

Belarusian Orthodox Church Seeks More Independence from Russia

Belarusian Orthodox circles call it the beginning of a new era, as Metropolitan Pavel, its new leader who recently moved from Russia to Belarus, stated he would ask the Moscow Patriarchate to grant the Belarusian Orthodox Church self-governing status.

Currently, the Belarusian Orthodox Church constitutes a part of the Moscow Patriarchate and lacks the authority to deal even with minor issues without Moscow's consent.

The Belarusian authorities and the clergy support the idea because they want to limit Russian influence. The Moscow Patriarchate will likely ignore the request from Belarus, but it may not last forever.

The First Timid Step to Independence

The war in Ukraine has intensified the desire of the authorities to control those institutions that are dependent on other states. Though Belarus remains a largely atheistic country, the Belarusian Orthodox Church enjoys great credibility among Belarusians.

According to the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, the Belarusian Orthodox Church is the most trusted institution in the country, with 63% of Belarusians stating they trust it.

On 16 December priests from Minsk applauded during [Metropolitan Pavel](#)'s statement who said that he would seek self-governing status for the Belarusian Orthodox Church.

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Pavel's initiative brought joy for the Belarusian clergy, but not empire-minded Russians. A popular Russian news site Regnum accused Belarus of moving towards autocephaly (i.e. complete separation from the Russian Orthodox Church).

The Russian Orthodox sites mostly condemned the statement of the Belarusian Metropolitan, and the Moscow Patriarchate keeps silence. For Russians, who feel like they live amongst their enemies, Pavel's statement was akin to a knife in the back.

The wishes of the Belarusian Orthodox Church are no doubt reasonable. The Belarusian Orthodox Church has a very weak position in the Orthodox world and remains [the only Exarchate](#), a mere province of the Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia. The Belarusian Orthodox Church unites all of the dioceses in Belarus, but lacks any power over them and is unable to make decisions on its own.

Metropolitan Pavel [got his job](#) without so much as a discussion about his candidacy with the Belarusian clergy, orthodox Christians or the authorities. Even now Pavel's Range Rover has Russian registration plates on it. Needless to say, his announcement regarding the Belarusian Orthodox Church's aspirations for greater autonomy came as a big surprise.

Lukashenka in the Background

Metropolitan Pavel does not hide the fact that greater independence remains in the interest of "the priests, believers, and heads of state structures". Lukashenka's regime wants the Belarusian Orthodox Church to gain more self-governing status, as it will increase the authorities' control over the religious institution.

Looking at Ukraine, where the Kyiv Patriarchate plays a great role in uniting the country, the Belarusian authorities would

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The authorities and the Belarusian Orthodox Church has a [solid history](#) of cooperation, as Lukashenka said in 2008 that "the Belarusian state considers the Orthodox Church to be the main ideological force of the nation". The authorities financially support the construction of churches, and the Orthodox Church has exclusive rights of influence in certain spheres of the state's activities such as education, health care, and crime prevention.

The Church supported Lukashenka during the referendum in 2004, which removed limits on the number of times he could run as president. As Lukashenka said in 2002, "for our part, we have the right to expect assistance from the side of the clergy".

Why the Belarusian Orthodox Church Needs More Rights

Self-governing status within the Moscow Patriarchate should not be confused with autocephaly and separation from it. The Russian Orthodox Church has five levels of independence.

First, there is the metropolitan district, like in Kazakhstan, which lacks any rights to make its own decisions. Second, there is an exarchate, which brings together a large number of dioceses, but has no power. Belarus is an exarchate. Third, there are self-governing churches like in Estonia or Latvia. Pavel wants to upgrade the Belarusian Orthodox Church to this level.

Currently any talks about the fourth and fifth levels which are close to having autocephalous status ,and which the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Japan have, remain impossible at this time.

According to the Metropolitan, "it hurts" that the Belarusian Orthodox Church remains at such a low level. Today decisions of the Synod of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, even technical ones, cannot come into force before the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch in Moscow considers them. Belarusian priest Alexander Shramko has said that this demonstrates "total distrust".

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As a result, the Belarusian Orthodox Church remains sluggish and is [gradually losing Belarus](#). 120 thousand Orthodox believers and 58 thousand Catholics attended religious services on Christmas, which is not all that impressive when one considers the fact that there are seven times more Orthodox Christians than Catholics in Belarus.

The Catholic Pilgrimage to Budslau seem to be the major spiritual event of the year in Belarus, and Protestant churches, [despite repression against them](#), keep growing. It remains unlikely that Metropolitan Pavel wants more autonomy for the church because he loves Belarus. He just wants to fix the structures that he manages.

Is Independence Possible?

It remains unknown when the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church will consider giving greater autonomy to the Belarusian Orthodox Church. But as the statement by Metropolitan Pavel grew to become the main religious news in Belarus, it will be difficult to ignore. Even if the Patriarch of Moscow delays the process in the coming years it will still have to be answered. The speed of Moscow's response will depend on how often Minsk will raise the question.

But the delay may be also harmful to the Moscow Patriarchate.

If the Russian Orthodox Church turn a blind eye to the justified requests of Belarusian Orthodox Christians, the idea of pushing for autocephaly, or autonomy from the Moscow Patriarchate, will spread more acutely. It was no accident that Metropolitan's words about greater independence received a resounding ovation from the present priests.

The wishes of the Belarusian Orthodox Church will certainly raise suspicions, not only in the Patriarchate, but also in the Kremlin. The Russian authorities, who strongly influence the Orthodox Church, can see this move as an attempt to reduce their influence in Belarus.

Therefore, the final decision may not be made by the Belarusian and Russian clergy, but between Putin and Lukashenka. The issue is not one of religion, but the independence of Belarus. And Minsk and Moscow certainly have contradictory positions on this issue.