

# Pro-life vs pro-choice in Belarus

On 3 October 2016, women in neighbouring Poland went on a nation-wide strike protesting a notorious law criminalising abortion. This ongoing controversy has also provoked public debate in Belarus.

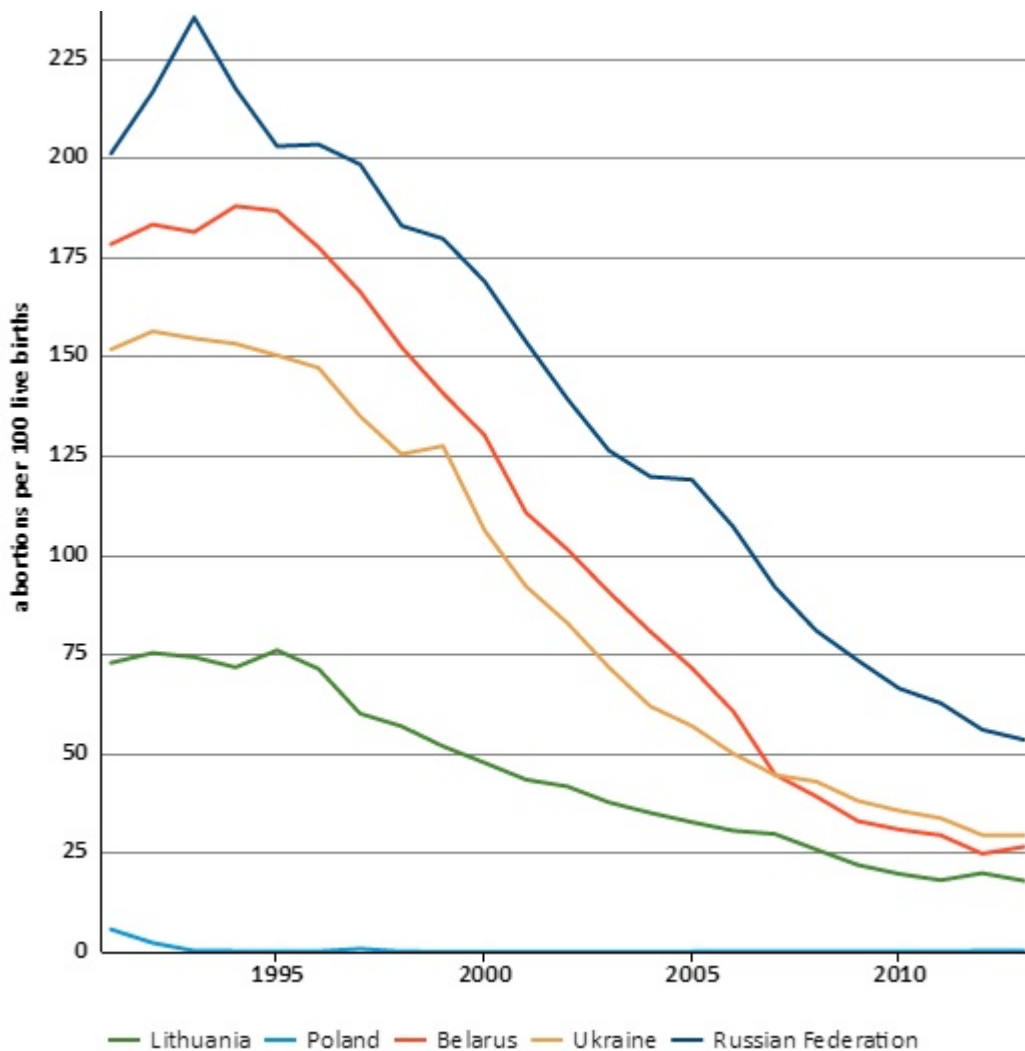
Unlike Poland, Belarus does not infringe on women's reproductive rights. Its legislation guarantees the right for every woman to decide on motherhood herself.

However, since late September, the Belarusian media have been actively discussing the pro-life and pro-choice standpoints. These debates reveal that society remains divided on the issue of abortion.

## **Is Belarus turning pro-life?**

In 2013, Belarus revised its [abortion legislation](#), yet it still remains very liberal in comparison to Poland; women can decide for themselves whether they want to become mothers. Current laws allow abortions until up to the 12th week of pregnancy. Under certain conditions, such as rape, it is also possible up until the 22nd week of pregnancy.

Since the 2000s, the number of abortions in Belarus has declined steadily. According to the National Statistical Committee, the current abortion rate in Belarus is about 24.7 abortions per 100 live births. This is a significant improvement compared to 2000, when the rate was 128.7 abortions per 100 live births. Belarus's neighbours display similar trends of declining abortions.



Since 2014, psychological consultations have been a requirement for all women who wish to terminate their pregnancy. Currently, such counselling leads to around 20 per cent of women changing their minds about having an abortion. Doctors in Belarus can also refuse to perform the procedure, reserving the right to redirect women to a different medical professional.

Concerned about the [negative demographic trends](#) and low birthrate in Belarus, the state also supports other pro-life initiatives. Besides counselling, it has introduced incentives for families with children and sponsors awareness campaigns. For instance, in 2015, the National Programme of the Demographic Safety of Belarus organised events such as “a week without abortions” at selected hospitals across the country.

# Facing the choices

In the pro-life camp, Belarusian conservative forces have been teaming up with religious institutions to protest abortions. In recent media debates on abortion, the Belarusian Christian Democrats in particular have reiterated their uncompromising position as the country's major pro-life advocates.

On 23 September 2016, Volha Seviarynec, married to leading Belarusian Christian Democrat [Pavel Seviarynec](#), publicly shared her personal story about deciding against having an abortion under circumstances in which a majority of people would have opted for one.



During the 12th week of pregnancy, Volha's child was diagnosed with a serious genetic disease known as Patau syndrome. Even though doctors strongly advised them to terminate the pregnancy, the couple refused. After the birth, their child survived for only eight days.

Volha acted in this ordeal according to her faith, and her going public with the story sent a powerful pro-life message.

A few days later, tut.by published a series of interviews with Anna Gerina, coordinator of the charitable organisation Genom. The foundation was established by the families of terminally ill children with rare genetic neuromuscular diseases. Anna's story is also a tragic one, as she turned her life around fighting for her daughter Yana, diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy at the age of eight months.

According to Gerina, there are no statistics available on the number of people suffering from this disease in Belarus. Moreover, the country does not have a single doctor

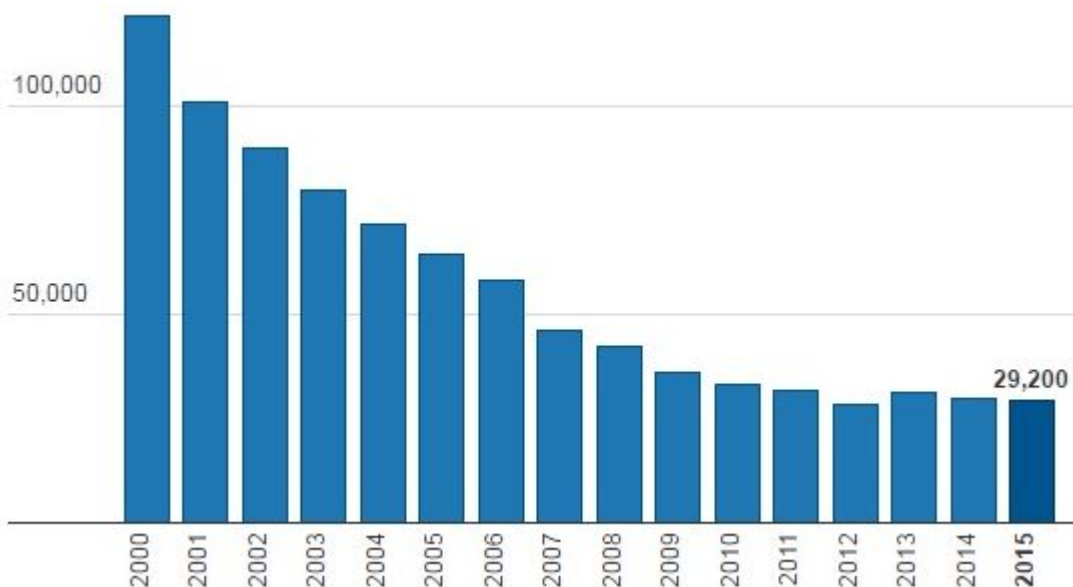
specialising in such cases as her daughter's. The life expectancy of these children remains low and the state does not invest resources into programmes that could help them.

Anna too believes in God, yet she is on the pro-choice side. In her opinion, no mother with prior knowledge of the diagnosis would consciously choose to give birth to a child with this kind of genetic disease: "It is not for the sake of the woman, but for the sake of the child."

## Why abortion?

According to Sviatlana Prakapenka, chief of the maternity centre in Polatsk, two of the major reasons for having an abortion in Belarus are social and material insecurity. For many, it still remains one of the main forms of birth control, as about 50 per cent of unplanned pregnancies end with an abortion in Belarus.

Husbands and partners often shy away from responsibility, refusing to take part in the decision to terminate the pregnancy. Thus, the woman alone bears the pressure of family planning.



The Belarusian media regularly report gruesome cases of discarded and abandoned babies. Just recently, on 19 September, a 28 year old mother dropped her newborn daughter down the garbage chute of a residential building in the Minsk suburb of Machulishchy. The child, who was just three hours old, miraculously survived falling from the seventh floor.

Hospitals still do not offer baby-boxes, which could help save the lives of unwanted newborns and give their mothers a way out. On 21 September, the newly elected Belarusian parliament declared its intention to discuss introducing such an initiative, which already exists in Russia and Ukraine. Civil society activist Nasta Dashkevich pointed out that along with baby boxes, the state could also guarantee the right to anonymous childbirth, ease adoption laws, and foster a more child-friendly mentality.

However, presidential decree Nr. 18, adopted in 2006, might obstruct the baby-box initiative. It imposes certain obligations for women considering leaving their newborn in the care of the state: she must reimburse the costs of the child's upbringing and education. Thus, women with low incomes are more likely to choose abortion over preserving a life.

Offering counselling for women who are considering terminating their pregnancy remains a short-term fix. In the long run, the state should invest resources in promoting a healthy lifestyle and responsible family planning. Demystification of modern hormonal contraceptives could also help women avoid difficult choices. Ideally, these topics should also become a part of the educational system.

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# Abortion in Belarus

Belarus remains one of the leaders among post-communist countries when it comes to the abortion rate. In 2012, nearly 27 thousand pregnancy terminations took place in Belarus.

Although the authorities restricted the abortion law in 2013, Belarus still remains more liberal than the majority of Western countries. The present shape of the abortion law in Belarus bears the legacy of Soviet times when ending a pregnancy was widely available and has been practised since 1920s.

Supporters of the liberal abortion law argue that poor socio-economic conditions should justify the decision to end a pregnancy. On the other hand, Catholic and Orthodox churches and Belarusian pro-life movements emphasize the Christian dimension of the abortion and call for respecting traditional values. Apart from the hot ideological discussion over abortion, Belarus today is struggling with demographic problems typical to all European societies and its need to rethink its present social policies.

## **Present Abortion Law in Belarus: Back to the Soviet Times**

According to the World Health Organisation, "Eastern European countries have the highest estimated abortion rates in the world". The experts, however, underline that a number of abortions there dropped dramatically between 1995 and 2004, probably due to the increased use of contraception.

Year	2000	2009	2010	2011
Number of abortions	121,900	30,86	27,662	26,858
Source: Ministry of Health of Belarus				

Many think that abortion remains popular in Belarus because of insufficient knowledge about modern birth control methods. They often advocate education on family planning beginning early in a child's school years as one of the key issues to protect teenagers against unwanted pregnancy.

Others, with the Christian churches at the forefront, explain the wide use of abortion by the crisis of values in Belarus aftermath the Soviet times.

## **Serious changes that limit abortion**

The roots of today's high abortion rate go back probably to legislation created during Soviet times. Its authorities legalised abortion on demand back in the 1920s and since then it has been widely practised. Other communist countries took after Moscow and also opened the window for a rather wide use of abortion.

Soviet Belarus implemented its abortion law in 1950s and with minor changes to them, they have remained in force until recently. Before 2013, the law permitted abortion in different ten cases. For example, divorce during the time of a pregnancy or the imprisonment of a husband now are no longer give a woman a right to have an abortion.

Today the new law permits abortion only up until the 22nd week at the latest if pregnancy is a result of rape or a woman lost parental rights. Due to the social conditions, a woman can decide on abortion until 12th week. Latvia allows abortion on request only within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. Lithuanian law also permits

women to have an abortion until the twelfth week of pregnancy. In Ukraine, women can end pregnancy until the 12th week but in some cases also they are permitted to end a pregnancy up until the 22nd week. Both Ukraine and Lithuania are now considering placing further restrictions into their abortion laws. Poland has banned abortion in the 1990s. Now Poles cannot legally terminate pregnancy except in three situations: when the health or life of a woman is at stake, if there is a malformed fetus or when the pregnancy is a result of a criminal act.

### **A scale of abortion in Belarus**

Country	Percent of known pregnancies ending in legal abortions in 2010
Russia	39.9
Latvia	27.9
Ukraine	26.2
Belarus	23.6
Lithuania	16.4
Poland	0.16

Source: [www.johnstonsarchive.net](http://www.johnstonsarchive.net)

The Belarusian Ministry of Health reported that nearly 27 thousand abortions in 2011. When comparing 2010 and 2009 the number is steadily dropping.

The chart to the right presents the percentage of aborted pregnancies in 2010 in Belarus and neighbouring countries. However, many illegal incidents take place in so called “underground abortions”, particularly in countries with stricter laws. They remain under-reported and thus certainly decrease the overall numbers.

More and more Belarusian women, as in the Western Europe, consciously plan when to start the family. Certainly, each case is individual, but often they have one shared factor: economic circumstances. In the majority of cases, women wish to have children, but first they want to achieve financial stability.

### **Pro-life Movement in Belarus**

In November 2012 the Catholic and Orthodox churches have jointly appealed to the Belarusian authorities for restriction of the abortion law. The Christian churches agree that abortion goes too far in Belarus.

The Churches support the pro-life movement in Belarus. Apparently, their campaigning forced the authorities to seriously re-consider amendments to the abortion law. One initiative, called ‘Pro-life Belarus’, aims to promote values such as family and the protection of life. It is a social movement that acts in close cooperation with the Orthodox Church.

Another organisation, Open Hearts Foundation works in Mahiliou, mostly with the Catholic Church. Both engage themselves into organising lectures, seminars and supportive meetings. They offer also free counselling on maternity- and pregnancy- related issues for women throughout Belarus.

## Abortion and the Demographic Reality

A high abortion rate, together with a low birth and death rates all matter when it comes to demographic problems in Belarus. Like many other European countries, Belarus is also struggling with a decline in population. In the data revealed by the National Statistics Committee, the birth rate in 2013 reached a level of 11.9 per 1,000 population. On the contrary, a death rate is estimated at 14.2 per 1,000 population.

Not surprisingly, Belarusian authorities want to reverse this trend. On 17 June First Deputy of Presidential Administration, Aliaksandr Radzkou, called to make large families fashionable in Belarus. Alexandr Lukashenka also likes to talk about reversing the negative demographic trends in Belarus. But despite the talk and attempts to reverse the situation, Belarusians are getting married less and the number of [divorces](#) has increased over the last years.

A better way would be to implement a set of consistent policies encouraging both men and women to be able to “afford” having children. State benefits for families with children or support for housing might work in Belarus. However, increasing the [economic difficulties](#) taking hold in Belarus may make implementation of these plans more difficult.

Of course, changes in the abortion law will not resolve Belarus’s demographic problems. Belarusians should have more forums to discuss issues of abortion, contraception and family planning. For now, the Internet remains the only place to do so.

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## [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 audience, 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.