Belarusian Orthodox Church: In Symphony With The State

On 4 July the president of the Papal Inter-Religious Committee from the Vatican, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, met with Alexander Lukashenka in Minsk. During the meeting, Belarusian authorities tried to convince the Vatican’s representative that all 25 religious denominations present in Belarus live in peace and enjoy freedom. However, as Lukashenka made clear, only the Orthodox Church can have a leading role in Belarusian society.

Top Belarusian politicians and Orthodox hierarchs often emphasize that Eastern Christian rites laid a cornerstone for the Belarusian nationhood. But many are concerned that the Orthodox Church goes too much hand in hand with the Belarusian authorities and in many ways legitimizes the authoritarian regime.

Recently the Orthodox Church in Belarus publicly expressed its position on many society-related issues such as saying ‘no’ to capital punishment. This signifies that the Church wants to become a real moral authority for Belarusians. The question might be, however, how independent can the Orthodox Church be, considering its canonical structure and dependency upon Moscow.

Metropolit Filaret: the Orthodoxy as a spiritual-cultural foundations of Slavic nations

Metropolit Filaret, born in Moscow in 1935 as Kirill Varfolomeyevich Vakhromeev, remains the highest hierarch in the Belarusian Orthodox Church. He was educated at the theological seminary in Moscow. In 1978 Filaret became a Metropolit of Minsk and All Belarusian Soviet Republic. In 1989 following the demise of the USSR and creation of an independent Belarus, he became the head of the Belarusian.
Orthodox Church.

The figure of Filaret arouses controversy. On the one hand, he remains popular due to his religious activity and attempts to revive the Orthodox Church in Belarus. He initiated the translation of the New Testament into Belarusian. He also revived a number of monasteries. He also founded the first Theological Academy in Belarus. That won him the respect of many people.

At the same time many criticise Metropolit Filaret’s passivity when it comes to the human rights violations in Belarus. According to their logic, if the Church is claiming to have a leading role in the society, it cannot remain silent about human rights violation.

Interaction between the State and the Church

Metropolit Filaret supported Alexander Lukashenka on many occasions. For example, supporting his referendum to remove limits on of the number of times he could run as a president in 2004, he said that ‘the Belarusian nation has more than once expressed its wisdom. I am convinced that now our nationals will make the right decision’.

A special agreement signed in 2004 between the Belarusian authorities and the Orthodox Church defines a character of their mutual relations. The agreement went as far as to define a scope of co-operation between the state authorities and particular ministries, with the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church received the exclusive right of influence in certain spheres of the state’s activities such as education, health care, crime prevention. The state also granted it the status of “one of the most important social institutions” with “which cultural heritage in the past and today accord influence on formation of the spiritual, cultural and national traditions of the Belarusian nation”.

Belarusian Catholics are still waiting for a similar
agreement. The Belarusian authorities has been postponing concluding a concordat for several years.

More Equal than Others

The Belarusian Orthodox Church remains the biggest religious community in Belarus. But it is not independent.

The Belarusian Orthodox Church remains subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church headquartered in Moscow. This means that the church in Belarus follows all the elements of religious life such as teaching religion, service practice, and also a hierarchical system of management from its Moscow-based centre. The majority of Orthodox Churches in the world, like Polish, Greek and Serbian hold the status of autocephaly, meaning independent of external authority. In case of Belarus, the Church remains under Moscow’s patriarchal authority.

Apart from the state-recognised Church, the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church exists, but it can operate only outside of Belarus. Since it does not accept the supremacy of the Moscow Patriarchate, it cannot get permission to register itself in Belarus. This is the reason why the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church remains the religious organisation primarily for Belarusians in in the United States and Canada.

Do Belarusians Need an Autocephalous Orthodox Church?

In 2010 Lukashenka met with Bartholomev I, holding the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the most honourable title within the Orthodox Church. Albeit the fact that he does not decide himself on autocephaly, he holds the exclusive right to call special synods to deal with various issues.

The meeting caused rumours in Russian and Belarusian media about the potential independence of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Both the Church and presidential administration immediately denounced it.

However, the Orthodox Church in Belarus has had a short period
of autonomy in its history in years 1922-1938. In 1930s due to the anti-religious policy of the Soviet authorities it had to return under Moscow’s Patriarchate control.

Today the Church in Belarus probably would meet all criteria necessary for autonomy. It operates in the territory of independent state, has a number of the clergy, theological schools and monasteries. Advocates of the autocephaly often raise the issue of negative attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church towards the Belarusian identity, culture and language.

Many people think that nearly all Belarusians are Orthodox Christians. In reality, however, this is a simplification. Western Belarus, including the Hrodna region, has a strong presence of the Roman Catholic Church, that uses both Belarusian and Polish in its service. But the vast majority of Belarusians – whether Orthodox or Catholic – do not pay much any attention to religion in their daily life.

Only over the last years has post-Soviet Belarusian society begun to search for its spiritual values. One of consequences of this has been that protestant communities are on the rise over the last years, and the state persistently creates institutional obstacles for them. While the state favours the Orthodox Church, data shows that less people attend it.

The Orthodox Church and Belarusian Society

Recently Metropolit Filaret spoke out against death penalty at a round table co-organised by the Council of Europe and the Belarusian authorities. As he reminded the audeince, when in a 1996 referendum where the death penalty question was put for a popular vote, the Orthodox authorities ‘called people to decline this form of punishment’. So far, however, the Orthodox authorities did not voice their opposition when executions took place. This was the case in 2012, when the state executed two men convicted for organising the bombing attack in the Minsk metro.
The Orthodox Church together with Catholic also opposed abortion and surrogacy. They appealed for the amendments to Belarusian law. According to official figures, over 25 thousand abortions occur in Belarus every year. As press officer of the Belarusian Orthodox Church said: ‘Even the very early canonical sources treat abortion as killing. This is also our position now: abortion remains evil and contradicts Christian creed’.

Families of political prisoners publicly requested the leaders of the Orthodox Church for their support. So far these calls failed to produce any results. The Catholic Church is more assertive here. In 2012 the Vatican’s Ambassador to Belarus Apostolic Nuncio, Claudio Gugerotti, visited several political prisoners, including former presidential candidate Mikalaj Statkievich and human rights activist Ales Bialiatski.

Traditionally for Orthodoxy, the state-Church relations are based upon the concept of “symphony”. It presumes that the state and the religious authorities should develop and interact in harmony. This should not mean, however, that the church should agree with any particular policy of the state.

If the Orthodox Church wants to strengthen its position as moral authority in Belarus it should clarify its position on political issues and moral dilemmas facing the Belarusian society today. Being a moral authority requires more than praising the “Slavic brotherhood” with Russia and economic stability.