor, Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis.<sup>28</sup>

The next logical step was the Concordat between Lithuania and the Vatican, which was signed in 27<sup>th</sup> of September of 1927.<sup>29</sup> According to Algimantas Kasparavicius, the Concordat between Lithuania and the Vatican not only regulated the relations between Lithuania and the Church in the country, but also made a huge desirable impact on the improvement of the rule of law and the image of Lithuania among other countries.<sup>30</sup>

Both documents the Concordat and the *Lituanorum Gente* played a crucial role in the normalization of the bilateral ties between Lithuania and the Holy See. These documents solved all the main problems which arose from the recognition of Vilnius as a part of Poland (as much as it was possible) during interwar period. Besides, these documents have a substantial impact on later events.

### **The Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania during Soviet occupation**

Unfortunately, the period of peace in Europe was very short. Germany and Soviet Union signed a Nazi – Soviet non-aggression agreement (more commonly known as the Ribentrop – Molotov pact) in 1939. This secret pact caused the Second World War,<sup>31</sup> which included the occupation of Lithuania in 1940.<sup>32</sup> However, the influence of the Catholicism, the religious liberty and the bilateral relations between Lithuania and Vatican was so strong that remained an important aspect even after the occupation of the country.

Firstly, the Holy See demonstrated courage and never recognized that Soviets annexed Lithuania legally.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, the Catholicism was a very important motivation for those people who resisted to Soviet occupation, either by participating in the partisan movement in postwar Lithuania<sup>34</sup>, or by joining to activities described by historians and political scientists as non-violent resistance. The most important of such activities was the participation in the Publishing of the Chronicle of the

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<sup>27</sup> Klaipeda region was annexed by Lithuania in 1923.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 2133

<sup>29</sup> Ungarishes Institute, “Concordat Between Lithuania and the Vatican” (n.d.)  
<http://www.forost.ungarisches-institut.de/pdf/19270927-1.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Algimantas Kasparavicius *Between Politics and Diplomacy. Holy See and Republic of Lithuania*, 523

<sup>31</sup> David Wedgwood Benn, “Review: Russian historians defend the Molotov—Ribbentrop Pact”  
*International Affairs* 87 [No. 3 \(May 2011\)](#): 709-715.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20869721?seq=1>

<sup>32</sup> Secret bases, “Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact” (n.d.)[https://www.secret-bases.co.uk/wiki/Nazi-Soviet\\_Pact](https://www.secret-bases.co.uk/wiki/Nazi-Soviet_Pact)

<sup>33</sup> Algimantas Kasparavicius *Between Politics and Diplomacy. Holy See and Republic of Lithuania*, 525

<sup>34</sup> Audris Narbutas, *Why citizens of Šiauliai vote for left, while citizens of Panevėžys vote for right?*, Bachelor paper, 32- 38, a copy could be send by the author

Catholic Church in Lithuania, which lasted from 1972 to 1989.<sup>35</sup> Vilma Narkute in her profound article *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania in Defense of Religious Liberty (1972-1989)* wrote how this initiative revealed the massive human rights violations made by Soviets.<sup>36</sup> Besides, this journal and supported radio translations was spread by radio and republished due to the efforts of the Holy See.

Due to the spread of this publication, the Western world understood what was happening in Lithuania and knew about the serious violations of the religious liberty which were taking place. This knowledge was crucial and very helpful when, in 1990, the members of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania signed the Act of the Re-Establishment of the state of Lithuania, popularly known as the Act of March 11<sup>th</sup>.

### **Political consequences of occupational experience**

One of the greatest days in the history of modern Lithuania was the 11<sup>th</sup> of March of 1990, when the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania led by the deputies of Sajudis declared the independence from Soviet Union by signing Act of the Re-Establishment of the State of Lithuania.

Among the many consequences of the occupational past, for our research the most important are two. First of all Lithuania decided to come back to the family of western democracies and, therefore, approved several laws on the protection of the religious liberty. Second, the approach on the occupational past created the main political cleavage, which separates the left wing parties, such as the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania and the Labor party, from the right wing parties, such as the Homeland Union Lithuanian Christian Democrats party.<sup>37</sup> Most studies reveal that people who think that the independent Lithuania is better than the occupied Lithuania votes for right parties, while those people who believes otherwise prefer the left parties.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, there is scientific evidence that those people who believe in God are more likely to vote for the Homeland Union Lithuanian Christian Democrats party.<sup>39</sup> At this stage it would be useful to remind the premise of the historical institutionalism that human beings are *both* norm abiding rule followers *and* self-interested rational actors. Therefore, the direct conflict between the Homeland Union Lithuanian Christian Democrats Party and the Roman Catholic Church would be harmful for the current Government of the Republic of Lithuania.

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<sup>35</sup> Vilma Narkute, "The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania in Defence of Religious Liberty (1972-1989)," *Lituanistika*, no 7,(2002): 159 <https://etalpykla.lituanistikadb.lt/object/LT-LDB-0001:J.04~2002~1367183326933/J.04~2002~1367183326933.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 159

<sup>37</sup> Aine Ramonaite, *Political Anatomy of Post-Soviet Lithuania*, (Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2007), 18-39

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Audris Narbutas, Why citizens of Šiauliai vote for left, while citizens of Panevėžys vote for right?, 55

## Legal protection of religious liberty in independent Lithuania

The Rebirth of Lithuania required the establishment of a new Constitution for the country. This Constitution was approved by referendum in 1992. The main document of the country declared the protection of the most important human rights including religious liberty, which was institutionalized by the Article no. 26<sup>40</sup>. The direct consequence of the Constitution was the Law of Religious Communities and Associations, which was approved by the parliament in 1995. The Article no. 2 of this law claims: “Every individual within the Republic of Lithuania shall have the right to freely adopt any religion or faith, also to change his choice and, either individually or with others, in private or in public, to profess it, perform religious rites, practice faith, and provide instruction thereof.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the Article no. 8 focuses on Freedom to Perform Religious Rites: “Religious rites and cult ceremonies shall be freely performed at cult premises and in their vicinity, in the homes and flats of citizens, funeral parlours, cemeteries and crematoriums.”<sup>42</sup> Finally, the Constitutional Court made some important conclusions. For instance, in 1995, it was affirmed that there is no reason to think that the Constitution would allow the restrictions on human right to express his faith and religious views.<sup>43</sup>

Hence, the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania and the Law on Religious Communities and Associations are extremely important in regard to the current situation of religious liberty, but it would be a mistake to ignore influence of the bilateral relations. As previously motioned, the Vatican never recognized the occupation of Lithuania. Therefore, the Holy See had a positive image in the eyes of Lithuanian politicians and whole nation. Consequently, in 2000 three Agreements were signed between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania. The most important for the scope of the current study is the Agreement Concerning the Judicial Aspects of the Relations between the Catholic Church and Lithuania. The Article no. 1 of this document declares “The Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania agree that the Catholic Church and the State shall be independent and autonomous each within their field and, adhering to the said principle shall cooperate closely for the spiritual and material welfare of every individual and of society.”<sup>44</sup> The Article no. 4 emphasizes: “The Republic of Lithuania shall also recognize freedom of the Catholic Church and its communities to perform publicly religious rites <...> as well as acknowledge the total competence of the Catholic Church in its sphere.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.21892>

<sup>41</sup> <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.385299?jfwid=16j6tpgu6w>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Lithuania, “Freedom to profess and impart a religion or belief (Article 26 of the Constitution)” (n.d.), <https://www.lrkt.lt/data/public/uploads/2016/06/1993-2009.-ii-skyrius.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> Secretariat of state, “Agreement between the Republic of Lithuania and the Holy See concerning the Juridical Aspects of the Relations between the Catholic Church and the State” [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/secretariat\\_state/2000/documents/rc\\_seg-st\\_20000505\\_santa-sede-lituania-giuridico\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/2000/documents/rc_seg-st_20000505_santa-sede-lituania-giuridico_en.html)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

All the mentioned documents revealed that the religious liberty is highly institutionalized in the legal system of Lithuania. Besides, the agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania Concerning Judicial Aspects of the Relations between the Catholic Church and Lithuania created obligations for the Church to cooperate with the State of Lithuania.

### **Global pandemic and the two Governments of Lithuania**

In Lithuania, the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2020.<sup>46</sup> Since that day, the country had two lockdowns. The first one lasted from March 14<sup>th</sup> to June 17<sup>th</sup>.<sup>47</sup> The Second one started on November 4<sup>th</sup> and, has not ended yet.<sup>48</sup> Each lockdown was managed by a different Government.

The former Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis and his cabinet fought with the first wave of the coronavirus. The former government of Lithuania recommended to religious communities not organizing religious rites.<sup>49</sup> This recommendation was compatible with the freedom of religion. Besides, the Episcopal Conference of Lithuania immediately informed the Catholics that public masses will be halted for a while.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, it is coherent to say that, during the first wave of Covid-19, both the Republic of Lithuania and the Church acted according to the Agreement. This partnership was fruitful and Lithuania was seen as a great example of managing the health crisis in the eyes of OECD.<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately, the situation has changed dramatically in the third quarter of the year 2020. In fact, the numbers of confirmed cases rose abruptly like a rocket. For instance, Chinese media wrote: "Lithuania's Health Ministry on Wednesday reported 3,128 new confirmed COVID-19 cases in a 24-hour span, the biggest daily spike since the country confirmed its first case on Feb. 28."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The Government of the Republic of Lithuania "First coronavirus case confirmed in Lithuania," (February 2020) <https://lrv.lt/en/news/first-coronavirus-case-confirmed-in-lithuania>

<sup>47</sup> BNS, "Lockdown ends but Lithuania will live under emergency conditions," *Delfi* <https://www.delfi.lt/en/politics/lockdown-ends-but-lithuania-will-live-under-emergency-conditions.d?id=84550153>

<sup>48</sup> LRT, "Lithuania imposes nationwide lockdown," *LRT* (December 2020) <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1296887/lithuania-imposes-nationwide-lockdown>

<sup>49</sup> The Government of the Republic of Lithuania "Decision on the declaration of lockdown in the territory of Lithuania," *MyGovernment* (March 2020) <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/73c0b060663111eabee4a336e7e6fdab>

<sup>50</sup> Jovita Budreikiene, and Naglis Navakas, "Quarantine is announced in Lithuania, Confirmed 9 cases of Covid-19," *Verslo Zinios* (March 2020): <https://www.vz.lt/2020/03/14/patvirtintas-naujas-koronaviruso-atvejis>

<sup>51</sup> The Government of the Republic of Lithuania "The OECD praises Lithuania for the proper management of the coronavirus pandemic," *Koronastop* (June 2020). <https://koronastop.lrv.lt/en/news/the-oecd-praises-lithuania-for-the-proper-management-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic>

<sup>52</sup> Huaxia, "Daily COVID-19 cases in Lithuania top 3,000," *Hinxuanet*, December 10, 2020,, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/10/c\\_139576973.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/10/c_139576973.htm)

Due to such a serious situation, the Government declared the Second national lockdown on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020. This decision included the recommendations for the religious communities to organize the religious retreats and recollections remotely (online).<sup>53</sup> However, the Episcopal Conference decided to continue organizing public masses in the churches, but with serious restrictions in the number of participants.<sup>54</sup>

The decision to declare the quarantine was made in the context of important changes in the political landscape. The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union lost the parliament elections of October 2020, in which the clear winner was the party of Homeland Union Lithuanian Christian Democrats. This party formed a mostly liberal coalition with the Liberal Movement of the Republic of Lithuania and The Freedom party.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the Ingrida Simonyte's Government took the power on December 11<sup>th</sup>.

One of the first works of this Government was the expansion of lockdown on December 14<sup>th</sup>.<sup>56</sup> For instance, the Government of Lithuania has been restricting the right to move from one municipality to another for several weeks (till the current moment). In respect to the religious aspects, on the one hand the expanded quarantine included only recommendations (no prohibitions) for religious communities and, on the other hand, it politically required an enormous support from the Episcopal Conference. The Church demonstrated a high dose of solidarity with the Government of Lithuania and announced a temporary halt of the public masses from December 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>57</sup> However, some misunderstandings occurred when, after the Christmas feasts, the Episcopal Conference announced the return of masses in the churches with restrictions.<sup>58</sup> This decision caused severe critics from society<sup>59</sup> and insistent requests from the Government, and it produced

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<sup>53</sup> The Government of the Republic of Lithuania "Nationwide lockdown as of Saturday," (November: 2020) <https://sam.lrv.lt/en/news/nationwide-lockdown-as-of-saturday>

<sup>54</sup> The Episcopal conference "Lithuanian bishops: services will not be interrupted during quarantine, but the number of believers will be limited," *Bernardinai*, (November 2020), <https://www.bernardinai.lt/lietuvos-vyskupai-pamaldos-karantino-metu-nenutruks-bet-bus-ribojamas-tikinciuju-skaicius/>

<sup>55</sup> BNS, "Lithuania's liberal parties to receive five ministries under coalition deal," *LRT* (November 2020), <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1273780/lithuania-s-liberal-parties-to-receive-five-ministries-under-coalition-deal>

<sup>56</sup> LRT, "Lithuanian government extends quarantine, introduces new restrictions," *LRT* (December 2020), <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1293190/lithuanian-government-extends-quarantine-introduces-new-restrictions>

<sup>57</sup> Delfi, "Conference of Bishops: from 16 December. until January 3. public worship in churches," *Delfi*, (December 2020) <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/vyskupu-konferencija-nuo-gruodzio-16-d-iki-sausio-3-d-stabdomos-viesos-pamaldos-baznyciose.d?id=86004301>

<sup>58</sup> Indre Naureckaitė, "The Lithuanian Bishops' Conference heard sharp criticism: public services will not be renewed," *Lietuvos Rytas*, (January 2021) <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvosdiena/aktualijos/2021/01/06/news/po-kilusio-pasipiktinimo---lietuvos-vyskupu-konferencija-nusprende-neatnaujinti-pamaldu-17793102/>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

a change in the decision of the bishops.<sup>60</sup> Eventually, once again, the 28<sup>th</sup> of January the Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte imperatively required not starting public mass.<sup>61</sup> The Episcopal conference agreed to this request and the renewal of public mass was postponed. The Lithuanian Episcopal conference announced its newest decision to start public mass from the 17<sup>th</sup> of February<sup>62</sup>, but under strict requirements and conditions. This decision gives the opportunity to believers to worship God.

### Conclusions

Historically, the religious liberty is highly rooted in the legal system of the Republic of Lithuania. The importance of the religious liberty is demonstrated by the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, the Law on Religious Communities and Associations, finally, the historical bilateral ties between the Holy See and Lithuania. All those institutions empowered a response of the Catholic Church and both Governments of Lithuania to the global pandemic of Covid-19. In all cases, the governmental decisions for religious groups were only of recommendation nature and, at the same time, the most common answer from the Episcopal Conference was cooperation. The fact that all the restrictions of the public masses were made by the Church clearly shows that the Republic of Lithuania did not violate the rights of the Catholics. Besides, it express a fruitful cooperation between the Church and Lithuania. The scope of the investigation only covered the relations between the Catholic Church and Lithuania, so that a further evaluation of the situation of the religious minorities still remains an open question for future studies.

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<sup>60</sup> ELTA, “Simonytė asks the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference not to renew the services in the churches yet,” *Delfi* (January 2021) <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/simonyte-praso-lietuvos-vyskupu-konferencijos-kol-kas-neatnaujinti-pamaldu-baznyciose.d?id=86342213>

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> The Episcopal conference, “Letter from Lithuanian bishops to the faithful (INFO 33),” (February 2021) <https://lvk.lcn.lt/naujienos/448>

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