



*Anton Radniankou is a project manager of the Local Foundation "Interakcia". He also edits intellectual online magazine IdeaBY.*

*Natallia Vasilevich is a political scientist, lawyer and theologian. She is director of Centre "Ecumena" and editor of website "Carkwa".*

## RELIGION IN BELARUS: LIMITED INDEPENDENCE

Since the concept of secular state has become a standard in a Western world long time ago, the position of the Church is not very much discussed while speaking about the political issues. However, there are tendencies of the rising interest of the Putin's regime on involving Russian Orthodox Church to strengthening its power.

And we might find similar approach of the Belarusian regime. A.Lukashenka calls the Orthodox Church as the main ideologist of the statehood, while remaining a non-believer – some kind of strange "Orthodox atheist" composition. Moreover, the Russian Orthodox Church authorities have a direct influence on the Belarusian Church, forming its shape and ideology. It is clear that other confessions are less handy to Lukashenka but their situation remains unclear. Thus, this

issue of "The Bell" is dedicated to answer these questions.

In the first article Anton Radniankou analyses the three biggest confessions in Belarus and reveals their connection with the regime. He states, that while the Orthodox Church is the most familiar to the government, Protestants are the least loyal to A.Lukashenka.

In the second article Natallia Vasilevich takes a deeper look into relations between Orthodox Church and the regime. She finds out that there are different groups among the Church branches, which position ranges from pro-Russian to pro-Nationalist wings. All in all, it is mostly influenced by authorities in Moscow and the political regime of Belarus.

*Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor*

## REGIME AND CHURCHES: WHAT IS THEREBETWEEN?

*Anton Radniankou*

Belarusians' attitude towards religion is unique. On one hand, Belarus is one of the least religious countries of the world, according to findings of Gallup Belarus. On the other hand, a number of studies suggest that the church enjoys the highest level of trust among Belarusians. Though unreligious, Belarusians find church's role important.

There are no accurate statistics of believers in Belarus. The religion is not a mandatory question during official censuses under the legislation. Therefore, any statistics are based on surveys, hardly fully adequate to issues of belief.

According to the studies of the Informational and Analytical Center under the Presidential Administration, 93.5 per cent of Belarusian citizens associate themselves with a certain religion, though only 65 per cent of Belarusians believe in God. These findings are in contradiction with the data provided by the Commissioner on Religions and Ethnicities, stating that only 58.9 per cent of population associate themselves with some confession. Though a share of those who reported a link with some religion is dif-

ferent, shares of particular religions are almost the same.

Confession (religion)	Share
Orthodoxy	82,5 %
Catholicism	12 %
Protestant churches	2 %
Other religions (Islam, Judaism, Krishnaites, etc.)	4 %

*Source: The Commissioner on Religions and Ethnicities*

The level of trust in the Orthodox Church in Belarus is higher than that in the government and personally A.Lukashenka, something that makes the Church a potentially significant political actor. As different churches have different levels of influence and represent different world views, the authorities have different attitudes towards them.

### Joined at the hip

Aliaksandr Lukashenka calls the Orthodox Church "the main ideologist of the Belaru-

## CONTENTS

1	RELIGION IN BELARUS: LIMITED INDEPENDENCE
1	REGIME AND CHURCHES: WHAT IS THEREBETWEEN?
3	ORTHODOX CHURCH IN BELARUS: BETWEEN THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND BELARUSIAN SOCIETY

**Calling himself an "Orthodox atheist", the head of the state has established strong links with the Orthodox Church during the years of his rule.**

sian statehood" and declares that he has never separated the Church from the state, since he believes that "they are sharing the same task". Calling himself an "Orthodox atheist", the head of the state has established strong links with the Orthodox Church during the years of his rule.

The Church supports Lukashenka's regime and receives funds for construction of temples in return. In 2003, Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church signed a cooperation agreement, resulting in Mitropolit Filaret's support to Lukashenka during the referendum 2004 on an opportunity for the President to be re-elected for an unlimited number of terms.

However, the Orthodox Church of Belarus cannot be fully loyal to the government. Being in fact a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Belarusian Orthodox Church is Belarusian only by name. Notably, the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church does not possess a legal registration in Belarus. The only temple attempted to construct by it was demolished for formal reasons.

Though not formally announced, the willingness of today's leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church to replace the Belarusian Mitropolit causes serious worries for the ruling elite of Belarus. The current Mitropolit is so loyal to the Belarusian government that he has awarded the Order of Saint Vladimir to Dzmitry Paulichenka, suspected by the international community in murders of Belarusian opposition leaders back in 1999-2000.

The symphony of the Orthodox Church and Belarusian authorities is endangered not only by the Russian influence. The Orthodox Church is becoming increasingly assertive on issues of death penalty and abortions. Belarus cannot be positive about it, being the last state in Europe still executing capital sentences and with almost one in four pregnancies ending up in an abortion.

#### **Cold and hot relations**

Formally, the Belarusian government is in good relations with the Catholic Church. Lukashenka praises the Catholic Church's role in improving relations with the West. During the dialogue with the West in 2008-2010, he visited the Vatican and invited Benedict XVI to Belarus. The Belarusian Catholic Church stays off the politics, with Mitropolit Kondrusiewicz using his chance to stay silent even after the brutal crackdown on a post-electoral rally on 19 December, 2010.

However, cold relations hide behind the screen of mutual respect. The government does not return old temples to the Catholic Church, limits construction of new ones, and create obstacles

for activities of priests coming from abroad. Under the lead of Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, the Catholics have been holding mass rallies in Belarusian cities increasingly often, with growing numbers of people taking part in pilgrim processions.

The fact that the Catholic Church holds masses in Belarusian is also a problem for the Belarusian government. Given the rapid Russification in Belarus, with even the history of Belarus transferred to Russian in schools, the Russian language is still banned for masses in the Catholic Church. The government is concerned about all these facts.

The Belarusian authorities would care much less about these problems, if they had influence on the Catholic Church similar to that they exert on the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. The increasing activeness of the Catholic Church irritates the regime.

As a result, two criminal investigations were launched, one against a Catholic priest and another against a Catholic activist. The priest is suspected in espionage, with no details shared neither by the government, nor by the Church. The activist is prosecuted for creating a shelter for homeless people. Having denied registration to the shelter, authorities launched a criminal investigation for "activities on behalf of an unregistered organization" (Article 193.1 of the Penal Code).

The Catholic Church will probably try to maintain good relations with Lukashenka's regime, despite the prosecutions. It feels too weak to confront the government. So far, at least.

#### **Tough case for Belarusian government**

Relations between the government and protestant churches are the coldest. The regime does not register multiple protestant communities and obstruct their activities.

An attempt by the authorities to move the New Life church out of their building is the most notorious case. The believers had received a plot around a crumbling cowshed for perpetual use, and built a temple there. The authorities wanted to seize the building, something resulting in the most massive hunger strike in the history of Belarus. More than 200 believers went on hunger strike in 2006 for about a month. The authorities retreated, but attempts are still under way to seize the temple.

Some protestant churches actively participate in politics. The Bishop of Christians of Evangelical Faith openly spoke against political persecution of Dzmitry Dashkevich, a leader of the oppositional Young Front. By the way, Dashkevich is a member of the Pentecostal Church of John

## Approaches of Lukashenka's regime to Christian churches differ, though an ambition to control is what they all have in common

the Forerunner, as well as other leaders of oppositional Young Front, Belarusian Christian Democracy, and Conservative Christian Party of BPF.

Protestant churches are the least controlled by the government, therefore are exposed to the biggest pressure. Regardless of the government's resistance, Protestants are the most rapidly growing confession in Belarus, causing serious concerns for the authorities.

### Conclusions

Approaches of Lukashenka's regime to Christian churches differ, though an ambition to control is what they all have in common. The government enjoys control over the Orthodox Church, while possibilities to do so are limited vis-à-vis the Catholic Church, and almost absent vis-à-vis protestant churches. This is a reason behind the differentiated attitude by the government.

The Belarusian regime is likely to continue attempts to 'educate' Catholics and Protestants and to make them more loyal; however, the Orthodox Church is also a threat. Russia will try to replace the aging Mitropolit Filaret (born in 1935) by a more pro-Russian Mitropolit. Activeness of the Catholic Church has provoked the Orthodoxes to be more active and to openly oppose abortions and the death penalty.

It is not worth expecting Christian churches to openly oppose the regime; yet, dissatisfaction with government's policies is growing in churches. Active Christians are joining some opposition organizations, e.g. Young Front or Belarusian Christian Democracy.

Belarus is a country where Christmas is officially celebrated twice, but a monument of Lenin remains in each city. It leaves few hopes for the Christianity to become a catalyst of change. But it is certainly an institution all political actors should try to get support from.

## ORTHODOX CHURCH IN BELARUS: BETWEEN THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND BELARUSIAN SOCIETY

*Natallia Vasilevich*

In discussions on the national identity of Belarus the Belarusian Orthodox Church is commonly referred to as the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus. On the one hand, this reflects the reality of administrative subordination of the Orthodox Church in Belarus to the Moscow Patriarchate, as well as the reproduction of cultural and ecclesial patterns of the Church in Russia as normative ones. On the other hand, both in the administrative and cultural sense Belarusian orthodoxy is connected to the historically specific multi-dimensional situation on the border of so called canonical territory of the Russian Church, influenced by specific features of the Belarusian political regime and the low level of civil society development.

According to inter-Orthodox consensus and the Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church,<sup>1</sup> Belarus is a canonical territory of this church (I.3), which means, that there are no canonical jurisdictions in Belarus other than the Moscow Patriarchate, and the few alternative communities claiming independence from this ecclesial structure are not

recognised by the Orthodox Church in general. The status of Exarchate is granted to the Orthodox Church in Belarus (IX.15), which presupposes comparatively limited autonomy with all decisions being approved by the general Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, which also appoints all the local bishops (IX).

The Belarusian Orthodox Church in 2012 consisted of 1,594 communities<sup>2</sup> united in 11 dioceses, but there is no registered membership nor internal Church or external state statistics of Orthodox Church membership, therefore the number of Orthodox believers or those who identify themselves with orthodoxy is not known. Data on religious affiliation and behaviour vary, depending on the methodology of the sociological research, and generally the number of Orthodox believers rang-

<sup>1</sup> Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church. - <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/ustav/>

<sup>2</sup> В религиозной жизни Беларуси сохраняют ведущую роль традиционные конфессии - Гуляко. - [http://www.belta.by/ru/all\\_news/culture/V-religioznoj-zhizni-Belarusi-soxranajut-veduschuju-rol-traditsionnye-konfessii--Guljako\\_i\\_622119.html](http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/culture/V-religioznoj-zhizni-Belarusi-soxranajut-veduschuju-rol-traditsionnye-konfessii--Guljako_i_622119.html)

**The Belarusian government prioritises the Orthodox Church over other religions in public discourse and legislation, however, this privileged position is balanced by strict state control of its activities.**

es from 40<sup>3</sup> to 80<sup>4</sup> per cent of the population, with significantly weaker connection to the religious community and less regular church attendance compared to Roman Catholics and Evangelicals.<sup>5</sup>

### The Regime and the Church

The Belarusian government prioritises the Orthodox Church over other religions in public discourse and legislation, however, this privileged position is balanced by strict state control of its activities. On the level of institutionalised state-church relationship, there are special agreements between the Orthodox Church and central and local governmental authorities, and this alone gives higher symbolic status to the Belarusian Orthodox Church over other religions in Belarus, none of which has a similar official relationship with the Belarusian state authorities. These agreements, which are numerous and often without clear structure and mechanisms of implementation, are often identified both by state and church authorities as evidence of special state support to the Orthodox Church. However, despite the agreements, in reality the Orthodox Church in Belarus has less freedom of activities in comparison with neighbouring countries, even predominantly Catholic Lithuania and Poland, where the Orthodox religion is part of the school curriculum, and where restitution of church property has been made, there are Orthodox chaplains in the army and the Church receives funds from the national budget.

This approach of the Belarusian state authorities towards the Orthodox Church, which is believed to be particularly favoured, can be illustrated by the statement of Belarusian President Lukashenko who claimed that, "in our turn, we have the right to expect assistance from the side of the clergy",<sup>6</sup> and the expectations of the state authorities are that the Orthodox Church at least remain loyal, which is not always the case as there are more and more examples when representatives of BOC dare to oppose state authorities. However, Belarusian sociologist Olga Breskaya argues that "the Church failed to become an autonomous actor in

public life during the last decades of Belarusian independence",<sup>7</sup> which, she says is a result of paternalistic politics from the government side, as well as the absence of strong religious communities inside the Church able to lobby their interests in the public sphere.

### Limited influence

Among the topics which are raised by the Orthodox NGOs and hierarchy in the public sphere the following dominate: state registration numbers (ID of persons); demographic decline, abortions, general pro-life agenda, reproductive technologies (in vitro fertilisation, surrogacy, etc.), public morality, family values, juvenile justice; these topics basically limit the domain of social inclusion of the Church. However, there are Orthodox circles of semi-official character that are also concerned with the death penalty, the issue of political prisoners, human rights, domestic violence, ecology, overcoming the Communist past, and even national revival of Belarus, but such initiatives rarely enjoy support from the official hierarchy.

One particular example is Hrodna diocese in western Belarus, on the border with the Padlasie region of Poland, which has a strong active Orthodox Church, often connected to Belarusian national identity. This link helps Hrodna diocese to maintain other ecclesial and cultural patterns different from Russian post-Soviet ones. In contrast, in eastern dioceses Russian Orthodox influence is much more significant. It depends not only on the geographical position of the local diocese or cultural self-colonisation due to the normative status of Moscow as the centre of religious life. This dependence is also determined by general Russification and Sovietisation of the Belarusian people, stereotypes and ignorance about local history, personal approach and values of the local bishop and local leaders, who promote a different position and prioritise different things in their pastoral policies. It must be admitted, that in practice the great influence of Russia comes not only on the official level of promoting ideology formulated by the higher establishment of the Russian Orthodox Church, but also on the anti-hierarchical level in connection with popular movements of the special cult of the late Russian Tsar Nikolay II, which, while still being marginal in character involves an active but limited number of people.

The centralising tendency in the Russian Orthodox Church started by Patriarch Kirill (Gundyaev) of Moscow elected in 2009 is more significant in the case of Belarus due to recent weakness of Metropolitan Philaret (Vakhromeyev) of Minsk

<sup>3</sup> Калинов А. Выступление на Ежегодном совещании по вопросам человеческого измерения ОБСЕ в г.Варшаве (Республика Польша) 7 октября 2008 г. // HDIM. DEL/335/08 7 October 2008. - <http://www.osce.org/ru/odihr/34116>; Информационно-аналитический центр. Общественное мнение о ситуации в национальной сфере. - [http://iac.gov.by/ru/sociology/research/Obshchestvennoe-mnenie-o-situatsii-v-natsionalnoj-sfere\\_i\\_0000000214.html](http://iac.gov.by/ru/sociology/research/Obshchestvennoe-mnenie-o-situatsii-v-natsionalnoj-sfere_i_0000000214.html)

<sup>4</sup> Религиозность и мораль белорусов. - Исследование НИСЭПИ. - 09.2010. - <http://www.iiseps.org/analitica/143>

<sup>5</sup> Кацук Н. К методологии эмпирического исследования социокультурных стратегий верующих различных конфессий. - Социология №3, 2008, с.118.

<sup>6</sup> <http://afn.by/news/i/24378>

<sup>7</sup> Olga Breskaya, Model relacji między Cerkwią a państwem na Białorusi w kontekście postsekularyzacji społeczeństw europejskich. - Politeja 2012; 9(22/1):133-152. C.152

**The Church failed to become an autonomous actor in public life during the last decades of Belarusian independence.**

because of his age and health problems. Metropolitan Philaret as a person of great authority in the Orthodox world has governed the Orthodox Church in Belarus since the end of the 1970s, and through his authority has united the Belarusian Orthodox Church in local entities on the national level; while in recent years each diocese and bishop without the presence of a strong leader on the national level started to be more oriented to other centres, first of all, Moscow, which led to decentralisation of the Orthodox Church in Belarus locally, while centralisation in general however, gave more autonomy to bishops of alternative orientation, as already mentioned in the example of Hrodna diocese.

**Conclusion**

The main centres of influence of the Belarusian Orthodox Church are external in character. On

the one hand, there is the ecclesial centre in Moscow, which promotes the ideological concept of the "Russian World" as a spiritual, cultural and political entity, including not only the ecclesial dimension of the Orthodox Church in Belarus, but of the Belarusian people in general. On the other hand, there is the political centre in Minsk, which seeks loyalty towards the Belarusian regime from the Orthodox Church. These two centres have mechanisms for exercising pressure. However, there are several circles in the Belarusian Orthodox Church which try to formulate their own agenda not only in accordance with the two centres, but also as alternatives to them. The position of the Belarusian Orthodox Church was clearer in the past due to its outspoken leader Metropolitan Philaret, while at the present time there is no clear power or decision-making centre.



**norden**

Nordic Council of Ministers

TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEXT ISSUE OF  
"BELL", PLEASE CONTACT:

Vytautas Keršanskas

Phone: +370 5 2705993

Fax: +370 5 2736953

Email: vytautas.kersanskas@eesc.lt

**EASTERN EUROPE STUDIES CENTRE**

This publication has been produced with the financial support from the Nordic Council of Ministers. The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the coordinators of the study and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Nordic Council of Ministers, nor of the Eastern Europe Studies Centre.