

Catholic Church as next target for Belarus' undermining of civic solidarity

On 31 August, Belarusian border security officers denied a Belarusian citizen, Archbishop Tadeush Kandrusievich, the head of the Catholic Church, return into the country.

Amid displays of solidarity among various civil society leaders in Belarus, the authorities continue to respond with increased pressure. Religious organisations have been no exception.

Over the last few weeks, Kandrusievich has critically spoken out against the brutal crackdown on peaceful protests. These sentiments have been echoed by other religious leaders in Belarus (such as Jewish, Christian Orthodox and Protestant leaders). The stance of Metropolitan Paval, head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, has even cost him his post.

With this crackdown on religious civil society leaders, the Belarusian authorities aim to break the chain of solidarity among Belarusians, diminishing their ability to mobilise.

Attack on Catholics unlikely to help Lukashenka

So far the Belarusian Catholic Church has reacted in a balanced yet consistent way regarding the developments in the country. On 15 August, its leader, Archbishop Tadeush Kandrusievich, appealed to the authorities to resolve the conflict peacefully, emphasising that "(...) people have the

right to know the truth" (about the presidential election). He also criticised the state for using violence against protesters.

Yet, the Catholic Church has unintentionally become more seriously involved in the current political crisis following state forces' intervention in the Red Church in Minsk. During the protest on 26 August, OMON riot police blocked the entrance to the church building for nearly 40 minutes, as some of the protesters and journalists were seeking shelter inside. Archbishop Kandrusievich, spoke from abroad about the incident, calling it "unacceptable and unlawful".

On 31 August, in an extraordinary move Kandrusievich, a Belarusian citizen, was denied return to Belarus without explanation. The next day, when visiting Baranavichy, Lukashenka enigmatically accused Archbishop Kandrusievich of "engaging with politics" "suddenly going on a trip to Warsaw for consultation" and receiving "tasks" to do upon his return to Belarus, despite providing no proof to support this conspiracy theory.

The entry ban on Archbishop Kandrusievich has shocked the public in Belarus and many have expressed their outrage towards the state's decision, with those of all religious affiliations showing their solidarity. The service which took place on 5 September in the Red Church brought together several thousand people.

In his inspiring sermon, Bishop Jury Kasabucki in strong words decried the "persecution of the Catholic Church in Belarus" (around 12% of Belarusians are Catholics, according to PEW Report 2017) and prayed for the victims of state violence. "Does opposition to torture equate to going into politics?", he asked rhetorically.

Changes in the Orthodox Church

The case of Metropolitan Paval is similar – the authorities expect unconditional loyalty from both him as an individual and the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) as a whole, rather than the gestures of solidarity with the victims and critique of torture which the Church has demonstrated.

Nevertheless, initially, the BOC struggled to take a consistent position on the political crisis. Metropolitan Paval officially congratulated Aliaksandr Lukashenka on his re-election, yet a couple of days later he spoke in a different tone. He apologised for the “premature reaction”, which, “has caused outrage among many Orthodox believers” in the country.

On 12 August, during a meeting with journalists, Metropolitan Paval recognised that Belarusians “are entitled to have their issues but they should not be resolved by resistance”. Most likely, due to further pressure from Belarusian believers and in all probability also from the Orthodox clergy, the Church then spoke out more firmly. On 15 August, the synod of the BOC strongly condemned both the harsh reaction of state forces and some incidents of provocation on the part of protesters. Metropolitan Paval attended the hospital to visit the victims of the brutal crackdown.

Soon after this, he suddenly stepped down from his post (perhaps with encouragement) and the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church (of which the BOC is a part) proceeded to elect his successor – for the first time, a Belarusian, the Bishop of Barisau, Vaniamin.

Despite being new to the role, the new Metropolitan has already passed comment on the developments in the country. On

26 August he appealed to Orthodox believers (some of whom work in the state apparatus system), emphasising the spiritual and moral nature of the conflict. “Changing minds, changing hearts from evil to good, from lies to truth, from division to unity [...] – these are the changes that our society needs first”, he stated.

“Chain of repentance: from Kurapaty to Akreščina”

Many Protestant Christians have also joined the protests or supported them, and some have subsequently been detained and sentenced. On 14 August, Pentecostals and Charismatics officially appealed to the authorities to call a halt to the violence, release all detainees and begin a peaceful dialogue with the people.

Furthermore, members of a Minsk-based congregation have launched an initiative “From Kurapaty to Akreščina. Never again”, which brought thousands of people onto the street, forming a 15-km chain. Many participants of the event were holding copies of the Bible, crosses, and white-red-white flags in their hands.

Zmicier Dashkievich, an activist and Protestant, one of the initiators of the chain, has emphasised to Belarus Digest that the cause of the current crisis and peoples’ demands are of a mainly moral, not economic nature, unlike those of the 1990s. Belarusians believe their voices have been stolen and thus have demanded to know the truth. According to Dashkievich, churches, are the natural institutions to emerge to help resolve the political crisis with no bloodshed and bring spiritual renewal to Belarusian society.

Importantly, both “Kurapaty” and “Akreščina” have already

emerged as symbols within the public space and discourse. The former is the site on the outskirts of Minsk which memorialises the most extreme atrocities of the Soviet regime towards Belarusians. Akreščina, on the other hand, is the Minsk-based detention centre, made infamous recently for keeping political prisoners (such as Paval Sieviaryniec from the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party) as well as protesters, often in intimidating conditions.

What can Churches do in the current crisis?

Through the crackdown on the Catholic leadership, the authorities have sent out a clear message to all their current and potential critics – whatever your public profile may be, there may be serious consequences for involvement (including the risk of losing your citizenship). Yet, the state aims for more as it hopes to break the chain of solidarity among Belarusians and civil society (including churches).

In fact, solidarity seems to be the most serious threat to the state apparatus. The authorities, therefore, are not underestimating the role religious organisations can play in society and are counteracting their effectiveness through preventive measures. However, this meddling within the Churches is unlikely to help stabilise the spirit of protest among Belarusians. On the contrary, many, regardless of their denominational affiliation, may find the incident concerning Archbishop Kandrusievich unacceptable and unlawful, which will inevitably trigger further acts and lead to a strengthening of solidarity within civil society.

It seems that these small acts of solidarity by the Churches (with protesters and each other) have seriously concerned the authorities, for whom the ideal would be a divided civil society who mind their own business. This would prevent further

solidarity, and, conversely, diminish the moral grounds for the protests. In fact, given the level of brutality of the state forces, any act of solidarity by the Churches with protesters (and with each other) will matter a lot, particularly in the coming days.

If you think that Belarus Digest should continue its work during this period critical for Belarus, please support our fundraising campaign with a [donation](#).

Environmentalists v Church, Intellectual Club, Internet Control – Civil Society Digest

Environmentalists clash with the Catholic Church over a city park. Urban Myths are looking for funding for new murals. Crowdfunding helps to finance civil society projects. Belarusian reporter recovers from KGB moral damages for unlawful detention.

Amendments to Internet control prepared secretly from the public. Nobel prize winner Svetlana Aleksievich will open an intellectual club in Minsk. What do Belarusians Think public discussion on 2 June will dissect pension reform. This and more in the new edition of Civil Society Digest.

Urban activism

[Sixth episode of The City reality show](#) continues to acquaint with urban activists and educational program for them. In this week episode, the fellows painted the fence and removed the trash in a park in the rhythm of capoeira. Organised by the Centre for Cultural Management, The City weekly reports on 20 grassroots activists who fight for the prize money to implement social projects on the ground.

[And park, and church. How it's possible to agree.](#) [Andrej Jahoraŭ](#), the Centre for European Transformation, parses a [local conflict](#) over the construction of the church, followed by the cutting of trees in the Minsk park Katoŭka. The expert believes that the issue isn't in ecology or violations of the rights of believers, but in decision-making at the local level. The conflict is caused by the practice adopted in Belarus when the society is actually excluded from the decision-making processes.

[Urban Myths festival opens a new season](#). The project brings prominent street artists to Belarus to create a series of murals based on local content. Now in Minsk, the Spain artist Deih is trying to combine his traditional theme of Universe with the Belarusian mythology. In 2015, street art community Signal organised the first [Urban Myths festival](#) in Minsk with two graffiti rated within the top 10 of the month in the world.

Crowdfunding

Crowdfunding platforms report their achievements. [Talaka.by informs](#) that for the recent 12 months 203 new projects have been posted on the platform; the fastest Belarus' crowdfunding

campaign was completed for 8 hours – raising money for a known athlete to attend competitions abroad. From the recent month [MaeSens.by](#) has collected Br365 mil (around \$18,6K) for assisting creative, social and charity projects.

[Book about Piotr Martsev collects money through crowdfunding.](#)

Kyky.org chief editor Sasha Romanova publishes a provocative book of memoirs about Piotr Martsev, businessman and founder of the Belarusian independent newspapers *BDG* and *Imya*. A crowdfunding platform Ulej.by hosts a [campaign](#) to raise money on the printing of the book. For the first two days, the campaign has collected more than 62 million rubles (around \$3,1K) – 41% of the required amount.

Intellectual life

[Nobel laureate Svetlana Aleksievich to open intellectual club in Minsk.](#)

Aleksievich informed on her plans during the [master class](#) organised by Press Club Belarus. Starting from September, the Club's meetings will be held in the Minsk [TUT.BY](#) gallery, with the participation of the world famous intellectuals. The Club will have its website to provide information on the lectures and invited guests.

[Presence Code anthology](#). On May 18, Flying University and the Belarus Collegium [presented](#) an Anthology of 2000-2015 Belarusian thinking titled *Presence Code*. The anthology allows seeing the intellectual and cultural contribution made in 2000-2015 and contains the texts of different genres and styles – manifestos, metaphysical reasoning, criticism and others to understand Belarus.

Interaction between state and

civil society

[Reporter gets moral damage compensation for unlawful imprisonment in KGB](#). In 2012, a reporter Anton Surapin spent a month in the KGB detention centre for allegedly aiding the [teddy bear airdrop](#) team. Now, with the help of BAJ lawyers, Surapin won 8 million rubles (around \$400) for the moral damage. This is the first precedent in years when a person, who had been recognised a political prisoner, succeeded in his claim for compensation.

[Amendments to Internet control prepared secretly from the public](#). On May 16, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) got an answer from the Ministry of Information on its request to reveal details on drafting a new law to control the Internet. The Minister answered that BAJ's request "had been taken into account" without any other clarifications.

[Activist held in 'cycling case' faces formal charges](#). Dzmitry Palijenka, an activist detained after the [brutal dispersal](#) of the Critical Mass cycling event on April 29, has been officially charged with using violence against a police officer (Article 364 of the Criminal Code). On May 12, three more cyclist activists were [fined](#) of Br840,000 (around \$45). Environmental CSOs have launched a [campaign](#) and [flashmobs](#) to support participants of the Critical Mass.

Other

[What Belarusians think on pension reform](#). The topic of the pension reform's implications will be discussed on June 2, in the Minsk Gallery [TUT.BY](#) with online broadcasting. A BEROC expert will present economic impacts on the pension system because of the ageing of the population. A series of live discussions *What Do Belarusians Think* is organised by OEEC in partnership with the Belarusian Research Council, Pact and

supported by USAID.

[Infographics on European Cafe's results](#). The project [European Cafe – Open Space of Europe](#) has summed up the results of a customs survey to get feedback on its activity. Since 2011, the project aimed at integration of the Belarusian society into the European space, has organised 60 lectures with experts from 16 countries, with over 3,000 people attended. 96% of respondents answer that they have a positive impression of the project. The infographics was made with the methodological support of Pact.

[Emigre politician makes trip to Belarus](#). Opposition Belarusian politician [Siarhiej Navumčyk](#) arrived in Minsk on May 24 on his first visit to Belarus in 20 years. The 55-year-old politician works in Prague for the Belarusian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. In September 2015, opposition politicians [Alieś Michalievič](#) and Viačaslaŭ Siučyk returned to Belarus after years of self-imposed exile.

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, Viktor 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. Siarhiej 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, [Siarhiej 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.

Everyday Life and Festivals of Belarus's Catholics – Belarus Photo Digest

Belarus may be one of the least religious countries in the world, but Catholic believers are countering the general trend.

There are 619 Catholic parishes and about 1.4 million of self-identified Catholics in Belarus. Most regularly attend the Sunday mass and participate in colourful religious celebrations throughout the year.

Here are some of the scenes from the life of Belarus's

Catholic Church that caught the eye of Belarus Digest
photographer Siarhei Leskiec.





About the photographer: Siarhei Leskiec is a freelance photographer whose work focuses on everyday life, folk traditions, and rituals in the Belarusian countryside. Originally from Maladzieczna region, he received a history degree from Belarusian State Pedagogical University.

The Catholic Church and Belarusian Authorities: a Masterpiece of Political Levelling

On 2 February 2016, Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs of Belarus [Lianid Huliaka](#) criticised the Catholic Church for “insufficiently active cadre training” and “the destructive activities of some Belarusian priests among the population”.

Two days later the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Belarus in an official statement defined these issues as “exclusively the internal affairs of the Church”. The Bishops suggested that all such questions “may be discussed in person”. Such a public exchange of opinions did not whip up Belarusian public

interest.

In recent years the Commissioner has become a mouthpiece for the authorities' pretences toward Catholics. He raised identical objections to "cadre training" and activities among the population in 2014 and 2015.

Nevertheless, Huliaka's public criticism does not threaten to embitter Church-State cooperation. After utterances in January 2015, Cardinal Secretary of State [Pietro Parolin made an official visit](#) to Minsk, Saint John Paul 2 Catholic Academy of Theology was registered and President Alexander Lukashenka honoured Fr. Česlaŭ Kurečka with a President's award for spiritual revival.

The political forays of the state officer have taken the form of proving the Church's political loyalty. The Conference humbly rejects allegations, redirects dialogue to the sidelines and never criticises the Belarusian authorities.

Catholic status quo in Belarusian politics

Around 80 per cent and 10 per cent of the population define themselves as Orthodox and Catholic respectively. The authorities recognise these confessions as the [most legitimate and important](#).

In 2009 Gallup research found Belarus to be one of the least religious countries in the world. According to these findings, religion plays an important role in the daily life of 27 per cent of Belarusians. International studies show that only 6 per cent of Belarusians attend church regularly. Catholics appear to be the more active believers: while 50 per cent of them attend Sunday mass, only 18 per cent of Orthodox adherents do so.



Belarusian diplomacy sees [good relations with the Vatican](#) as a means of establishing an outpost in the Western direction. Officials and state media speak only in a positive way about the Church.

Fr. Aliaksandr Amialčenia, Director of the Vatican Radio's Belarusian Service, said that "in order to create a positive image of the country it is advantageous to adhere to a positive image of the Church".

The authorities have invited Archbishop [Tadevuš Kandrusievič](#) to the most important state events. Recently the hierarch attended the Prayer for Belarus ceremony and sat in the first row during the fifth presidential inauguration of Lukashenka. Kandrusievič's presence at the official rituals of the Belarusian regime demonstrates the Church's loyalty.

[Fr. Uladzislaŭ Lazar's detainment](#) on charges of state treason seems to be the most explicit example of Church-Powers relations. On 30 May 2013 the KGB arrested the Catholic priest. Lukashenka revealed this in July, and it was later confirmed by the Conference press secretary. Archbishop Kandrusievič limited himself to a call to pray for Fr. Lazar.

Despite numerous social efforts to oppose the priest's detainment, Catholic officials remained silent. On 3 December the authorities released Fr. Uladzislaŭ and the case has not gone to the court. Neither party has disclosed any circumstances around the arrest. Catholic hierarchs remain patient, even in the most extreme dealings with the authorities.

Interests involved: what is at stake?

After decades of atheism under the Soviet Union, freedom of religion has been slow to return to Belarus. The communists destroyed many churches and the majority of temples were used as warehouses or industrial plants. A shortage of priests, lack of administrative structures and temples in need of rebuilding remain the key problems today. Solutions to all these issues depend on the Belarusian authorities.

Since 1989 Polish priests have been playing a significant role in the Church's revival. According to the Commissioner Office, they currently account for over 25 per cent of the total number of priests in Belarus. In criticizing “insufficiently active cadre training”, Huliaka was referring to the need to replace foreign priests with local ones. [Reducing the number of Polish](#) priests has been among his priorities for many years. According to Huliaka, “some Polish priests try to cultivate politics” and “they do not like our country, our law, the authorities”.

The Conference of Bishops claims that in 2009-2015 the  number of Polish priests declined from 168 to 113. A considerable number of them, despite protests by the parishioners, have not received the necessary permits to work in Belarus.

Information about the majority of these cases bypasses the media, but fragmentary leaks show that in 2009 four Polish priests were refused visas, in 2012 – three, and in 2014 – two. A sudden decrease in the number of priests could greatly hinder the Church's functioning.

New parishes wait years for a temple construction permit and Lukashenka personally signs each one. The Catholic hierarchy,

however, never expresses its concern about the issue publicly. The protest of parishioners in Hrodna in December 2006 has been the only deviation from this policy of silence.

Fr. Aliaksandr Šemiet, after waiting ten years for a temple construction permit, organised a hunger strike. Five days later the authorities issued it. [Aliaksandr Kaškievič](#), Bishop of Hrodna, was informed about a forthcoming protest, but huge support from parishioners and the priest's desperation meant that he could not forbid it.

Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill meeting: a new chance for Belarusian diplomacy?

Some analysts treat the historical reunion of two Christian leaders in Cuba as a personal failure of Lukashenka. The Belarusian president has been an [ardent supporter of such meeting](#) in Minsk. Archbishop Kandrusievič enthusiastically stated that “the likelihood of the Pope visiting Belarus is greater than ever”. In the current struggle [to normalise relations with the West](#), closer relations with Catholics create new opportunities for Belarusian foreign policy.

It is possible that Archbishop Tadevush Kandrusievič will receive some extra bonus such as a Catholic shortwave radio broadcasting licence, for example. Any legal guarantees, however, seem unthinkable. In 2008, during a meeting with Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone, Lukashenka expressed readiness to sign a concordat with the Vatican.

Since then, Minsk has frozen the bargaining process. Leszek Szerepko, former ambassador of Poland in Minsk, in an article published in *Tygodnik Powszechny* wrote that “the existing system which guarantees to the state a rich instrument of

control and influence over religious communities” fully suits the Belarusian leader.

The Catholic Church has rich experience of functioning in authoritarian regimes. Amidst endless public provocations, Archbishop Kandrusievič has avoided participation in the authorities’ game. In 2007 deputy Prime Minister [Aliaksandr Kosiniec](#) announced that “in four years there will be no foreign priests in Belarus”. Nevertheless, Polish priests continue to serve in the Belarusian state. Perhaps Catholic diplomacy in the corridors looks unattractive, but it remains effective.

Artsiom Tkachuk

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Holy See: Belarus is a Model for Our World

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, second in line in the Vatican hierarchy to Pope Francis, called an internationally ostracised Belarus a “model for our world”.

Visiting Minsk on 12-15 March, he also denounced the West's policy of isolation and promised to provide the Holy See's help in improving Minsk's relations with Europe.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka's trip to the Vatican is now all but settled. Pope Francis' visit to Minsk remains less probable as the Holy See would avoid further alienating Russia.

Vatican Envoy Gets Exclusive Reception

Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Secretary of State, received a welcome in Minsk that many heads of state would envy. The cardinal met with all of the country's senior officials, including the president, prime minister, chairman of the parliament's upper house, and foreign minister.

To date, the Catholic Church is the second-largest confession in Belarus after the Russian Orthodox Church. About 15% of Belarusians associate themselves with the former. Interestingly, the share of regular church-goers is much higher among Catholics than among Orthodox believers.

Parolin: Belarus is a model for our world suffering from conflicts□

In this context, Cardinal Parolin has certainly taken comfort in Lukashenka's reassurance that Belarus "would prevent any attempts to favour one church over the others".

The Belarusian ruler can hardly complain about a lack of reciprocity. Meeting reporters in Minsk, Pietro Parolin called Belarus "an example of harmonious coexistence of different cultural and religious traditions". Such statements certainly hearten the much-maligned regime.

Holy See Against Isolating Belarus

Alexander Lukashenka has long sought support of the influential Catholic hierarchy for his attempts to normalise relations with the West. In June 2008, he received Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Pietro Parolin's predecessor, and announced forthcoming talks on the concordat between Belarus and the Holy See.

In April 2009, Pope Benedict XVI held a private audience with Alexander Lukashenka, accompanied by his youngest son Mikalai, in the Apostolic Palace, an event that was seen as a

breakthrough in contesting Lukashenka's diplomatic isolation.

Despite some international criticism, the Apostolic capital remains committed to its policy of engagement with Belarus. Pietro Parolin said in Minsk that the Holy See was ready to help the Belarusian authorities improve their ties with the EU. The Vatican envoy has also denounced the EU's policy of isolating Belarus:

The isolation of a nation, its marginalisation, albeit for reasons which may seem understandable or even noble, is the defeat of diplomacy...

Lukashenka: "We Have Some Issues, Not Problems"

In return, the Holy See is seeking to improve the Catholic Church's situation in Belarus.

At his meeting with Cardinal Parolin, Lukashenka boasted of having transferred about 300 religious buildings to the Catholic Church. Indeed, the number of Catholic parishes has increased fourfold in the last 20 years.

In reality, the authorities' attitudes towards Catholics remain far from cosy. In 2013, Uladzislau Lazar, a Catholic priest, spent six months in prison after being accused of espionage. The KGB later dropped the charges.

Lukashenka: Opening a theological seminary was my idea

In January 2015, Lukashenka and another senior official accused Polish-born priests of meddling in domestic politics. The Catholic hierarchy called these accusations "a baseless insult... an incitement of ethnic and religious hatred". Following this flare up, Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) had to [interfere](#) to defuse tension.

After many decades of government-imposed atheism, Catholics in

Belarus have experienced a serious [shortage](#) of local-born clergy. At the same time, they have spent many months trying to register a theological seminary in Minsk. This bureaucratic heel dragging never prevented Lukashenka from taking credit for this idea.

The government also hinders the development of a small, yet vibrant community of Eastern-rite Catholics, successors of the Uniate Church, which once dominated in the country. Since the country's independence, they have not been able to secure a plot of land to build a church in Minsk.

Concordat Put on Hold

The Vatican's envoy and its Belarusian hosts also preferred keep mum on the issue of a concordat. The parties have accepted that the talks on the matter have stalled.

The Holy See has been seeking an end to negotiations for this international agreement in order to ensure the Church's rights in religious education, appointment of priests and bishops, etc.

The Orthodox Church and Russian ambassador have fought against a concordat

According to Belarus Digest's sources in the Catholic hierarchy, the authorities struggled to water down the first draft and to subordinate it to Belarusian law.

The same sources affirm that the Russian Orthodox Church and Russia's ambassador in Belarus, Alexander Surikov, have been making every effort to prevent the concordat from happening.

As a result, it has become abundantly clear that the concordat is not going to happen anytime soon. The Belarusian authorities have suggested substituting it with specific-area agreements concluded with the local Catholic authorities, thus downgrading the legal framework of relations.

Pope Francis Invited to Belarus

It is now safe to say that Pope Francis, like his immediate predecessor, will give a private audience to President Lukashenka. According to Belarus Digest's sources, the visit is most likely to take place in September, in the midst of Lukashenka's re-election campaign.

However, whether Pope Francis will come to Belarus remains unclear.

Senior Belarusian officials have invited the Pope to visit Minsk. The explicit and [repetitive](#) nature of these invitations indicate a well thought-out plan and not merely a formal gesture.

Most experts agree that Moscow will put more pressure on Minsk in order to prevent the Papal visit from happening. The Russian Orthodox Church regards Belarus as its "canonical territory". They fear [growing influence](#) of the Catholic Church in the countries with predominately-Orthodox population.

Indeed, Metropolitan Pavel, the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, who received a courtesy call from Cardinal Parolin, declared already that the Papal visit was "not on the agenda".

The Vatican fears to alienate Russia

However, Alexander Lukashenka is perfectly capable of disregarding Moscow's opposition. Despite popular belief, the Orthodox Church has limits to its influence in Belarus. They cannot afford a serious quarrel with the country's secular authorities.

Ironically, the real opposition to the Papal visit will come from within the Roman curia. It has many influential people who believe in possibility of a successful ecumenical dialogue with the Russian Orthodox. They will be strongly against

putting it at stake by allowing the Pope to go to an insignificant "Orthodox" country.

Notwithstanding what happens to the Papal visit, the parties will remain interested in maintaining warm and constructive relations. Minsk needs the Vatican's mediation in its relations with Europe and seeks domestic PR benefits. The Apostolic Capital will continue to seek further improvement of the Church's operating conditions in Belarus.

Talking to Europe, Mending Ties with the Vatican, Family Values – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

During his "open dialogue" with the press on 29 January, President Alexander Lukashenka continued walking the fine line between alarming Russia and progressing Belarus' relations with the West.

The Belarusian ruler made it clear that he appreciated the noticeable shift in European and US policy towards Belarus, all the while reaffirming his mistrust of the West at the same time. He swore allegiance to the nation's "sacred ties" with Russia, though he also insisted that he would never "go to war with the West to oblige someone".

Quite unexpectedly, Lukashenka gets the chance to have a direct top-level dialogue with the EU on 11 February when he will host a meeting on Ukraine with the participation of

Angela Merkel and François Hollande. Given the format of the event, it is unclear whether he will get anything substantial out of it, apart from the obvious PR benefits.

Lukashenka and his religious figurehead, Lieanid Huliaka, also managed to mar Belarus' relations with the Catholic Church by making a few ill-conceived statements in public. The foreign ministry was forced to intervene immediately in order to salvage their hard-won relations with the Holy See.

Lukashenka and Europe

Latvia is considering inviting [Alexander Lukashenka](#) to represent Belarus at the next summit of the Eastern Partnership, which will take place in Riga on 21 – 22 May. Andrejs Pildegovičs, Latvia' State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, announced their intentions on 23 January, speaking to the press in Minsk after several meetings with his Belarusian counterparts.

The Latvian diplomat stressed that the final decision would rest with the Belarusian authorities. He also made it clear that Europe expected reciprocal steps from Belarus: "In today's Europe there's no such thing as political prisoners".

Lukashenka: "I don't really trust our Western partners".

In its relations with Belarus, the European Union is willing to go beyond the current stage of intensive working-level interaction. Reaching this stage was quite an achievement in 2014. A few years back, meetings at the level of foreign ministers and their deputies were a rarity. Now, the foreign ministry's European department works overtime to cope with the overwhelming workload of visits and consultations.

However, further normalisation in their relations seems unlikely without Lukashenka's direct engagement in the process. On 29 January, Lukashenka expressed his pessimism and

doubts about the prospects of normalising relations with the West: "I don't really trust our Western partners... No major shifts in relations between Europe and America and Belarus will happen until after the presidential election".

The Belarusian ruler also exhibited conflicted feelings about attending the Riga summit.

I'm not eager to go to this Eastern Partnership [summit]. I'm sick and tired of having these meetings the past twenty years. I know how they deal with matters there. Although I don't reject [the summit].

The Riga summit provides a convenient and comfortable setting for Lukashenka to make his European comeback – a familiar circle of his CIS counterparts joined by top EU officials. In the current geopolitical situation, the Belarusian regime needs the Eastern Partnership to counterbalance the smothering embrace of Russia. If nothing else, he could use closer ties with Europe to blackmail Russia and extract tangible economic benefits.

However, the price of his ticket to Riga has a ceiling. He fears appearing soft and manageable in the eyes of his voters and Russia by making open concessions on the sensitive topic of political prisoners.

Tough bargaining on the conditions of his attendance is bound to stretch on over the next several months. Speaking on Belarusian TV on 8 February, Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) stated that Belarus' participation in the Riga summit was conditioned on an invitation "on an equal footing", "without any discrimination".

The outcome of the [visa facilitation talks](#) may also influence Minsk's decision. The government would enjoy having something tangible to show for Lukashenka's participation.

Mending relations with the Holy See

On 30 January, Vladimir Makei received Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, the Apostolic Nuncio to Belarus. The minister hastened to mend the rift that recent rash statements by senior officials caused in ties between Belarus and the Catholic Church.

The Belarusian authorities value the relationship with the Holy See, one they have been at work on for years. Alexander Lukashenka has often praised the Vatican's role in improving Belarus' relations with the West.

A week prior, Lieanid Huliaka, the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, speaking at an annual meeting of his Office, accused "some Catholic priests from Poland" of meddling in politics. "They don't like our country, our laws, or our leaders".

The Roman Catholic Church in Belarus has a serious shortage of locally born clergy. According to official statistics, out of 430 Catholic priests serving in Belarus, 113 are foreigners, mostly from Poland.

Bishops' Conference: the regime's accusations are "a baseless insult to the Catholic Church"

On 29 January, President Alexander Lukashenka voiced the same concerns. At his meeting with the press he said, "As for the Polish clergy, I am not very happy with the service of some Polish representatives here... On occasion, they are doing things they should not be doing".

These converging statements from top officials alarmed the Catholic Church in Belarus. On 30 January, the Conference of Catholic Bishops issued an urgent statement calling these accusations "a baseless insult to the Catholic Church and the incitement of ethnic and religious hatred".

Vladimir Makei went out of his way to defuse tension created by his boss and colleague. The minister described the Holy See's position and practical activities towards Belarus as "very constructive and balanced".

He conveyed the president's appreciation for Pope Francis' efforts in combating poverty and promoting peace and stability and offered to be a bridge to open up discussion of possible issues between all concerned parties. The foreign ministry would obviously hate to see its friendly ties with the Vatican crumble following a few opportunistic statements.

Friends of Traditional Families

Belarus has made an important step in institutionalising its top-priority multilateral initiative. On 20 January, the international community saw the emergence of a Group of Friends of the Family in New York, when Belarus' Deputy Foreign Minister [Valentin Rybakov](#) made a statement on its behalf at UN headquarters.

It took a few weeks for Belarusian diplomacy to pull together 18 like-minded countries.

Hard-line regimes dominate among "friends of family" group led by Belarus

As will readily be observed, Islamic nations from Asia, the Middle East and Africa dominate the group, and it does not have a single representative from the Western hemisphere or Europe (besides Belarus). It is interesting to note that a common characteristic of the group's members is their autocratic or even dictatorial domestic regimes.

[Speaking at the UN](#), Valentin Rybakov reaffirmed that the family remained the natural and fundamental unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state. The statement called for the systematic mainstreaming of "the

family" across the post-2015 development agenda. It avoided making an explicit reference to what the definition of a family is, though still failed to gain broad support.

Despite the limited support enjoyed by its pet initiative, Belarus is determined to keep it alive at all costs. As it capitalised on its highly successful [initiative on combating human trafficking](#), Minsk wants to maintain its standing in multilateral international diplomacy.

Belarusian Espionage: Abroad and at Home

On 10 November the General Prosecutor's Office of Lithuania reported that a Vilnius court will try a Lithuanian citizen on espionage charges. The Lithuanian authorities claim that he cooperated with Belarusian security services.

As other cases from recent years prove, Belarusian intelligence is quite interested in its immediate neighbours – Poland and Lithuania. Belarusians usually seek military intelligence and generally probe opportunities to advance Belarusian economic interest in these countries.

Belarus's EU neighbours regard Belarusian intelligence as being, more or less, on par with its Russian counterpart. However, despite close ties since Soviet times and cooperation agreements, Belarusians may have a separate agenda, as Lukashenka's attempts to pursue a more independent foreign policy.

Inside Belarus, recent public spying cases have involved only

local citizens. As either Andrej Hajdukoŭ's or priest Uladzislaŭ Lazar's cases show, the authorities can use espionage charges to intimidate the opposition or independent institutions.

A Spy with Belarusian Roots

A former worker of Oro Navigacija, a Lithuanian air traffic control agency, is suspected of committing espionage against Lithuania for Belarus's security services. He may receive up to 15 years in prison as a result. A Vilnius circuit court will hold his trial in January. At the moment the suspect's name remains unknown.

The investigators claims that the suspect secretly photographed documents in his office, including various objects tied to Lithuania's military and civilian infrastructure, and then proceeded to hand them to the General Staff of the Belarusian armed forces. "He gathered and passed on to Belarus information on the Lithuanian armed forces, its state enterprises, objects of strategic importance for national security in Lithuania", stated a press release from the General Prosecutor's Office.

The Chief of Lithuania's Security Department Gediminas Grina noted that Russia could also use this information, because Belarus and Russia have a military alliance and share intelligence data.

Having Belarusian roots, the suspect visited Belarus a couple of times a year to see his relatives and friends. His two sons have business partners in Russia, and regularly go there on to tend to their affairs. These facts could easily become rounds for Lithuania's own security services to become interested in him.

However, espionage scandals more often than not arise Belarus's other neighbour – Poland. In recent years several incidents have occurred with Belarus citizens being charged

with spying.

Belarus Intelligence: Poland in its Sights

The Polish Agency of Internal Security in its annual 2013 report noted that Russian and Belarusian spies have shown the highest level of activity in Poland. Russians are interested mostly in the energy sector, such as liquid gas and nuclear power, as well as EU and NATO's eastern policy.

For Belarus, the report says, Poland is a priority country for intelligence gathering. Belarusian spies search for markets to sell Belarusian goods, firms that can invest in Belarus, possibilities of becoming beneficiaries for EU assistance programmes and assess the nation's military capacity.

In March 2014 the Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza reported that the Polish Internal Security Agency detained two Belarus citizens with charges of spying for Russia. One of them, a Military Attache of Belarus in Poland Dzmitry Žukaŭ, took pictures of a NATO training centre in Bydgoszcz. Another Polish newspaper, Gazeta Prawna, added that he sought contacts with veteran societies, retired soldiers, and youth scout groups and often visited their gatherings and events.



A few month before this episode, Polish counter-intelligence detained a Hrodna resident named Jury, who also took pictures of military-related objects.

Another Belarus citizen, known as Aliaksandr, remains in Polish custody for already two years now. He apparently cooperated with officers from the shuttered Polish Military Information Service.

They regarded him as a source in the Belarus security services and paid him \$300,000 for his assistance. But a subsequent investigation proved that he was misinforming the Poles and

carrying out the orders of his bosses in Minsk.

Spies inside Belarus

In 2011 the Belarusian KGB reported that it had terminated the activity of 23 agents of its foreign security service. However, there was never ever any concrete cases data that appeared in the media. The people whom the authorities publicly charged with espionage or treason were all Belarusian citizens.

In 2012, the Belarusian KGB published information on two Belarus citizens, Aliaksandr Fenzeliaŭ and Jaŭhien Kačura, who were allegedly spying for Lithuania. The KGB detained a Lithuanian intelligence officer and two Belarusians who passed to him secret information about something related to the military. The agency was able to prove their case by gathering information and, later on, the suspects confirmed their guilt during trial. The court found them guilty and imposed a 10 and 8 year sentence on them, respectively.



Another case to surface was that of Andrej Hajdukoŭ, one that appears to be politically motivated. Opposition activist and leader of the youth organisation “Union of Young Intellectuals”, he was detained in Viciebsk by the KGB in November 2012 and faced charges of treason.

When taking a look at the KGB's official position on Hajdukoŭ, his tactics look rather ridiculous in an era of digital technology. For one, he allegedly hid secret information for foreign agents in a mail drop box. Nevertheless, he was tried and sentenced to 1.5 years in prison on a less serious charge – an attempt to establish contacts with a foreign agency, or in his case, with the US embassy.

In July of this year Lukashenka revealed information that one of the officers serving in Belarusian security agency, “was

connected to foreign states via a Catholic Church representative. He not only passed information on to them, but also caused trouble for our people who were working abroad”.

Soon, information appeared that the KGB had arrested the catholic priest [Uladzislau Lazar](#) on charges of state treason. After spending half a year under investigation, he was released due to the prosecutor's inability to prove his case.

As these cases show, the charges mounted against individuals by the Belarusian authorities sometimes appear to be more an issue of exerting political pressure on the opposition or independent institutions (like Catholic Church). Real instances of the apprehension of foreign spies remain unknown to the public, although the KGB continues to boast about its achievements in this arena.

According to the words of Polish and Lithuanian officials, these countries (and perhaps the whole west) regard Belarusian intelligence as being one and the same as Russian intelligence. They continue to work in close cooperation and are committed to sharing any and all needed information. Indeed, such agreements have legally existed since the early 1990s, and these close ties have continued to exist since soviet times, when they were originally established..

However, as the retired KGB lieutenant-colonel Valer Kostka said in an interview to Charter97.org web site, "if there is a common goal, the special services make a deal over it, no matter if it is CIA, Russian FSB or Belarusian KGB. It is a complicated hidden mechanism. If a certain interest exists, Lukashenka will make an agreement with Putin, so Belarusian intelligence will cooperate with Russians, and vice versa".

This means that Belarusian intelligence and special services may have their own agenda separate from Russia's, with which Lukashenka can attempt to pursue a more independent foreign policy.

Why Belarus Authorities Keep a Catholic Priest in Jail

On 15 November, several Belarusian organisations appealed to Amnesty International and local human rights structures to recognise priest Lazar as a prisoner of conscience.

Uladzislau Lazar has already spent four months in a KGB jail on charges of 'treason of the state' despite the fact that the public does not know any details surrounding the criminal case.

The Catholic Church in Belarus remains weak and does not openly oppose the government. The Apostolic Nuncio holds secret talks, but this tactic causes resentment among some believers and priests. Many in the Church would like to see their leadership be more assertive.

The authorities still appear to be rather timid and have yet to work out a solution. On the one hand, the activities of the Catholic Church irritate the authorities, while on the other, the Holy See can be an important ally. A priest turned political prisoner can certainly spoil future relations.

From Priest to Political Prisoner

Pavel Seviarynets from the Belarusian Christian Democrats and Zmicier Dashkievich from the Youth Front, both [recently released](#) to freedom, keep trying to spread the word about the case of Catholic priest Lazar. Until now, the Church has not officially demanded the release of the priest and holds only secret talks with the government. Mr Dashkevich said that, "it is not clear for [him] why the stance of the Catholic church

is so uncertain."

The criminal case against the priest looks very strange, and information on it remains completely secret. The Belarusian authorities placed the priest in KGB jail four months ago accusing him of "betraying the state". It remains unknown at what stage the criminal proceedings are and when the court will hold a trial.

Uladzislau Lazar himself denies any wrongdoing. He said this to Claudio Gugerotti, apostolic nuncio to Belarus, whom he met in prison on 25 October. After the meeting, the nuncio called Lazar 'sober and resolute.'

The Belarusian Christian Democrats, the Young Front and the "For Freedom" movement have signed an appeal to show how tired they are of the Church's tactics. The Christian Democrats want to see the Catholic Church and all other Christian churches in Belarus become more active in politics and in public in general. Also, the Belarusian Christian Democrats and the Young Front are using the chance to show to the electorate that they can protect Christians, even if the church maintains its silence.

Before this appeal, the opposition groups gathered signatures for the release of Lazar and money for his family. There are quite a few Catholics that support doing more to secure the release of the priest, more than the Catholic Church is carrying out today.

Catholic Church Tactics

The Church only received confirmation of the priest's arrest from the authorities in September. However, Lukashenka was the first to [state in July](#) that the authorities have "detained one of the traitors who have served in the special services and who, through the representatives of the Catholic Church, is related to foreign states".

Since then, Archbishop Tadeush Kandrusievich called on Catholics to pray for Father Lazar and [Pope Francis](#) has shown interest in the case and passed a rosary to the priest through the nuncio. The Roman Catholic Church, however, has not taken any more public actions.

During this time the Catholic Church is holding talks with the government. Unofficial sources indicate that Archbishop Kandrusievich is not part of these negotiations. Apostolic nuncio Claudio Gugerotti, who already has gotten [some results](#) in dealing with Lukashenka's regime in the past, remains in charge.

Compared to EU diplomats, the content of conversations between the Catholic Church and the authorities have never been leaked to the public. This helps to build trust between the parties, even while the [Orthodox Church](#) looks upon these developing relations quite jealously.

The Catholic Church has a long history of relations with authoritarian countries and, through its dealings with them, has learned a few lessons. The Church will not throw down the gauntlet before the regime. It has big plans to strengthen its position in Belarus: to build new churches, to open new educational institutes, to conduct great pilgrimages. Therefore, bishops remain reluctant to spoil their hard won relations with the regime.

The Church did not directly confront the authorities of Poland during the Soviet era and is not challenging the government in Cuba. It should be noted that both of those countries are a majority Catholic, while Belarus is not. In 2010 the church leadership publicly sought from the authorities the return of a monastery in the centre of Minsk and was dealt a blow. Instead of the monastery, the place was given to a hotel. It will open next year.

The Church knows that it cannot win the battle with the

authorities, but believes in its diplomacy. Several priests told the author that they remain convinced that the nuncio will find a mutual understanding with the regime, and Lazar will not be on the receiving end of a jail sentence.

At the same time, many priests in Belarus remain concerned about the silence of the upper echelons of the clergy, as they themselves could find themselves in the place that Lazar is in right now.

What Irritates the Authorities?

It seems that the criminal case against the priest Lazar has fallen apart. The authorities of Belarus are not giving any information about the status of the case, though the detention was reported first by Lukashenka himself. Lazar's sister and the nuncio continue to publicly convey the words of Lazar about his innocence.

Although it is impossible to prove the innocence of the priest, no evidence of his "treason" has surfaced either.

Off the record Catholic priests say that the authorities want to make Lazar an exemplary case for all other clergy. Although the Belarusian Church hierarchs remain loyal, the activities of such a large organisation has turned out to be an issue of concern for the authorities.

The Church clings to the Belarusian language, holds great pilgrimages, opens educational institutions, and among its active believers are a fair share of members of opposition organisations.

Lazar's case put not only the Church in an uncomfortable state, but also Lukashenka's regime. A criminal term for the priest on a charge of 'treason' looks too brutal even to the Belarusian authorities themselves. It seems that the regime does not know how to resolve the situation.

An unconditional release may show the vulnerability of the authorities, and a criminal term will certainly damage relations with an important potential ally. The crossing of this Rubicon will have an important effect on the regime's relations with the Holy See.

Will Christian Values Unite the Belarusian Opposition?

In recent months, two political prisoners, Źmicier Daškievič and Paval Seviaryniec, completed their incarceration and compulsory labour terms. Both promote Christian politics and are going to keep on struggling with the regime in the upcoming 2014 and 2015 elections.

Belarus remains the least religious country of the former Soviet Union, with only 33% of its population reporting religion as important for them. Moreover, as Belarus remains a sovietized society in many aspects, the law on religious freedom remains quite restrictive.

In such conditions, building a political campaign on purely idealist values may be a challenging task. However, coupled with good social and economic program and smart usage of modern technology, such a campaign can prove successful.

Paval Seviaryniec: Time for a Moral Revolution

Paval Seviaryniec is perhaps the most prominent activist of the younger generation of the Belarusian national movement. Born in 1976, he joined the Belarusian Popular Front in 1995 and in 1997 co-chaired the newly created oppositional youth

organisation Malady Front. In 1997-2004 he served as one of the main organisers of mass street protests against Lukashenka's politics, and took part in numerous political and cultural projects. He was detained around 40 times.

In 2005, the authorities accused him for organising protests against the results of the 2004 referendum which allowed Lukashenka to serve more than two terms in office. Paval received three years of compulsory labour, which means living in a settlement in a remote areas of Belarus and working with restricted travel rights. In 2010 he was arrested after a mass protest against the presidential elections results and sentenced to another three-year term of compulsory labour.

In an interview after his release, Seviarynets proclaimed the total defeat of the opposition and its marginal role in current politics. He thinks that today's leaders should prepare a moral revolution. Lukashenka will be gone sooner or later, and the opposition's leaders should prevent the persistence of norms which exist under Lukashenka regime – theft, lie, fear and threats. The opposition, in Paval's view, also does not fully stick to a moral way of life.

“We need thousands of people who set moral principles above all else. We should respond to hatred with love, to fear with belief, to lies with truth”, Paval said. He regards the church as the most important and crucial center for a moral revolution today, as it has the largest moral potential. The lawyers, economists and engineers who visit churches today can replace the hundred thousand Lukashenka bureaucrats.

Žmicier Daškievič: God, Family, Fatherland

Žmicier Daškievič became another leader of the nation's youth in the 2010s. He served as co-chair of Malady Front in 2005 and took over its leadership in 2008. He took an active part in the 2006 presidential elections and supported the candidacy of Aliaksandr Milinkievič. After the elections he was one of

the main organisers of the tent camp which was set up to protest against the election results.

✘ In November 2006, the court found him guilty of acting on behalf of an unregistered organisation and sentenced him to a year and a half in prison. In 2010, before the notorious crackdown following presidential elections, security services provoked a fight with him in the street and soon he received two years in prison for “hooliganism”.

Zmicier Daškievič, after his release, stated that he was not going to keep the position of Malady Front leader, although he would continue to support it. Zmicier, who married his girlfriend while in prison, now believes he has a responsibility to his family and therefore puts the values of God, family and fatherland above all else. He has to abandon his former revolutionary passion and fight using the word of God. “The day of regime change will come, because God has already decided upon it”, Zmicier says.

Religion and State in Belarus

According to a 2009 Gallup poll, Belarus occupies 15th place in the list of least religious countries, with 57% reporting that religion is not important in their lives. Hence, Belarus presents the least religious country of the former Soviet Union. Indeed, the role of the church in modern Belarusian politics has been small in comparison to such religious neighbours of Belarus as Poland.

As Belarus remains a sovietized society in many aspects, the ✘ law on religious freedom appears quite restrictive here. All religious communities must obtain state registration, and all public expressions of belief must receive official permission from the state. After the restrictive 2002 law came into force, Belarusian authorities faced a resistance to some religious communities, especially protestant, who are considered “not a traditional church” and are often met with

more restrictions.

The Catholic Church in Belarus, having up to 1.5 million believers according to some estimates, also regularly experiences problems with the state. As representatives of the west and potential "agents of influence", catholic priests from abroad sometimes do not receive permission to work in Belarus and some of them already working in Belarus are forced out of the country. As evidence of such official policy, recently the Belarusian KGB detained catholic priest Uladzislaŭ Lazar and accused him of assisting a spy suspect.

The problems with restrictions on religious freedom in Belarus have even appeared in European Parliament resolution of 17 December 2009, where it urged Belarusian authorities to safeguard freedom of religion for religious denominations other than the Orthodox Church.

Will Christian Democracy Unite the Opposition?

With only a third of citizens considering themselves believers and such restrictive politics towards religion, it would be hard for politicians like Paval Seviaryniec to mobilise society and build a new government based on Christian values. However, that very third of the population seems to be an active participant in Belarusian society, especially among Catholics and Protestants. The 2010 presidential elections showed that the candidate from the Christian Democrats Vital Rymašeŭski drew substantial attention from Christian voters.

☒ Christian Democracy as a political subject emerged in Belarus in the late 2000s. In 2009, the founding congress of Belarusian Christian Democracy took place in Minsk. Unsurprisingly, the Ministry of Justice declined the application for the party's registration. Despite this, the party continues with its activities with its unofficial status. Its activists have faced constant pressure in carrying out their work, especially in the regions. However, today the

party looks more viable than its colleagues among the “old” opposition, who became “professional oppositionists”.

Currently, the Belarusian opposition has formed two coalitions ahead of the 2014 local elections and 2015 presidential elections. While Žmicier Daškievič expresses skepticism to them and sees no way to challenge the regime at the moment, Paval Seviaryniec appears more optimistic. He suggests that Belarusian Christian Democracy become the link that unites the two coalitions to lead a joint campaign with a single candidate in 2015.

As a pragmatic nation with mostly materialistic interests and views, Belarusians will hardly follow a purely idealist political platform. However, coupled with a good social and economic program and a smart campaign, it can indeed yield successful results for Lukashenka's opponents.

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.



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



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.

Will Pope Francis Visit Belarus? Lukashenka Hopes So

In his congratulation letter to the newly elected Pope Francis, Alexander Lukashenka invited the Pontiff to visit the "friendly Belarusian land".

Although two previous Popes declared the wish to come to Minsk, neither actually had a chance to meet the millions of Belarusian Catholics. Whereas Minsk remains unwanted in the West, the Vatican appears an important mediator between both sides. However, for the first non-European Pope in a hundreds of years, Belarus could be too exotic to make it a priority and visit the country.

Lukashenka has repeated on many occasions that he welcomes the Pope to Belarus. During a meeting with the Vatican's Nuncio in April 2012, he expressed the will to strengthen both the Catholic and Orthodox Church in Belarus. Pope John Paul II never received an invitation to visit Belarus. But in 2002, Vatican officials conducted discussions with Minsk on the issue. However, as happened with Moscow, the visit never materialised.

A breakthrough in Belarus-Vatican relations took place with the new Pope Benedict XVI who met with Alexander Lukashenka and his youngest son Mikalai in the Vatican in 2009. Significantly, it broke for a moment the diplomatic isolation of Minsk in the West. It also turned out to be Lukashenka's first trip to Western Europe since his 1999 visa ban was implemented. However, the Pope could not reciprocate the visit to Belarus. Instead, the Vatican's Secretary, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, visited Belarus in 2009.

Support for Society

The Holy See has always supported the independent post-Soviet states. John Paul II in one of his audiences said to the representatives of the Belarusian Catholic clergy that “Belarus is the former Soviet republic that has undergone the least change since the fall of Communism, and is the least integrated into the rest of Europe”.

In May 2008, when Pope Benedict XVI addressed the new ambassador of Belarus to the Vatican, he said: ‘Please be assured that the Holy See will continue to support your nation in its efforts to affirm proper and legitimate aspirations for freedom and in her labours to foster the democratic process as a part of the great family of free and sovereign European nations.’

On 1 March 2008 Minsk was included in a special video link of Belarusian youth with the Pope. For the first time Belarusian Catholics could take part in the event. After the common prayer, the Pope made a speech to the Belarusian youth. Belarusian state media broadcasted the event.

Concordat: Still to Be Concluded

A possible concordat remains an unresolved issue between Belarus and the Vatican. A concordat is a special document concluded between a church and secular authorities to regulate bilateral relations, including the right to religious education and protection of religious freedoms.

The leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, [nominally the largest religious group in Belarus](#), have already signed a number of agreements with the Belarusian authorities and view the initiative of a concordat with the Vatican with suspicion. The Patriarch of Moscow, Kiril, during his meeting with Lukashenka in September 2009 said that ‘Belorussia is not a bridge, nor a gateway, but a Western part of the Saint Rus, historical Rus’.

The 2009 visit of Lukashenka to the Holy See might have

heralded a conclusion of the document. Nonetheless, until now the two sides have failed to conclude it. According to the head of Belarusian Catholics, Archbishop Kondrusiewicz, the conclusion of the concordat would enhance the prestige of both the Roman-Catholic Church and Belarus in the international arena.

Concordats with countries where Catholics are in a minority are not unusual. For example, Montenegro was the first country with a majority of Orthodox citizens to conclude a concordat with the Vatican, in June 2012. During the act of conclusion of the agreement, Benedict XVI confirmed his support for the European integration ambitions of that country.

Through Vatican to the West?

Lukashenka's 2009 visit to the Holy See remains remarkable for a few reasons. Ten years of isolation of Minsk might have given its leadership hope for improving the relationship with the West. Whereas the West spurns Lukashenka, he finds himself more comfortable with the East.

For Lukashenka, the visit to the Vatican was particularly prestigious at the moment when nobody in Europe wanted to do it. This was probably one of the reasons why the Apostolic nuncio in Belarus was the only diplomat who could [visit the Belarusian prisoners of conscience](#).

The Vatican still appears as an important mediator, but also as a promoter of Western values. At the same time, the Pope with his moral authority is in a good position to improve the image of the West in Minsk, which is a subject of frequent attacks by Belarusian propaganda.

It is too early to speculate over the politics of the newly elected Pope. Most likely the new Pope does not have any special links or emotional attachment to Belarus. He was born and grew up in Argentina where most people are most likely not sure where Belarus is.

The two previous European Popes – John Paul II and Benedict XVI – carried a 'regional historical burden': both witnessed the atrocities of WWII and were aware of the post-war and transformation difficulties Eastern European societies faced.

However, the new Pope may wish to continue their activities and strengthen the position of the Church in the region as the previous leaders of the Holy See did. It will be an important event for Belarusian Catholics and for Belarus, but may raise concerns for those who will regard the visit as tacit support for "Europe's last dictatorship".

Limits of Religious Tolerance: Protestantism in Belarus

Last month *New Life*, a Protestant Church in Minsk, celebrated its victory: the authorities allowed them to pray in the cowshed. Over the last five years, this Protestant community had to go through over 30 court hearings and their success has a bitter aftertaste.

Protestantism in Belarus undergoes a renaissance. Albeit the Protestant communities appear to be the fastest-growing, the case of the New Life proves how the authorities make their life difficult. Today restrictive legal framework hinders activities and growth of Protestant churches.

The authorities create obstacles which prevent Protestants from obtaining buildings for prayers and unfriendly attitude of the state media clearly raise the question of equality between the particular confessions before the law and freedom

of confession in Belarus.

Protestant (Non-)Church?

According to official figures, the number of registered Protestant communities in Belarus is 1,005. The biggest churches remain Evangelic, Pentecostals and Baptists. In comparison with 1,545 Orthodox churches and 475 Roman-Catholic parishes, number of Protestant communities grows fast.

An activist from a Protestant church in Minsk explained to Belarus Digest that the growth reflects the nature of Belarusians as the post-Soviet society, which after the communism started to recognise their spiritual needs.

Whereas, number of Protestant is substantial, the authorities and the state media refrain from calling them 'churches'. They usually prefer to refer to them as 'communities' or 'religious organisations'. Interesting, that the Belarusian word 'carkva', literally meaning 'the church', is reserved for use only for the Orthodox Church in Belarus.

Although the tradition of Protestantism in Belarus dates back to the 16th century, the authorities treat it today as non-traditional bearers of foreign political and cultural influence. Even the schoolbooks depict the Protestant confessions as sects which endanger Belarusian state and society.

The lack of proper buildings for the prayer can easily serve as evidence of 'inappropriate' and 'suspicious' activities of the Protestants. Without access to public media, it is almost impossible to explain wrongfulness and harmfulness of such propaganda.

To Pray but Where?

The lack of the venues to pray remains one of the top problems for Belarusian protestants. Complicated procedures,

unpredictable responses from the local authorities, unachievable prices often complicate functioning of protestant churches.

The parishes are lucky if they get the right from the local authorities to rent a building at reasonable prices. It is extremely difficult to register a new church building for Protestant communities. The case of the New Life church which had to fight over its building for the prayer illustrates this problem.

It started in 2005 when the community lost the right to use further the building, the cowshed adopted for the house for the prayer. The local authorities took a few attempts to resettle the church. In 2010, the community got the fine of 258 mln BYR for the 'environment pollution'. A battle over the cowshed between the authorities and the New Life Church continued.

To express their support with the church, in October 2012, the leaders of other Protestant churches in Belarus petitioned the head of the Presidential Administration. However, the authorities [refrained from enforcement](#) of the decision scheduled for December.

This probably does not let the community to be sure that problems like that will not appear in the future. However, through petitioning and exposure in the international public opinion, the Protestants' leaders proved they understood the power of legal instruments.

The authorities continue to reduce the number of permissions to rent land plots. Without it, official registration of buildings cannot be completed. Restrictive legislation pushes churches outside of legal boundaries.

Protestants' Problems Echoed in the West

The 2002 law on religion formally introduced inequality of

confessions in Belarus. It described the Orthodox Church as having a special role for the Belarusian society. Aleksandr Lukashenka constantly underlines the 'spiritual brotherhood' with Russia and the role of the Orthodox Church.

For example, during visit of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to Minsk he said: "Your ambition to preserve the unity of the Russian Orthodox Church and our Slavonic brotherhood deserves high praise. This idea fully meets the hopes of the peoples of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine".

The law on religions put also restrictions on the right of religious organisations to provide religious education. It confirmed the state censorship on import and distribution of religious literature which also rouse controversy.

The Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationalities Affairs of Belarus has a right to reject a registration of any church or religious organisation. The lack of registration makes further activity illegal. Obtaining the permission to build the church is also difficult. In 2010, the local authorities did not allow Protestant community from Navapolatsk to build a church building.

Foreign governments and international advocacy groups have already reacted to the deteriorating situation of the Protestants in Belarus. In a 2011 report, the US Department criticised the 2002 law as 'oppressive by European standards'. Moreover, the report raises the issue of 'an extensive bureaucracy that closely supervises the religious life'. The US 2011 International Religious Freedom Report was also very critical about the situation with the freedom of consciousness in Belarus.

In 2009, the European Parliament passed a resolution related to the human rights in Belarus calling to guarantee religious freedom in Belarus. But as it often happens international calls remained unheard in Minsk.

Protestants Tolerated but...

By playing with renting of prayer buildings the authorities keep the protestants far from the public sphere. Perhaps the growing number of protestants and the difficulty of controlling diverse and decentralised communities worries the authorities the most.

This attitude destroys the image of Belarus as a state of religious coexistence and tolerance, which the authorities often cherish in public speeches.

Two Christmases in One Country

Belarus is a unique country when it comes to Christmas: it has one Christmas at the end of December and the other one in early January. Both are official days off.

The Belarusian state officially recognises two confessions – the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches – as the most legitimate and important. Orthodox believers celebrate Christmas on 7 January by the Julian calendar, whereas Catholics celebrate Christmas on 25 December by the Gregorian calendar.

Through centuries of coexistence of many confessions, Belarusians have developed a distinct tolerance towards various religions. However, today these two main confessions have different positions and political backgrounds in relations with the Belarusian authorities. They also pursue different policies towards the use of the Belarusian language in church.

The Land of Many Religions

Orthodoxy was the first Christian confession that came to the territory of contemporary Belarus in the 10th century. The Catholic Church appeared here in the 14th century, when Belarus' territories constituted the core of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Grand Duchy presented a very interesting country religion-wise. Here, various Christian churches coexisted with each other and with Islam and Judaism, as well as with elements of paganism.

Throughout the country's history, no major conflict has happened between the two biggest churches of Belarus, despite the dominance of one or the other during various historical periods. One or another church's prevalence depended on the domination of either Russia or Poland in local affairs.

In towns and villages, Catholic and Orthodox churches often stood side by side. A family could celebrate Catholic Christmas on 25 December, and two weeks later join the celebration at their Orthodox friends or neighbours. In independent Belarus, the authorities decided to preserve this good tradition of religious coexistence and set both dates as official holidays.

According to official figures, around 60 per cent of Belarusians today claim to be believers. However, [Orthodox Christians appear less religious](#) than Catholics or Protestants. 18 per cent of Orthodox Christians report to be attending church regularly, while 50 per cent of Catholics do so. Most Catholics reside in the western part of Belarus, especially on the borders with Lithuania and Poland. They have a [particular identity](#), more west-oriented, and often call themselves "Poles", though hardly any of them can speak Polish.

A Chance for THE National Church

In Belarus, a national church like Catholicism in Poland or Orthodox Christianity in Russia never appeared. It has always been a land of many confessions. Perhaps this fact created unfavourable conditions for the development of national consciousness, as the church could not form solid ground for unification of the nation. Because of many periods of change in the country's religious situation, Belarusians remain generally unreligious people. However, Belarus had a chance to form a national religion, which was the Greek Catholic Church.

In the 16th century, the Orthodox hierarchy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania created the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, which combined elements of both Churches. The church kept the Orthodox rites but was a part of the Catholic Church.

Subsequently, the Uniate Church started to dominate and had the potential to become a real national church at the time when modern nations were being formed. However, external factors impacted that process negatively, and Belarusian territory was annexed to Russia during the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century.

The Russians pursued a policy of transition from the Uniate to Orthodox Church, and soon the Russian Orthodox Church merged with the Uniate Church. In independent Belarus, enthusiasts attempted to restore the Greek-Catholic church, but the number of parishes remains insignificant today.

Politics of Religion in Belarus

When Belarus gained independence, the churches had to rethink the new conditions and form strategies in their relations with the state. While the Catholic Church took a more pro-independence position, the Belarusian Orthodox Church remains closely tied to the Russian Orthodox Church, which serves as a close friend of the Russian state. Unlike Ukrainians, Belarusians do not have an autocephaly and have to report to Moscow.

After Alexander Lukashenka came to power, the Catholic Church strived to remain as apolitical as possible. It chose not to interfere in politics rather than confront the regime and thus hinder its development.

The Orthodox Church appeared more politically active and supported the newly elected pro-Russian leader. Soon, it established very close relations with him. In exchange for loyalty, the Orthodox Church received various benefits, including a notorious licence to trade alcohol and tobacco.

Lukashenka himself has always tried to use religious organisations in his political games. Being persona non grata among the secular powers of Europe, he decided to make friends with the Holy See and thus raise his image in the West. In 2009, he surprised the world by visiting the Pope together with his younger son Mikalai.

Inspired by this diplomatic success, the authorities started to make further plans. Soon, unofficial information appeared stating that Lukashenka was trying to arrange a meeting between the Pope and the Moscow Patriarch. Such a meeting would definitely raise the wretched profile of the Belarusian leader, but unfortunately for him, this meeting is yet to happen.

Still, relations with the Holy See [remain on the agenda of the Belarusian authorities](#). For example, Apostolic Nuncio Claudio Gugerotti, who visited Belarus in autumn 2012, was the only person whom authorities allowed to meet political prisoners. The regime tries to maintain good relations with Rome simply because it does not put forward any political terms or conditions.

Church and Language Policy

During the independence period, the Catholic Church pursued a firm policy of Belarusianisation. All church services, including worship and books, were translated into Belarusian.

Today, the Belarusian language is gradually replacing Polish across Belarus. It already dominates in all parts of Belarus except the Hrodna region, where the number of Poles is significant. Heads of the Catholic Church always address the public in Belarusian during major holidays, which are broadcast on TV and radio.

Heads of the Catholic Church always address the public in Belarusian during major holidays, which are broadcast on TV and radio.

In the Belarusian Orthodox Church, the situation developed differently. Structurally, the Belarusian Orthodox Church constitutes a part of the Russian Orthodox Church. Close ties with Moscow prevented the Belarusian Church from separating and creating an independent Orthodox Church, as did the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate.

Clearly, in such conditions the Orthodox Church has no desire to formulate any special policies concerning the Belarusian language. In Orthodox churches, Old Slavonic remains the most widespread language. The head of the Belarusian Orthodox church never uses Belarusian in his speeches. Although some priests are enthusiastic about the wider introduction of Belarusian into church services, the leadership remains silent on that issue – Russia is too close.

Vadzim Smok

Vatican Helps to Release

Belarusian Prisoners

Political

Apostolic nuncio Claudio Gugerotti is the only diplomat who can visit the Belarusian prisoners of conscience.

The Holy See seems to work as an intermediary between the European Union and Lukashenka with regard to release of the political prisoners. The nunciature tries to keep their profile low and refuses to give details of the visits to prisons. The secrecy of those visits may hint at the seriousness of intentions.

On 3 October, Claudio Gugerotti met with the Pope to discuss the latest events in Belarus.

The nuncio visited seven political prisoners last month: ex-presidential candidate Mikalaj Statkevich, chairman of the human rights organisation Vyasna Ales Byalyatski, co-chairman of the Belarusian Christian Democracy Pavel Syevyarynets, Young Front leaders Zmitser Dashkevich and Edward Lobau.

He also met anarchist Pavel Syramalotau and activist of the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front Syarhei Kavalenka. It is notable that the Belarusian authorities released the latter two after the meeting with the nuncio.

Besides, Belarusian analysts have often expressed the idea that the Catholic Church would have been a perfect intermediary in Belarusian-European relations – an opinion [shared by some politicians](#) in the West.

Weakness of the Catholic Church in Belarus

The position of the Catholic Church in Belarus is unstable. On the one hand, the Belarusian Catholic Church effectively

develops: builds new churches, organises mass pilgrimages to holy places and religious camps. 12 per cent of Belarusians [consider themselves Catholics](#) and every second Belarusian visits church regularly. The Catholic pilgrimage Budslau in Northern Belarus is considered to be the key religious event in Belarus. Christians of all denominations take part in it.

On the other hand, Belarusian Metropolitan Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz knows that the Belarusian Catholic Church can develop only if the authorities allow this. Therefore, the Catholic Church has to remain loyal to the regime.

But discontent with the policy of the Catholic Church administration is growing among the ordinary priests. Fathers Piotra Rudkouski and Yury Barok have many times condemned in public the silence of the Catholic Church authorities when the regime beats people and illegally sentences them to long terms in prison.

Nonetheless, the official line of the Catholic Church remains the same.

How Lukashenka Made Friends with the Catholic Church

In 2007, relations between the Catholic Church and Lukashenka significantly improved. At that time Pope Benedict XVI appointed Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz as Metropolitan of Minsk and Mahileu. The new Metropolitan soon found understanding with the authorities which made conditions for development of the Catholic Church in Belarus more favourable. However, this development was achieved at the price of loyalty to the Belarusian regime.

In 2009, the Pope officially received Lukashenka in the Vatican after long years of isolation. He was the first in Europe who did so. Naturally, Lukashenka is thankful to the Catholic Church for that. Lukashenka keeps saying at the meetings with the official representatives of the Catholic Church that there is a need for closer cooperation between

Belarus, the Holy See and the West.

Last November, Lukashenka said to Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, that he expected “from the Catholic Church and from Pope Benedict XVI personally more integration with regard to defence of our interests, especially in the West”.

This April, Lukashenka mentioned to the current Apostolic Nuncio Claudio Gugerotti that “the Catholic Church’s work on making the relations between Belarus and Western Europe is incomplete”.

It is obvious that Lukashenka really wants to see an influential ally with minimum political ambitions beside him. This ally should also depend on him in some way. The Catholic Church meets these criteria perfectly.

Why Do They Need an Intermediary?

Brussels does not trust Lukashenka anymore. It is clear that the “dialogue 2008-2010” and its sudden interruption cost a lot to European politicians. The European Union does not want to hold direct negotiations with Lukashenka. Back on 26 August 2011 Bulgaria’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Nikolay Mladenov arrived in Minsk with a mission to talk to Lukashenka. Lukashenka promised he would release all political prisoners soon but failed to keep his promise.

Brussels is tired of “spinning Minsk round”. The European decision-makers built their Belarus policy on the basis of a search for dialogue and compromises which could lead to at least minor political changes. Today Brussels is tired of looking for common points and the new approach is “if Lukashenka wants it, we want it too”.

This is why Lukashenka decided to establish relations with the Apostolic Capital himself. Today, the Catholic Church is a perfect intermediary for Lukashenka. Belarusian analysts think

that positive sides of the Apostolic Capital as an intermediary are great experience in negotiations and non-essential political ambitions. However, there's one more aspect, which no one mentions for some reason – the Catholic Church in Belarus is Lukashenka's hostage.

Apostolic Nuncio Claudio Gugerotti probably knows that Lukashenka will not go for reforms, but the Catholic Church sees its own advantages. First, the Catholic Church as an organisation based on morality wants to facilitate release of political prisoners. Second, although release of several political prisoners is not a great achievement, it will positively affect the reputation of the Holy See. Third, Lukashenka will pay back by letting the Belarusian Catholic Church develop freely.

Release of Several Political Prisoners Will Happen in the Near Future

It is worth mentioning that Belarus has its own very simple political cycle. If Russia is ready to supply energy resources at low prices to Belarus, Lukashenka will destroy the opposition by any means. If Russia demands that Belarus should pay more for oil and gas, Lukashenka starts slow liberalisation and the Belarusian prisoners of conscience come out of prisons.

Relations between Lukashenka and Putin are getting worse again. The Russian authorities demand that Lukashenka respects his own commitments. In the first place, this concerns privatisation and no more sales of oil products disguised as solvents. Belarus is not obliged to return taxes to the Russian budget when it sells oil products this way.

In such conditions, Belarusian authorities will seek support in the West. Belarus' foreign minister Uladzimir Makey even had a short meeting with the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last week in the United States. Naturally, the former

head of the presidential administration had some serious business to discuss with Clinton.

Therefore, the time for Lukashenka to release political prisoners has come. The Belarusian authorities will not do it massively in order not to lose face. However, several political are likely to leave their prison cells soon.

Ryhor Astapenia