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Closed Churches during the Pandemic: Liberal versus Conservative and Christian versus Atheist Argumentation in Media

Terézia Rončáková

Department of Journalism, Faculty of Arts and Letters, Catholic University in Ružomberok, 03401 Ružomberok, Slovakia; terezia.roncakova@ku.sk

Abstract: The current COVID-19 pandemic has led to the introduction of various epidemiological measures, including the ban on public worship. The problem of closed churches has become an intensely debated subject across several countries and a hotly debated question in recent media discourse. This paper provides an analysis of the arguments presented on the subject of closed churches by the media in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In addition to the detailed analysis of the argumentation used, it also presents a twofold comparison: arguments presented in liberal versus conservative media, and arguments presented in the Slovak media versus Czech media. Twenty-eight years ago, these two countries were part of one state and after the split, the countries became a model of a peaceful dissolution (the so-called 'velvet divorce'). However, from a religious perspective, they are quite different: whereas Slovakia is one of the most Christian (Catholic) countries, the Czech Republic is one of the most atheist countries in Europe. Three research dimensions are presented as part of this study: (1) media argumentation on the problem of closed churches; (2) comparison of liberal versus conservative arguments; (3) comparison of the media coverage in a strongly Christian country versus a strongly atheist country.

Keywords: media; religion; COVID-19; closed churches; argumentation; Slovakia; Czech Republic

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1. Introduction and the State of the Art

The recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a number of research opportunities within the field of media and religious studies. This paper focuses on the trinomial relationship between media, religion and the COVID-19 pandemic; or, more specifically, it examines the question of closed churches and the ban on public worship, as well as the related arguments presented in the media. This study aims to address the following key research question: what arguments were presented in the media to defend or challenge the reality of closed churches? A sample of both Slovak and Czech conservative and liberal media was collected to assess those arguments not only in terms of ideological position, but also nationality. The selection of these two countries was by no means accidental: the Czech Republic and Slovakia used to form one state (Czechoslovakia) for a period of 70 years (1918–1939 and 1945–1993). As part of a civilized divorce, the country split in 1993 and became an exemplar of peaceful dissolution. The split has gone down to history of Europe as the 'velvet divorce'. Both countries have a very different relationship to religion: whereas Slovakia is one of the most Christian countries in Europe[1], the Czech Republic is officially labelled as 'the most atheist' country in Europe[2]. Such an understanding is based on a shared stereotype, and although it is underpinned by some contemporary sociologists (such as Lužný and Navrátilová 2001; Hamplová 2008; Nešpor 2010; Václavík et al. 2018; Podolinská et al. 2013), it is also questioned by other scholars who point to the fact that Czech 'atheism' is not atheism in its original sense as a deliberate rejection of the existence of God (Gavenda 2014, p. 351), but rather a specific form of atheism which has more to do with apathy (Václavík et al. 2018, p. 112), or the fact

that Czechs show an avid interest in the supernatural and spiritual phenomena—a need which is often exemplified through the 'alternative' scene of magic (fortune-telling, amulets, horoscopes, or the notion that 'there is something above us') (Hamplová 2008). Some argue that in the Czech context, both believers and non-believers are rather 'unsettled' in their views since their anti-church, or for that matter, pro-church attitudes are often based on convention and tradition rather than some deeply rooted convictions (Nešpor 2010). The Slovak religiosity, on the other hand, is characterized by social conformity (Bunčák 2001, p. 68), significant spatial diversity (Zachar Podolinská et al. 2019), and different degrees of ongoing transformation related to secularisation (Majo 2013). Both countries are affected by a long-term trend of secularisation (Kratochvíl 2011; Lužný et al. 2007) since the 19th century as well as the latest short-term trends of de-secularisation, which, one the other hand, are characterized by the expansion of the definition of religion (Podolinská 2007), deviation from the idea of a personal God (Lužný et al. 2007), and the re-interpretation of the institution of the church—all of which have been described by scholars by various terms such as 'individuation', 'de-traditionalisation', 'privatisation of faith' or 'liquid faith' (Václavík 2010).

Previous scholarly research into the media interpretation of specific religious topics also includes the notion of news frames based on the principle of common news values (Contreras 2007), with a focus on the media's preference for conflict (Gazda 2009), scandal, entertainment and superficial generalisations, regardless of the essence of religious messages (Rončáková 2017). The scholarly research into shared argumentation bases (*topoi*) also points to a diverse range of both positively and negatively positioned media argumentation bases (González Gaitano 2009; Rončáková 2010). Research into the interpretation of identical topics in various types of media suggests fundamental differences between religious and secular media (Kolková 2008) as well as between conservative and liberal media (Psárová 2020).

Various types of research projects have been conducted on the recent ban on public worship over the past several months, with the vast majority focusing on the problem of protecting mental health during the pandemic. Most of the scholarly research confirmed that religious experiences and church services help to overcome anxieties, fear and difficulties in critical situations (Modell and Kardia 2020; Hong and Handal 2020; Koenig 2020; Molteni et al. 2020). Pirutinsky et al. (2020), for instance, examined the mental health of specific communities with respect to the closed places of public worship; Weinberger-Litman et al. (2020), for instance, focused on the Orthodox Jewish communities. DeSouza et al. (2021) explored the Afro-American and 'Black Church' communities during the pandemic. VanderWeele (2020) provided an interesting approach to the subject, in that he focused on the contrast between the argument of one's own spiritual benefit versus the argument based on love of one's neighbour. VanderWeele suggests that although the ban on public worship can be looked at as an infringement of spiritual benefits of individuals and deprivation of the need for religious worship with a negative impact on people's mental and physical health, the idea of love of one's neighbour should lead believers to give up on their worship services in order to protect the health of others. Chirico and Nucera (2020) provide an account of their first-hand experience of the fight against COVID-19 on the front line and call for engaging spirituality in the fight against the virus. Genig (2020), from a perspective of an Orthodox priest and hospital chaplain, points to the question of mystery in the care for patients suffering of COVID-19.

Other scholars explored the modifications to religious rites and new approaches introduced by churches during the pandemic (Bryson et al. 2020; Bawidamann et al. 2020). Kim (2020) concluded that the transition to 'contactless' worship services had already taken place and had been accepted without being subject to the scrutiny of public debate. The third category of scholarly interest includes studies focusing on the specific activities of churches during the examined period (Conteh 2020; Galiatsatos et al. 2020). The fourth category of research projects examined the subject by highlighting the new 'post-corona' era and the related challenges faced by the church (Hwang 2020; Levin 2020).

Hill et al. (2020) also provide some interesting insights as they examine the relationship between the degree of religiousness in individual US states and the population's mobility during the pandemic. An in-depth qualitative research into the same subject was conducted by Thorndahl and Frandsen (2020), who emphasized strong emotionally charged debate and raised the problem of the radical invasion of the coronavirus pandemic into the lives of people and social order. One of the most comprehensive contributions to scholarly debate was the research into the (potential) infringement of religious freedom during the pandemic (Shimanskaya 2020). The author pointed to the question as to what extent the restrictive measures of governments were reasonable and justified. She concluded that whereas during the first wave of the pandemic both the churches and believers accepted the ban on public worship as an inevitable measure and were reluctant to express their disagreement (and what is more, church organizations were eager to engage in charity activities), the situation changed dramatically in the second wave when churches began to express their concerns over the infringement of religious freedoms and started to criticize their governments for the discrimination of believers.

2. Methodology

The answer to the research question on the arguments used in media—both in favour of and against the closed churches—was examined through the method of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. As this approach to examine the subject (which is, admittedly, relatively new within the scholarly debate) is quite specific, we were unable to find this type of argumentation analyses within the existing research material. This led us to formulate our argumentation categories from scratch. In that process, we found the so-called framing method quite useful. The idea was to categorise the subject and subsequently analyse the textual content based on those categories. The frames tend to overlap with the topics present in the discourse subject to examination (Gazda 2009), and this methodological tool also enabled us to engage in a more in-depth examination of the categories and extend such an undertaking also to the underlying phenomena. One of the main proponents of the framing method is R. Entman. He suggests that to frame is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman 2004, p. 5). According to Entman, frames take on four functions: they (1) define the problem, (2) diagnose the cause of the problem, (3) make moral judgements and (4) suggest remedies or courses of action in response to the problem. (Entman 1993, pp. 51–58). It is exactly that interpretative approach by the media involving moral judgements, which is important in formulating the arguments in their published texts.

Our research sample of texts was collected from print and online media with different backgrounds within the liberal–conservative and Christian–secular spectrum (Table 1). As concluded by M. Sekerák (2015, p. 60), what is Christian (and Catholic in particular) is often identified as conservative and this part of the spectrum is often labelled as traditionalism. The opposite side of the spectrum is often denoted as modernist or progressivist, and critics often label the proponents of those ideas as liberals, Marxists or leftists. In general, the relationship between conservatives and liberals appears to be more of an antagonistic symbiosis rather than a fruitful dialogue (Rončáková and Sekerák 2017). This relationship was revived some 30 years ago in sociology and political science under the banner of a 'culture war' dating back to the period of Bismarck's struggle against the Catholic Church back in the 1870s. The term 'culture war' was coined by James Davison Hunter (1992) and is generally defined as a conflict between the conservatives and liberals—i.e., a conflict based on an ideological worldview regardless of religion, ethnical affiliation, social class or political views (Holt and Cameron 2010; Hartman 2015; Chapman 2009). J. D. Hunter even concludes that the orthodox in these religio-cultural traditions have much more in common with each other than they do with progressives in their own faith or philosophical tradition. (Hunter 2009, p. 1316).

Table 1. Research sample.

Medium	Country	Type	Profile	Number of Texts
Denník N	Slovakia	Online + print	Secular-liberal	38
SME	Slovakia	Online + print	Secular-liberal	41
Postoj	Slovakia	Online	Christian-conservative	24
Štandard	Slovakia	Online	Christian-conservative	11
Hlavné správy	Slovakia	Online	Christian-conservative	13
Křesťan dnes	Czech Rep.	Online	Christian-conservative	33
Konzervativní noviny	Czech Rep.	Online	Christian-conservative	5
Christnet	Czech Rep.	Online	Christian-liberal	24
Echo24	Czech Rep.	Online	Secular-conservative	6
MF Dnes	Czech Rep.	Online + print	Secular-liberal	53
Deník N	Czech Rep.	Online + print	Secular-liberal	11
Forum24	Czech Rep.	Online	Secular-liberal	15
12 sources in total				274

In Slovakia, liberal media are identified with secular media, and the conservative media with Christian media. In the Czech Republic, all four combinations between secular, Christian, liberal and conservative are present. In that respect, we have based our approach on the self-definition of media and their long-term positioning. Our sample included mainstream secular dailies with the highest circulation in both countries (*SME, MF Dnes*), which positioned themselves as liberal. Subsequently, in order to include more clearly articulated conservative and liberal argumentation lines, we supplemented the sample with media extending outside of the mainstream—in the sense outlined above—with a broader nation-wide reach. Here, our focus was placed on the most equitable representation of the liberal and conservative polarity.

As for the research interval of texts, the sample was taken from the beginning of the pandemic, or the first ban on public worship (March 2020) until Epiphany (6 January 2021), i.e., until the period after Christmas which—along with the period of Easter 2020—happened to be most sensitive in terms of the impact of closed churches. The sample also includes opinionated texts including, without limitation, hard news, features, editorials, columns, analysis, essays, interviews, reportages or diaries. We used online versions of individual media to identify the texts for our sample, and we used the search tools of individual websites to search for keywords such as 'church', 'worship', 'mass'. The main unit of analysis was one text (article).

We examined a total of 274 texts (127 Slovak and 147 Czech). Their frequency (Figure 1) varied over time depending on the development of the pandemic in individual countries. In Slovakia, the ban on public worship was lifted on 10 March 2020, and later reimposed (to some extent) starting 6 May 2020. In October, as part of tightening, the number of participants allowed to attend masses decreased and from 19 December onwards, services were gradually banned in the most affected regions, and subsequently banned nation-wide from 1 January 2021[3]. In the Czech Republic, public worship was banned from 15 March 2020 until 24 April 2020. From then on, the limit on the number of participants in worship services gradually increased from 15 to 500 believers. During the summer, services were allowed with minimum limitations; however, in October, limits were reimposed with a mechanism of gradual tightening and easing depending on the severity of the situation. However, masses were never banned on a nation-wide level.

Most of the texts covering the subject of closed churches appeared during the first wave of the pandemic. In both countries, the Easter period (12 April) coincided with the period of national lockdowns with banned public worship, and therefore most of the texts on the subject, quite logically, appeared during the months of March and April. In the Czech Republic, the 'second wave' of extensive coverage did not materialize, except for the Christmas period, during which the media mostly discussed the question of midnight

masses. In Slovakia, the second wave of the pandemic was even more fruitful in terms of the number of published texts compared to the first wave.

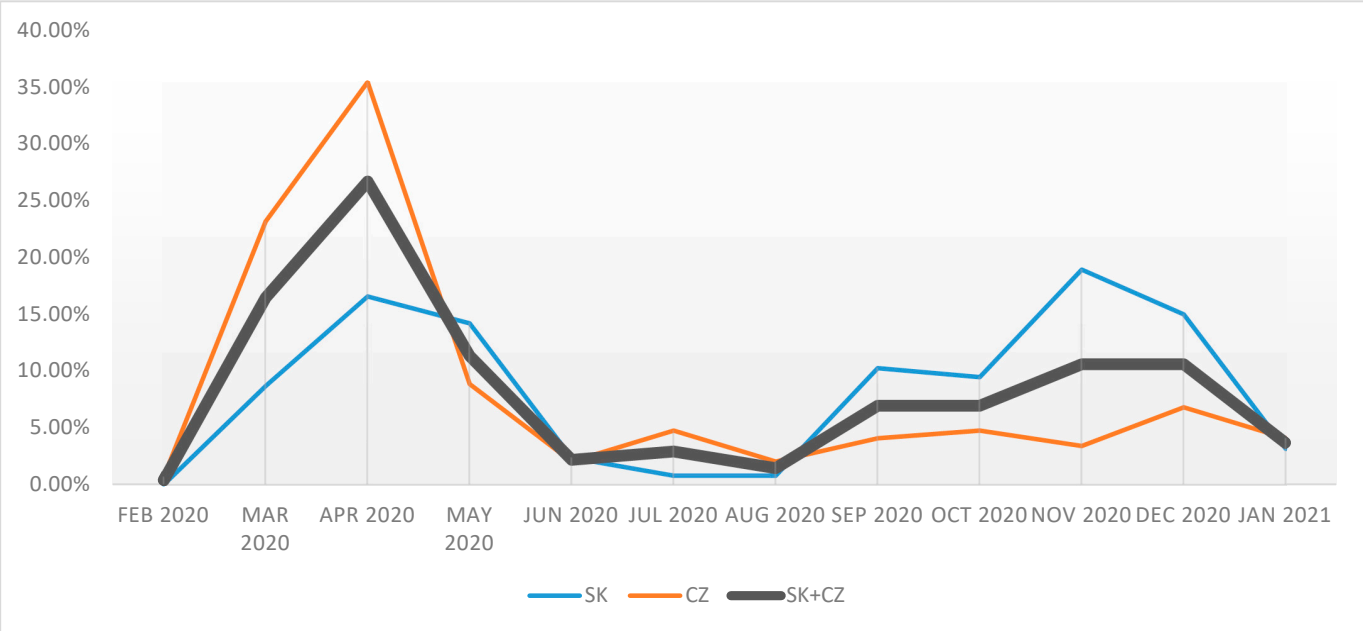

Figure 1. Chronology of published texts (percentage of total).

In addition to basic identifiers of each text (such as medium, date, author), we have also recorded the genre and origin of the presented opinion (i.e., whether the text is an opinion of the author or a quote from an external respondent). Subsequently, we reviewed the texts for arguments with some texts containing several arguments (coefficient 1.55 arguments per text). The identified arguments were divided into six aggregate categories:

- A1: responsibility;
- A2: opportunity;
- A3: importance of faith;
- A4: safety of churches;
- A5: discrimination of the church[4];
- A6: religious freedom.

Each category included identical arguments, i.e., arguments rooted in the same underlying principle; however, each of them had two opposite vectors:

- A1: closing the churches is required to protect public health/not required;
- A2: the pandemic is an opportunity for believers/not an opportunity;
- A3: faith is important and useful for the life of human beings/not important nor useful;
- A4: from the epidemiologist perspective, churches are safe/not safe;
- A5: churches are discriminated against as a result of the ban on worship in favour of other institutions/other institutions are discriminated against in favour of the churches;
- A6: closing churches is an infringement of religious freedom/is not an infringement of religious freedom.

3. Findings

The following passage explores individual argumentation categories and the related first-level statistical findings. Subsequently, second-level statistical tools are applied to examine further interrelations.

3.1. A1: Responsibility

The category of responsibility (Figure 2) includes arguments that the closing of churches was (not) required to ensure public safety and protect public health. The following vectors were observed:

- positive: closing of the churches is necessary to ensure public safety,
- negative: closing of the churches is not necessary to ensure public safety.

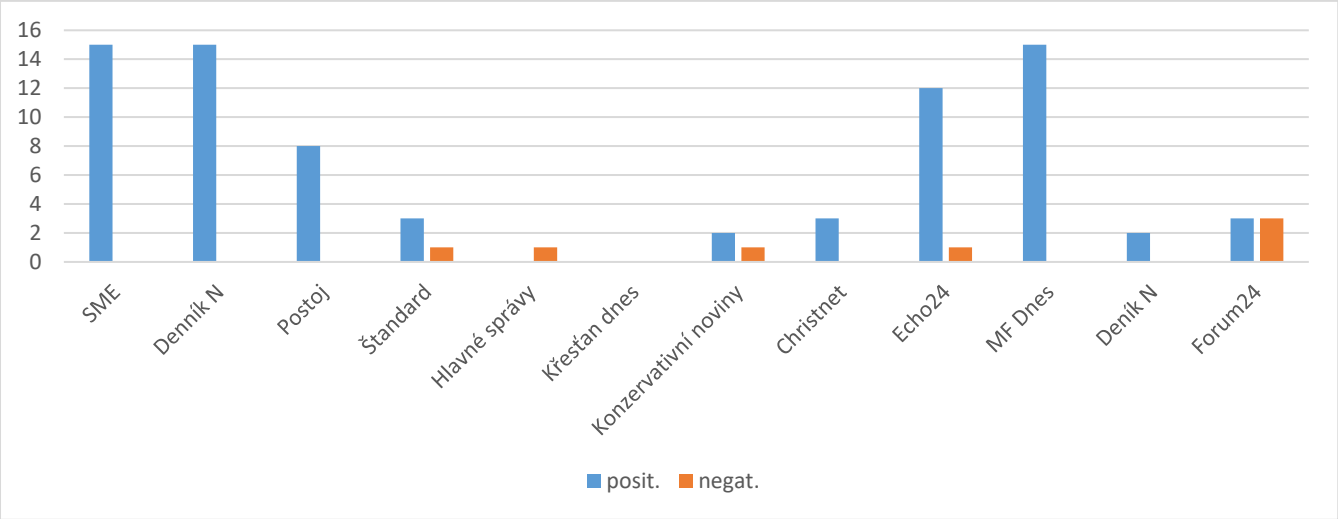

Figure 2. Occurrences of 'responsibility' as an argument (A1).[5]

This argument was typical of the secular media. Media with a Christian footing were reluctant to use it, but in principle they accepted this position; counterarguments were an exception. One occurrence was observed in four conservative periodicals, and three occurrences—quite remarkably—in a Czech liberal secular medium. It was argued that measures adopted by the government are exaggerated, unnecessary and inefficient. In more extreme cases, authors were raising further requirements (such as to receive the Eucharist on the tongue). *"A public worship service where believers sit two metres from each other and all of them—including the clergy—wear rags around their snouts is something I find—to put it archaically—deplorable before the Lord. I can do very little against it but still, there is something I can do: as long as this masquerade goes on, no one will see me in the church,"* (Doležal 2020) said Bohumil Doležal for the Forum24 website.

3.2. A2: Opportunity

This argumentation category (Figure 3) included views that the current situation provides an interesting opportunity for the churches and believers to deepen their faith, develop otherwise neglected spiritual and pastoral practices, abandon the church walls, and go 'out' to the people, reinvigorate their spirituality through personal prayer, family liturgy, etc. The positive vector was seldom balanced by a negative one:

- positive: closing of churches brought about interesting challenges for spiritual life,
- negative: closing of churches has not brought about any positives, just negatives.

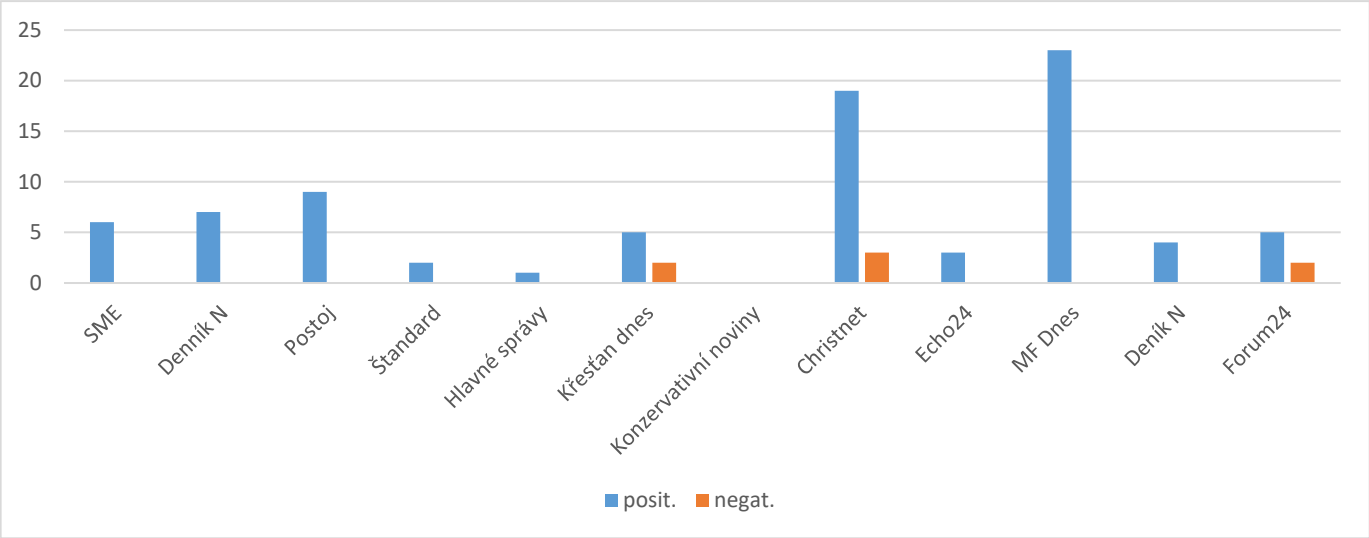

Figure 3. Occurrences of 'opportunity' as an argument (A2).

"Maybe some of us have thought at the beginning of this crisis that this was just an 'accident', some kind of 'coal-shortage school holiday' which would somehow fade away, and then we would come back and live on like in the old days. No, it will not. And if we tried to do so, it would be wrong," (Halík 2020) concluded Tomáš Halík in an open letter to believers. This type of argument was typical of the Czech environment, or more specifically, the Czech liberal media. Some arguments of this type were also found in the Slovak conservative and liberal media, but 100% of the liberal media subcategory were texts featuring Christian guest contributors; hence, these arguments were not put forward by in-house editors. As for the Czech secular media discourse, most of the texts featuring this argument represented interviews with priests, stories from within the church environment, or guest columns written by the clergy. However, this argument was also used by in-house editors in their own columns or news stories.

3.3. A3: Importance of Faith

This argument (Figure 4) addresses the importance and usefulness of religious faith as an integral part of human life and points to the human desire for transcendent experience and religious behavior. Two vectors were observed in that respect:

- positive: faith is necessary and useful for life,
- negative: faith is unnecessary and useless.

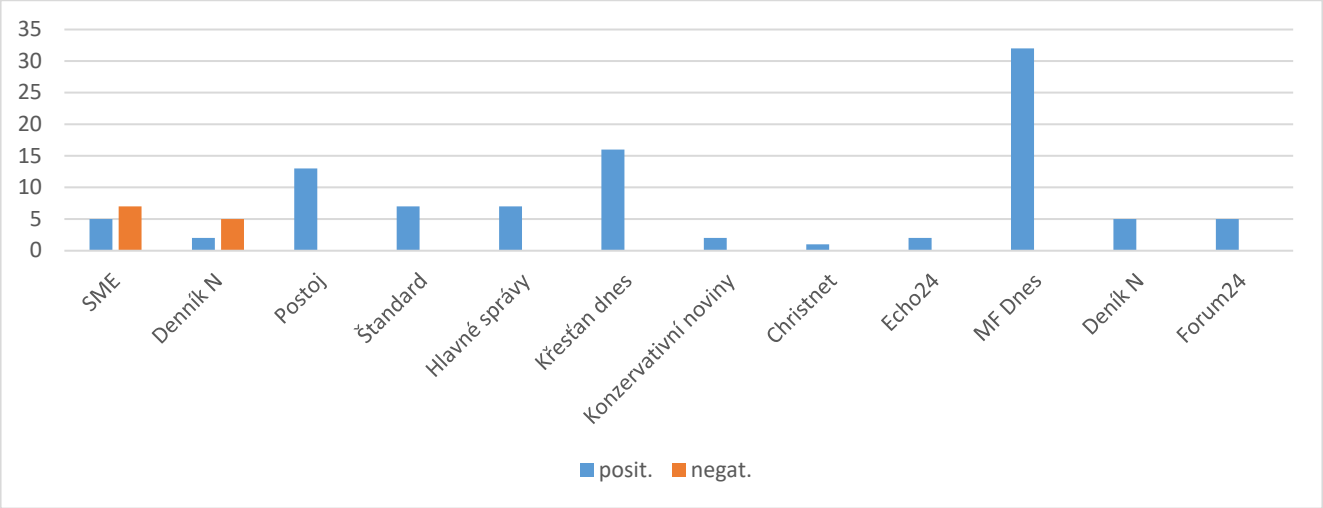

Figure 4. Occurrences of the 'importance of faith' as an argument (A3).

Our review of this argument proves that the differences between the Czech and Slovak media are quite striking: whereas in the Czech context this argument was very popular, in Slovakia it took on almost exclusively the form of the negative vector. In the Czech Republic, the usefulness of faith and, for that matter, the churches was routinely emphasized; the media pointed to the fact that the church actively tried to help, it was useful, close to people's suffering and helped overcome mental difficulties. In Slovakia, this argument was present almost exclusively in media with a Christian background (although it also appeared in secular media, but only as part of guest contributors' stories or interviews, and not directly in the texts of in-house editors). The Slovak media highlighted the opportunity to deepen one's personal faith (rooted in a kind of existential or implicit need or desire of believers for the liturgy, church communities or sacraments; often pointing to the pain of people being deprived of those needs). *"I was suffering like an animal that I could not attend the mass. . . . without Sunday communion, I felt uneasy,"* wrote Martin Leidenfrost, correspondent of the Postoj website (Leidenfrost 2020). On the other hand, liberal texts criticized religion as an 'expensive hobby' of a small group of people, religion was ridiculed and played down as something 'backward', harmful, weird, sick, embarrassing and stupid. *"Just like any other ritualized form of behaviour or experience, faith does not deserve any special treatment or protection,"* concluded Tomáš Prokopčák, commentator of the SME daily (Prokopčák 2020).

3.4. A4: Safety of Churches

The argument regarding the safety of churches (Figure 5) pointed to the level of epidemiological risks related to the functioning of churches and worship gatherings. Both vectors associated with this argument were widely represented:

- positive: churches are safe in terms of virus transmission risks,
- negative: churches are dangerous in terms of virus transmission risks.

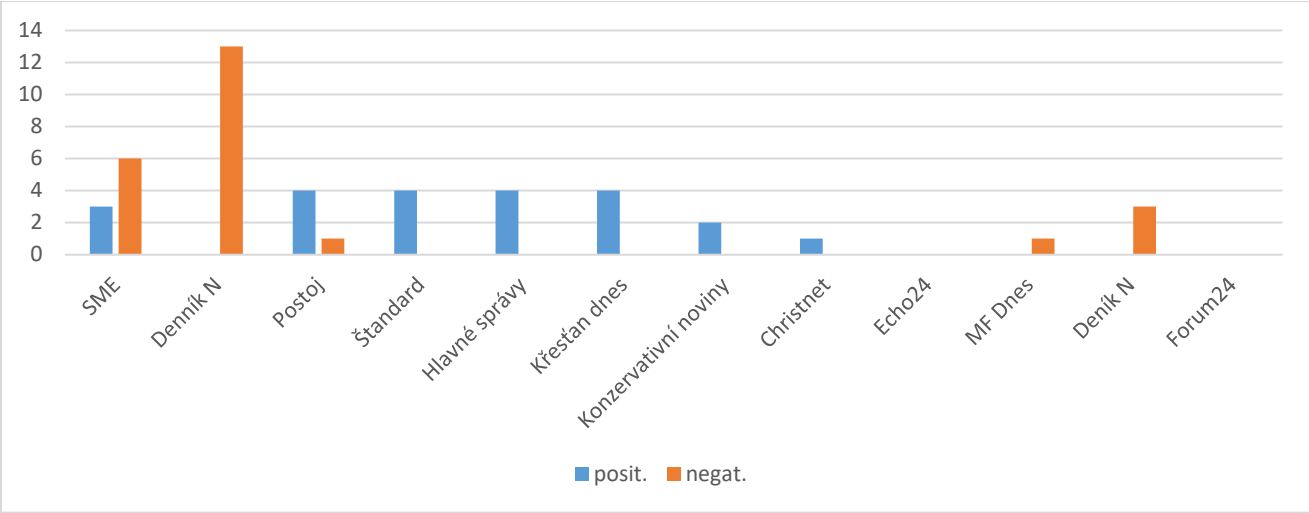

Figure 5. Occurrences of 'safety of churches' as an argument (A4).

This argument was heavily used in Slovakia, where the safety of churches represented one of the key arguments of the Slovak (liberal) media in favour of banning public worship. The liberal media argued that from the epidemiological standpoint, churches were extremely dangerous and pointed to studies which presented churches as 'super-contagious' focal points. Sometimes, authors did not hesitate to use irony or satire. The following poem by Vlado Janček appeared in the *Denník N* daily:

One after another

'Tis clear we shall ease

first wave was a breeze

Under just and proper order

Masses first, without dispute

funerals shall follow suit. (Janček 2020)

The conservative media responded to those claims by piling up arguments to the contrary. Interestingly, in the Czech Republic these arguments barely caught the media's attention.

3.5. A5: Discrimination

The argument of discrimination (Figure 6) was based on a comparison of the treatment of churches/masses compared to the treatment of cultural or sports events. Two vectors were identified depending on which side of the 'conflict' was regarded by the authors as being discriminated against:

- positive: churches are discriminated against in favour of theatres, restaurants, stadiums, schools, etc.,
- negative: churches are unjustly favoured to the detriment of theatres, restaurants, stadiums, schools, etc.

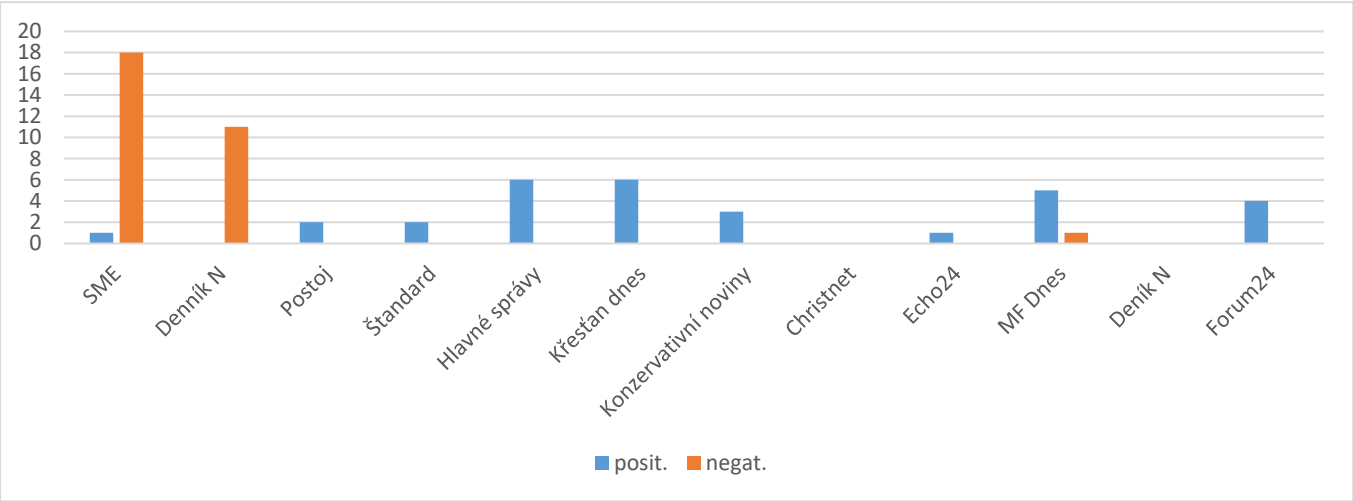

Figure 6. Occurrences of 'discrimination' as an argument (A5).

This argument also originated in Slovakia, or, more precisely, it was popular in the Slovak liberal media discourse; authors pointed to schools, restaurants, fitness centres or sport stadiums being discriminated against in favour of the churches. During the period when churches were partially open, the media often highlighted other public places of gathering which had to be closed (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Illustration photo titled 'This restaurant will open on Monday' (14 November 2020). This image was published on the Facebook profile of the Slovak MP Jana Bittó Cigániková, member of the liberal party Sloboda a solidarita (Freedom and Solidarity); after becoming viral, the photo was appropriated by a number of media.

On the other hand, conservative media raised concerns over discrimination against churches at the time when restaurants and fitness centres were open. In the Czech Republic, hobby markets opened before Easter and they became a symbol of inequality (Figure 8). The government decided to open hobby markets to encourage people to stay in their own houses during Easter and refrain from visiting each other. Such easing led to panic-buying, as the media streamed pictures and videos of overcrowded hobby markets with people queuing at the cashier desks. As a result, hobby markets became a symbol of injustice for those who criticized the closed churches. The opposite arguments (critical of the churches) were not used in the Czech media; it is a paradox that in the Czech Republic, such an argument only occurred in an interview with a Slovak journalist criticizing the Slovak conservative government (given the significant share of Christians in the current cabinet) which, according to the author, favoured churches over restaurants.

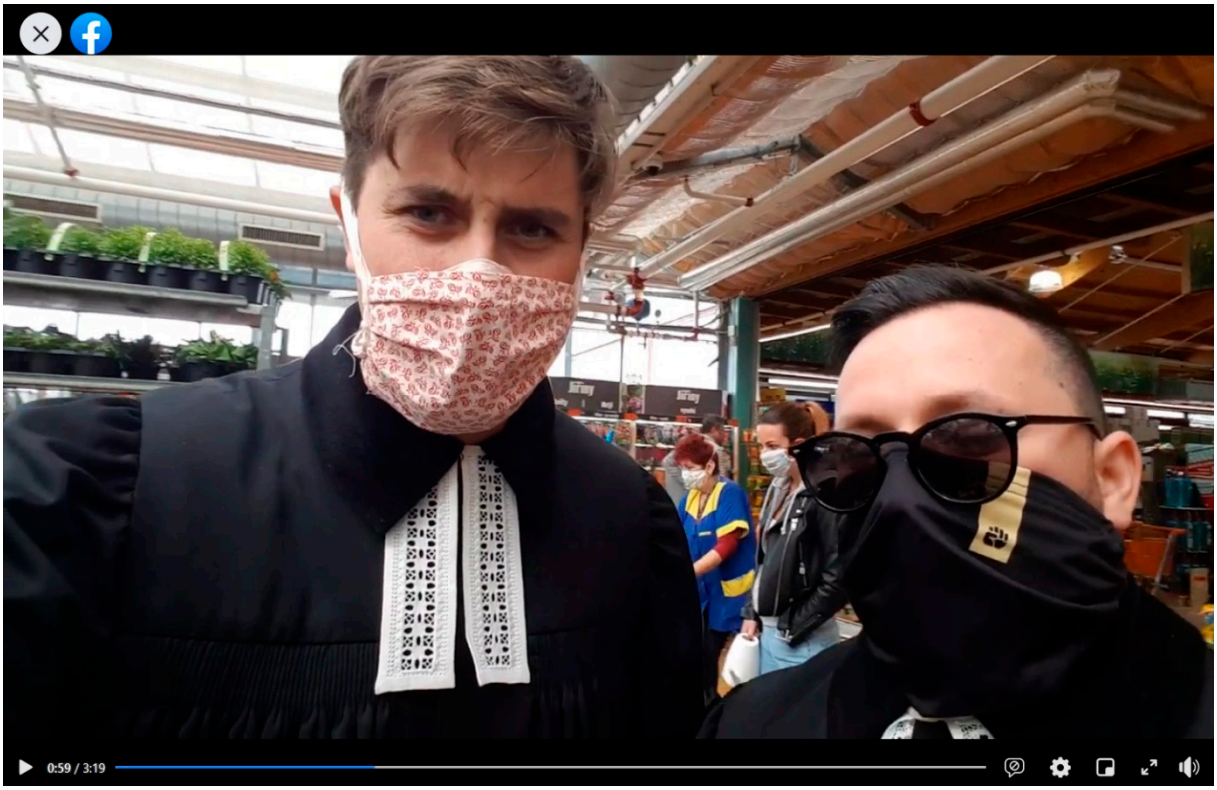

Figure 8. A screenshot from Facebook video of the Czech priestly duo titled 'Pastoral Brothers' (19 April 2020). A popular Czech priestly duo Jakub Malý and Karel Müller decided to record a video in an open hobby market as part of their series of funny videos at the time when the churches were closed. The footage shows priests as they explore individual departments in search for items suitable for setting up a mass (candles, statues, pews, chalice, etc.).

3.6. A6: Religious Freedom

The argument of religious freedom (Figure 9) was used with reference to the notion that a ban on public liturgical celebration of masses is an infringement of the freedom of religious expression and practice. Two vectors were observed in that respect:

- positive: religious freedom is infringed by the ban on public worship,
- negative: religious freedom is not affected by the ban on public worship.

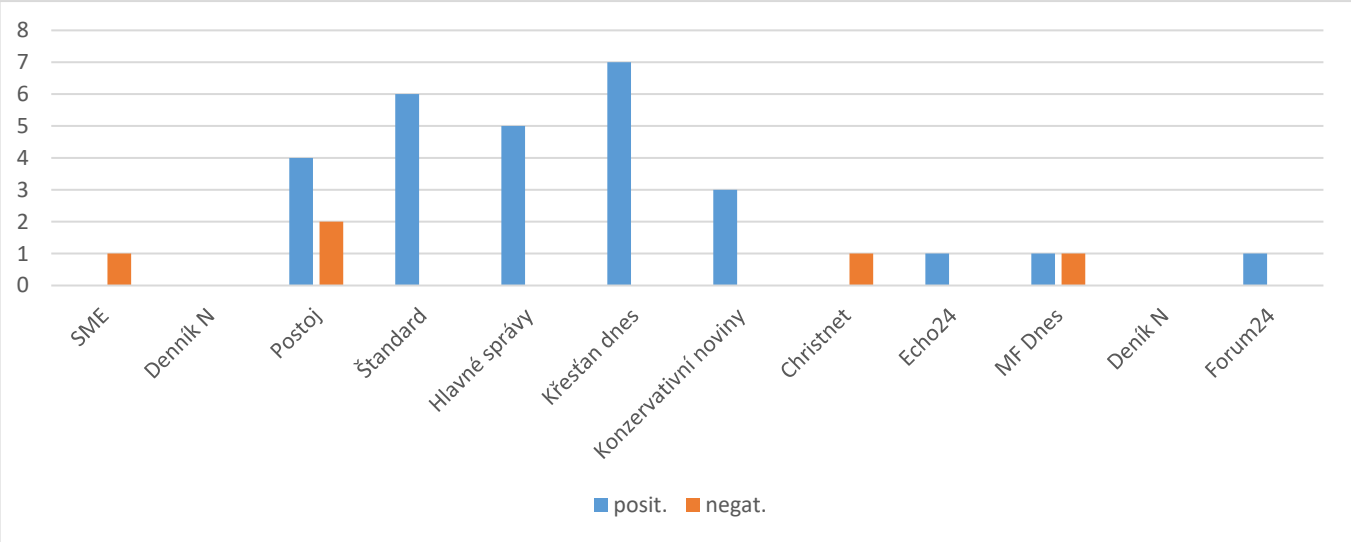

Figure 9. Occurrences of 'religious freedom' as an argument (A6).

This argument was typical of the Christian conservative media and was seldom challenged within the conservative discourse. Interestingly, three out of five texts (making the case that the closed churches should not be perceived as infringement of religious freedoms) were presented in the Christian media which tried to present a conciliatory position by emphasizing the virtue of obedience and respect for authority. The inverted narrative within the Christian conservative discourse was relatively strong and many authors perceived intervention of the state into church life during the pandemic as excessive and unreasonable. They also criticized the bishops that failed to speak up and succumbed to the bullying by the government. *"Here's my reprehension toward our bishops: No more quiet! No more fear! Jesus founded our church and said: 'And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Mt 16, 18),"* (Baránek 2020) wrote Ján Baránek in the *Štandard* daily.

3.7. Overview of All Arguments

When we look at the overall argumentation landscape (Figure 10), the most controversial arguments include the safety of churches and discrimination—both with a significant proportion of negative vectors presented in the media (churches are dangerous/churches are favoured). These were the most conflicting arguments with respect to liberal and conservative vectors. On the other hand, liberal and conservative consonance could be observed in the argument of responsibility (it is responsible to close the churches due to public safety concerns). As for the arguments based on opportunity (closed churches as a chance to deepen faith) and importance of faith (its significance for human life), one could not observe many counterarguments there. Those presented in the secular media within the positive vector did not originate (especially in Slovakia) from in-house editorial staff, but occurred in the interviews and texts written by guest contributors representing the clergy. Thus, the debate on religious freedom has remained limited to the internal discourse within the church environment and has not spilled over into the secular sphere.

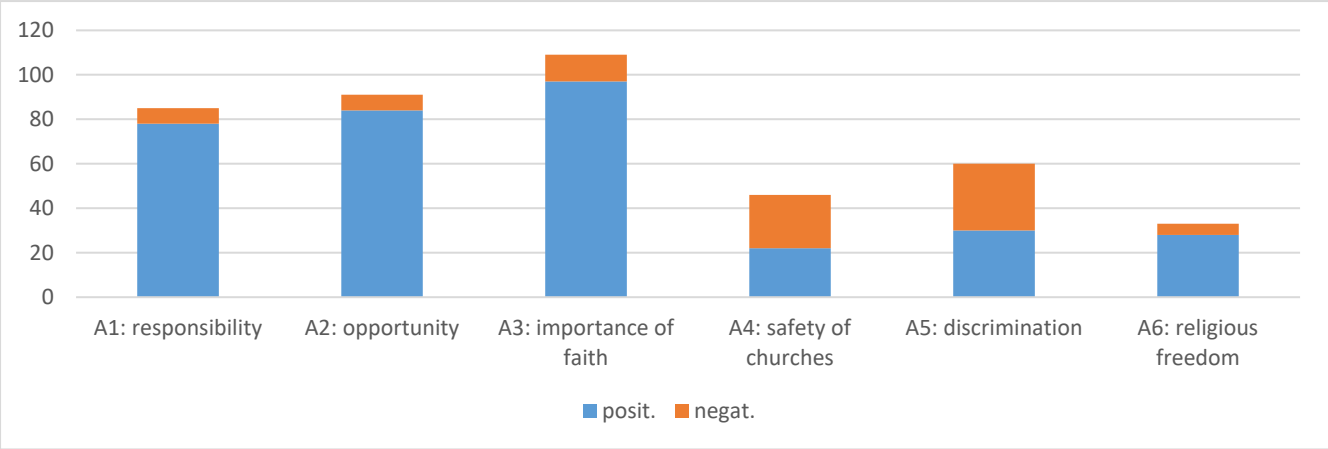

Figure 10. Number of occurrences of all arguments.

Detailed analysis of the arguments presented in the media (Figure 11) shows the following: (1) a negative vector is a typical feature of the arguments used in liberal media; (2) patterns of affinity could be observed within the sphere of liberal media; also, affinities were present within the group of conservative media; however, affinities between Christian and secular media were weaker; (3) liberal/conservative polarization is more significant in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic.

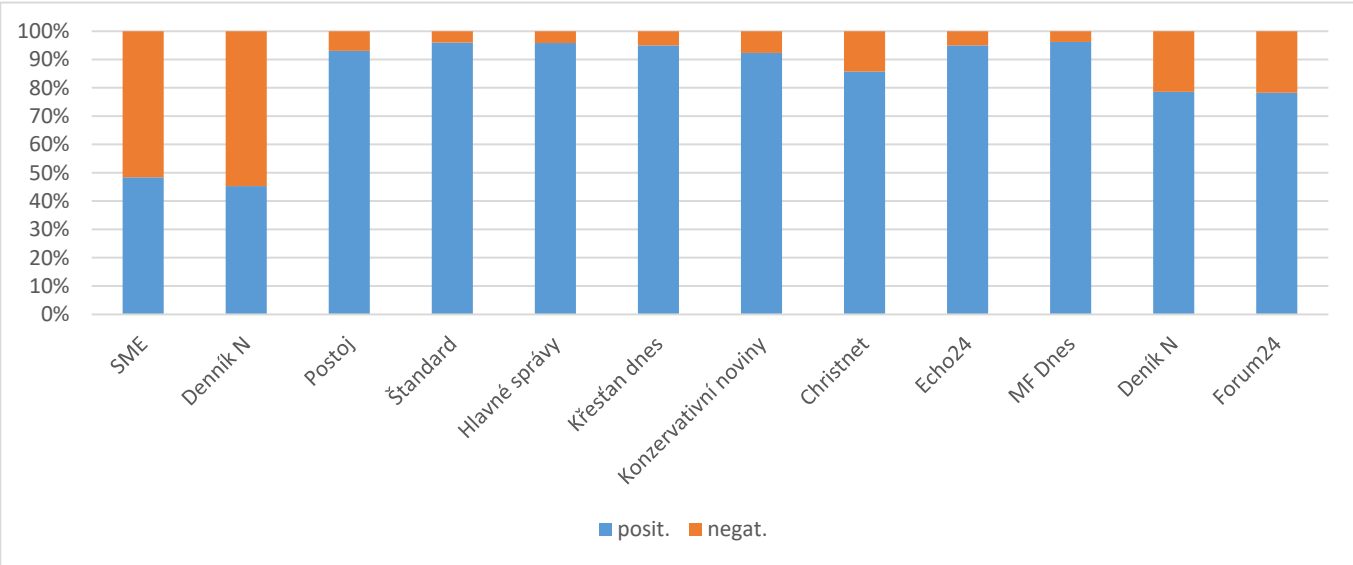

Figure 11. Overview of argumentation vectors by individual media.

The above conclusions are evident prima facie. However, we decided to underpin the above conclusions statistically through the chi-square test to prove the hypothesis of the statistical dependence of the variables involved. For that purpose, we tested the dependence between the two variables: media and argument. To ensure that the condition of the minimum value of 5 for each field of the table is fulfilled, we pooled individual media into two categories (conservative/liberal, Christian/secular). As part of the first step of the analysis, the scope of the review was limited to 'strong' arguments (to meet the required values). The arguments were then pooled into two groups based on their vectors (positive/negative vector). As for geography, the Czech and Slovak media were reviewed separately.

With respect to the Slovak media, the dependence between the type of arguments and the liberal/conservative nature of individual media was clearly confirmed ($p = 1.86237 \times 10^{-19}$)[6]. In addition, the dependence between the vector of the argument and the liberal/conservative nature of the medium was also supported ($p = 2.80316 \times 10^{-13}$). Since the conservative media in Slovakia overlap with Christian media—and liberal media overlap with secular media—it would not make sense to examine the category of Christian secular media.

In the Czech environment, the dependence between the arguments used and the liberal/conservative nature of media ($p = 0.000214068$) was confirmed. Additionally, the dependence between the arguments used and the Christian/secular nature of the media ($p = 0.000437117$) can be supported. On the other hand, no statistical dependence between the argument vectors and the conservative/liberal type of media ($p = 0.224079238$) nor the Christian/secular type of media ($p = 0.963497132$) was confirmed.

Based on the analysis, it is evident that the dependence was significantly higher in Slovakia. It was also established that in an environment where the term 'Christian' is not automatically associated with the term 'conservative', and, for that matter, the term 'secular' is not necessarily associated with the term 'liberal' (such as Czech Republic), Christian and secular media tend to differ more in terms of arguments used than in their vectors. Within the Czech Christian discourse, arguments related to religious freedom were used to a large extent (closed churches seen as an infringement) and arguments pertaining to the safety of churches (churches are safe). On the other hand, secular media were characterized by a frequent use of the argument relating to responsibility (closed churches are required to protect public health), along with the argument regarding the importance of faith (faith is necessary for the life of the society).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of a sample of 274 texts originating from 12 media sources—different in terms of both their geography and conservative/liberal or Christian/secular positioning—we arrived at six aggregate argumentation categories. The method of vectors turned out to be useful because the same argumentation basis was used in two opposite directions.

The disproportion between the Slovak and Czech media was one of the findings which really stood out. It is quite a paradox that in the country labelled as Christian (Slovakia) (Tkáčová 2014, p. 195; Tkáčová 2016, p. 96), secular media made strong statements against the church, full of emotional attacks in relation to the question of closed churches during the pandemic; however, no such attacks were observed in a country generally regarded as atheist (Czech Republic). Quite the opposite: it was the secular Czech media which made a strong case on the importance of faith for the life of the society. Czech media were willing to share stories of the creative engagement of members of the church during the pandemic: they highlighted the church's efforts to help people overcome suffering and pointed to an increased demand for spiritual experience (cf. Conteh 2020; Galiatsatos et al. 2020). This finding is in line with the pattern observed in research projects conducted in other countries—where many of the findings affirmed the positive influence of religion on mental health (Modell and Kardia 2020; Hong and Handal 2020; Koenig 2020; Molteni et al. 2020), the presence of religious solidarity (VanderWeele 2020) and the importance of spirituality in the fight against the pandemic (Genig 2020; Chirico and Nucera 2020).

The liberal–conservative consonance was observed in the argument of responsibility (the necessity to close the churches to protect public health), which was usually presented in a rational manner free of emotions. A more profound debate on the argument of religious freedom did not materialize—this argument was of little interest to the liberal environment and counterarguments were to a certain extent restricted to the Christian conservative sphere. Most of the proponents called for making government measures subject to the scrutiny of the public debate and suggested that the measures are not accepted too humbly (cf. Kim 2020). However, this argument was not rare. This finding is in accordance with

the conclusions of O. Shimanskaya (2020), who suggested that the European legislation on the freedom of profession of faith should be improved with regard to public safety as a prerequisite for a sustainable economic, political and cultural development in Europe.

The argument on the importance of faith was not subject to controversy; however, in the Slovak environment, the counterarguments could be observed quite often (faith is useless and ridiculous). On the other hand, a strong and positive argumentation vector (faith is helpful) was prevalent in the Czech Republic. As for the religious media, this argument was associated with a strong emotional charge (cf. Thorndahl and Frandsen 2020).

The argument of opportunity was represented strongly by Christian liberal media. It was almost the only argumentation related to closed churches within that environment. This included calls for reconsideration of the functioning of the church, reinterpretation of the meaning of liturgy, liberation from formalism, development of a liturgy at home, and emphasis on the role of laity and women. Here, the new situation was perceived as an opportunity for the post-coronavirus reform of the church (cf. Hwang 2020; Levin 2020). This narrative was typical for the Czech Christian-liberal environment. In Slovakia, this argument usually took the form of calls for deepening one's personal spirituality.

The most controversial and most emotionally charged reactions were associated with the argumentation category of the safety of churches and discrimination—these were represented by the strong narratives from within the Slovak liberal environment. It was argued that churches and worship gatherings were dangerous, and they were presented as 'super-contagious places'. Similarly, it was claimed that churches were being somehow favoured over other institutions. In the Czech environment, such argumentation strategies were not observed.

The argumentation categories (and their respective vectors) represent a plausible research tool for further analyses of how the pandemic affects religion. By extending the comparison of arguments used in the media to other countries, one could obtain more valuable insights into the subject. Our Czech and Slovak comparisons show that generalized religious characteristics of countries and expectations based thereupon may prove misleading—and a careful analysis such as the one presented above may lead to paradoxical findings.

It was not the intention of this paper to provide a profound analysis of the reasons behind these phenomena but to outline some of their key drivers in the context of the contemporary sociological and theological developments. The contrast between the Slovak tradition and Czech religious apathy (Reban 2014; Václavík et al. 2018; Tížik and Zeman 2017) is directly reflected in the social and political significance of the church in both countries. With respect to the Czech Republic, the prevalent understanding among scholars is that religion and the church are detached from political and social life (Lužný et al. 2007), that they are squeezed out into the private sphere (Lužný and Navrátilová 2001), and the poor social and political relevance is supplemented by general discontent with the church across the board (Kratochvíl 2011). The situation in Slovakia is the opposite: it is felt that the church is a significant political player (Zachar Podolinská et al. 2019), sometimes perceived as an anti-democratic force during the 1990s (Reban 2014). However, there are also voices pointing to gradual withdrawal of the church from public life (Majo 2013; Valčo 2010).

The above could imply that for the Czech media, the existence of religion or the church is, quite naturally, of little interest, or that the church as a communicator is pushed out of the discourse and provided with less than proportionate coverage in media (Kratochvíl 2011, pp. 25–27). However, in our research, we have found that the level of interest in the church is similar to that in Slovakia with respect to the question of closed churches. In addition, Czech media discourse was less conflicting and less negativistic compared to Slovakia—something which might be attributed to the fact that a weak and subdued religious life does not stir up much emotion. However, the subject of our research was not some indifferent, objective news coverage, but subjective opinionated texts in which we could identify a clearly positive attitude including efforts to creatively help the church.

One way to interpret this phenomenon is suggested by T. Podolinská (2007, p. 136), who concludes that global threats increase social demand for religion. In that respect, some of the contemporary theologians point to the role of Christianity to "interpret the events and crises that arise in human affairs" and "answer the ever recurring questions about the meaning of the present life and the life to come" (TT 2012, art. 51, 52)[7]. Another reason for the existence of 'invisible religion' (Podolinská 2007, p. 137) in addition to the institutionalised structures is the "current trend of 'rediscovery' of the mystical aspect of religion, [where] people strive for experiences and direct contact with the 'entirely Other'" (Ratzinger 2007, p. 11).

On the other hand, the anti-church negativism present in the Slovak media discourse can be explained by a layer of aversion to the church as a significant social and political lobby organization which, despite the fact that it represents a majority of the society, neglects the minority, which maintains its significant influence in the centres of cultural formation including, but not limited to, publishers and the media (Hunter 2009, p. 1319). Clearly, there is a fear present in the media that the church might destabilise society due to its influence through religion (Rončáková 2017). These attitudes of the media can, to some extent, be related to the diversified religious views and their geographical distribution as well as dependence on age. Such distribution is typical of Slovakia (Zachar Podolinská et al. 2019; Podolinská et al. 2013): the news and media companies are concentrated in the capital of the country, driven by the younger generation. Previous research into the nature of the media points to a typical framing of the church as an enemy of progress, democracy and tolerance, as well as efforts to illustrate the church as a marginal social institution (Contreras 2007, pp. 126–28). As part of the media research methodologically based on *topoi*, one can observe the underlying argumentation basis in respect to the church as an undemocratic, immoral and hypocritical worldly power (González Gaitano 2009), or an image of the church as an out-of-date institution which does not reflect the needs of people, imposes limits on freedom and should not meddle with politics (Rončáková 2010, p. 390). These findings correlate with our conclusions on the Slovak media's aversion towards churches as 'super-spreading' places and criticism of the preference of churches over theatres, schools, fitness centres and pubs. Expressive terms full of irony presented in the media clearly with the aim to ridicule the opponents refer to the theological category of the 'scandal of the Cross' associated with mockery (Ratzinger 2011, p. 206). One of the *topoi* discovered by N. González Gaitano (2009) during his analysis of the visit of Pope Benedict XVI. in the USA in 2008 was "the church as a sign of contradiction". Similarly, M. Valčo (2010, p. 120) concludes that the church in today's society must take on the function of a 'counter culture', and must not be afraid to provoke the predominant culture and politically correct standpoints.

Therefore, it can be concluded that our original media research into the liberal–conservative argumentation on the question of closed churches inevitably transcends its original scope to include the interrelations within the field of sociology, political science, medicine and theology. Some of them were confirmed by our findings—such as the positive impact of religion on mental health; the need for a new legislative arrangement of religious freedom in a democratic world; flexibility and creativity of churches during crises; or the role of the church to be a sign of contradiction. On the other hand, our research also points to new questions and challenges: for instance, the idea of a quest for meaning in the context of religious apathy, the anti-church aversion in a traditionally religious environment, and the impact of the pandemic on the former and the latter.

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Notes

1 According to the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, the religous composition of the population is as follows: Roman Catholic (62.0%), Lutheran (Augsburg Confession) (5.9%), Greek Catholic (3.8%), Reformed Christian (1.8%), other minority churches (2%), unregistered churches (0.5%), no religion (13.4%), not stated (10.6%). Thus, based on the above figures taken from the latest census (2011), some form of Christian creed was professed by 75% of population.

2 According to the Czech Statistical Office, the religious composition of the Czech population is as follows: Roman Catholic (10.4%), Evangelical Church of Czech Brethen (0.5%), Czechoslovak Hussite Church (4.0%), other minority churches (0.4%), believers with no religious affiliation (9.1%), no religion (34.5%), not stated (44.7%). Hence, the share of self-identified 'believers' was 20.8%; however, only half of them were affiliated to one of the Christian churches. People with no religion represented one third of population, and almost another one third of population did not state their religious affiliation in the most recent census (2011).

3 The ban on public worship was in place until 19 April 2021.

4 The terms 'church' and 'churches' are used in the context of religious composition of both countries (please refer to notes 1 and 2) to denote institutionalised communities of Christians (Catholics, Protestants). The church (sg.) is a general term denoting a community of believers founded by Jesus Christ; the term 'churches' (pl.) accentuates various institutions existing within the framework of such communities. The term 'clerics' represents people engaged in spiritual services (mainly priests, bishops or members of orders), and is used herein as the opposite of 'lay' persons.

5 The Figures 2–8 present the absolute numbers of occurrences.

6 Given the standard significance level of $p = 0.05$, zero hypothesis was rejected (H0: variables are statistically independent); hence we arrived at H1: variables are statistically dependent.

7 An abbreviation which stands for the document of the International Theological Commission, part of the Roman Curia: Theology today: Perspectives, principles and criteria (2012); article is provided instead of the page.

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