Greek Catholics in Belarus – a Struggle on the Margins

On 13 February, Belarus’s main state television channel aired a 25-minute broadcast praising the Greek Catholic Church. The positive coverage signifies a change in how the Belarusian authorities treat this marginalised institution, which was previously viewed with suspicion.

Dominant on the territory of modern-day Belarus in the 17th to 18th centuries, the Greek Catholic Church (also called the Uniate Church) struggles to attract believers and find allies today.

The situation is difficult because the Uniate Church has been criticised by the Orthodox Church, which commands the largest following in the country, and shunned by the Catholic Church, which is concerned that the Greek Catholics could undermine its already fragile relationship with the Orthodox Church.

The Rise of the Uniate Church

The Uniate Church was born in 1596 when the Kievan Church severed relations with the Eastern Orthodox Church and came under the authority of the Catholic Pope by signing on to the Union of Brest. The decision affected the orthodox population of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, concentrated on the territories of modern-day Belarus and Ukraine.

The Union allowed King Sigismund III Vasa, a devout Catholic, to extend his influence over the population loyal to Russian Orthodoxy at the time.

In practise, the Union meant that all Orthodox Christians passed under the control of the Pope in Rome, but retained
their ecclesiastical traditions. It also meant that the Uniate-dominated Ukrainian and Belarusian territories were religiously distinct from both the Orthodox Russian empire and Catholic Polish lands.

According to historians, by the end of the 18th century, about 70 to 75 per cent of the local population identified themselves as Uniates.

The fortunes of the Uniate Church were reversed following the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, when the Russian Empire gained control over most of the territory of modern-day Belarus and parts of Ukraine. Moscow sought to weaken the influence of the Greek Catholic Church. After many Uniates joined the uprising against Russia in 1830-1831, the Uniate was dissolved altogether.

Alexander Nadson, the most famous Greek Catholic priest of the modern era, wrote that “[w]hat the Russian government realised was that as long as Belarusians remained Uniates, the policy of Russification was doomed to failure”.

Since then, the Uniates have made several attempts to restore their church in Belarus, operating largely from exile during the Soviet era in 1945-1990, and subsequently reestablishing themselves on Belarusian soil.

The Revival of the Uniate Church in Modern Belarus

Before the Soviet Union collapsed, just one Greek Catholic priest, Viktar Danilau, remained in Belarus. He secretly performed liturgies and published religious books. In 1990, Greek Catholics conducted the first public liturgy in the Belarusian language in Minsk since 1839.

Twenty-five years later, there are sixteen Uniate priests in
the country. Several other priests perform services outside Belarus – in London, Antwerp and Minneapolis. Siarhieji Stasievich, a Belarusian Greek Catholic priest based in London, estimates the number of Uniate believers at around 2,000. The number of regular practitioners is probably smaller. The annual pilgrimage of Belarusian Greek Catholics to Polatsk, the most ancient Belarusian town, gathers about 100 people – not insignificant, but certainly not a large movement.

The territorial reach of the Greek Catholic Church within Belarus remains limited as well. New churches were built in Polatsk and Brest and some small parishes and chapels have been established in the rest of the country.

The Uniate Church also holds services in Latin Catholic churches and has a major centre with a chapel and library in Minsk. Currently, the first-ever Belarusian Greek Catholic church outside Belarus is being erected in London.

The structure of the Uniate Church remains weak. It is the only church among the Eastern Catholic Churches without a canonical head in the form of a bishop. So far, Siarhieji Hajek has fulfilled the office of the Apostolic visitor for Greek Catholics in Belarus.
Until 2015, Alexander Nadson performed a similar function for Belarusian Greek-Catholics living abroad. Nadson passed away in 2015 and his office remains vacant. According to Stasievich, Greek Catholics currently lack native candidates for bishops, as almost all priests are married or too young. Bishops must have served as priests for at least 10 years and are bound to celibacy.

**Why the Belarusian Greek Catholic Church Remains Weak**

Until now, the significance of the Greek Catholic Church has remained small, although numbers of the faithful, priests and places of worship is gradually increasing. Why has the Uniate Church failed to develop since the introduction of freedom of religion after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

For a start, many Belarusians are atheists. According to a 2009 Gallup study, only 34 per cent of Belarusians considered religion an important part of their lives. In such circumstances, the restoration of any denomination is difficult. While this number is similar to that in Russia, 46 per cent of Ukrainians and 75 per cent of Poles view religion as important.

Second, the Church has no natural religious or secular allies in the country. The Orthodox Church, which dominates in Belarus, looks down upon the Greek Catholic Church. In 2015 the Belarusian media wrote that in Hrodna region Orthodox Archbishop Hury condoned the distribution of leaflets against the Uniate Church, saying “the Uniate has brought untold disaster upon the Belarusian people.”

Many Orthodox theologians attack Greek Catholics. For example, in 2015 Siarhej Hardun from the Belarusian State University claimed to the media that the Uniate Church had denationalised
Belarusians and argued that “Belarusians should remember their Russian roots”.

On occasion, the Orthodox Church also holds liturgies to commemorate the year 1839, when the parishes of the Greek Catholic Church were forcefully joined to the Orthodox Church at the behest of the Russian Crown. The most recent liturgy of this kind took place in Salihorsk on 25 February of this year.

The Roman Catholic hierarchy also remains reluctant to support the Uniate Church out of fear it might further undermine its uneasy relations with the Orthodox Church. On 12 February, Pope Francis and the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church signed a joint declaration, saying among other things that the Uniatism represents the wrong path for achieving the unity of Christians. Currently the Roman Catholic Church prefers ecumenism, an idea of mutual recognition of the churches, rather than encouraging other churches, especially Eastern, to come under the jurisdiction of the Papacy.

Third, the Belarusian Greek Catholic Church has a difficult relationship with the authorities. For example, in 2008, Belarusian state television broadcast a film that spoke of the “hostility” of the Greek Catholic Church in Belarus. The Uniate Church has also failed to secure permission for the construction of temples in Minsk and other Belarusian cities because many local officials are afraid to cooperate with the Greek Catholics.

The broadcast, aired by Belarus 1 on 13 February, may signify
a change in the attitude toward the Uniate Church by the Belarusian authorities. Under President Alexander Lukashenka, who has been in office for over 20 years, state-run media had never before issued such a long statement regarding the Greek Catholics, let alone such a positive description of their historical background and contribution to Belarusian society.

While a brief broadcast is hardly a game changer, it certainly marks a step toward a better relationship. Increased public awareness about the existence of the Uniate Church, coupled with recognition from the state, is what the Greek Catholic Church needs to grow and evolve as an institution in Belarusian society.