

Orthodox Church is Losing Belarus

Belarus is turning away from the Orthodox Church. That is what statistics presented last week by Lieanid Huliaka, the Commissioner for Religions and Nationalities suggests. Belarusian protestants are the most active churchgoers, while Orthodox Christians are the least active. Only state support allows the Orthodox Church to keep up the appearance that it dominates religious life in Belarus.

According to the official statistics 59 percent of Belarusian citizens are Orthodox Christians, while just 12 percent are considered Catholics. But while only 18 percent of Orthodox believers attend mass regularly – every second Catholic does. Indeed, during Christmas 2011, only 254,000 Orthodox Christians attended mass, just 14,000 more than the total number of Catholics who attended. And despite state repression and restrictions, the Protestant communities remain vigorous and numerous in Belarus.

Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants

A closer look at churches and their communities also casts doubt on the future of Orthodox Christianity in Belarus. There are 1,567 Orthodox Christian communities registered in the country with 1,348 churches, says Huliaka. That does significantly outnumber the 479 communities and 465 churches of the Catholics. But Protestants have 1,025 communities. The leading Protestant denominations – Pentecostals and Baptists – together account for 798 communities.

The independent strength of the Protestant communities is truly impressive. While Orthodox and Catholic parishes have support from state authorities, the Protestant communities have to fend for themselves – and even face persecution. In

2006, one Protestant community resorted to mass hunger strikes to defend their church against state confiscation. Young Protestants have been prosecuted for refusal to serve in the army – conscientious objectors demanded to enter social service instead of bearing arms.

The state has gone so far as to break up small gatherings of Protestants reading Gospel and singing religious songs. In November 2009, a protestant in Mahilyou province was fined for holding a Thanksgiving Day celebration at his home. The following summer, officials broke up a gathering in a small village in Brest region. In both cases, the organisers had to pay fines for holding unauthorised religious services.

The Russian Church in Belarus

Today the Orthodox Church, also known as the Russian Orthodox Church, has massive state support. But the numbers of Orthodox Church members are inflated by the state. To qualify as Orthodox, it is enough to declare one's Orthodox denomination on surveys.

In 2008, President Lukashenka stated: 'The Belarusian state considers the Orthodox Church to be the main ideological force of the nation... We never separated ourselves from the church because the state and the church are committed to the same goals.'

Nevertheless, the Orthodox Church failed to become a truly national church in Belarus. Orthodox institutions in Belarus are a part of the Russian Orthodox Church directed from Moscow. Over time, cooperation with the Belarusian state has brought many material benefits, but has also tarnished the Church's image. In the 1990s, for instance government allowed the Church to earn money through tobacco and alcohol trade. Current attempts to introduce Orthodox religious education into state schools could further undermine its positions.

Lukashenka knows how to use Orthodox institutions to satisfy his own ends. As the scholar Valiancin Akudovich has stated: "The Russian Orthodox Church is Moscow's 'fifth column' in Belarus. ... [Lukashenka] is constantly balancing his relations with the Russian Orthodox Church. If it displays too much initiative and independence, he 'disciplines' it, and when necessary, he earns political capital on it – both inside the country and in foreign relations."

Indeed, at times the state has lashed out against the Church. In 2007, the deputy head of the presidential administration Anatol Rubinau stated: "Strengthening the influence of the religion means at the same time weakening the influence of the state and state ideology."

Silent Success of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church in Belarus has been cautious in recent decades. It is aware that Moscow is sensitive about Catholic activities in areas that the Russian Orthodox Church considers its own. And yet, the Catholic Church has quietly expanded its influence, establishing parishes in some eastern regions of Belarus that had never witnessed a Catholic presence.

An important ingredient of the Catholic Church's success was renouncing the old policy of sending Polish priests to propagate and maintain Catholicism in Belarus. Many in the Polish elite used Catholicism to assimilate Belarusians to Polish culture. Even now some Belarusians call Catholicism 'Polish religion.' However, today most of services in Belarusian Catholic Church are conducted in the Belarusian language. The Orthodox Church uses predominantly Russian.

Lukashenka has been eager to work with the Catholic Church and even met with the Pope in Vatican in 2009. Last November, he expressed gratitude for the 'support which the Catholic Church gives us, in particular in the international arena' and added that 'we expect more of the Catholic Church and of the Pope

personally to defend our interests, particularly in the West.'

These developments reinforce the fact that the Belarusian regime has no serious religious preferences. As Catholic scholar Piotra Rudlouski has noted: 'A state established in the atheistic Soviet past is organically alien to the Church, and vice versa. Therefore, using the church can be only conditional and unsustainable.'

A Nation Without Religion

But in reality neither the Orthodox, nor the Catholic church exert any considerable impact on people's views. Belarusians generally are not religious. According to a 2009 Gallup survey, Belarus was one of the least religious nations in the world, with only 27 percent of respondents saying that religion played an important part in their everyday life. "I am Orthodox atheist," summarised once credo of many the Belarusian ruler Alexander Lukashenka.

History made many Belarusians sceptical of organised religion. First of all, the country has always been far from global and regional religious centres. It is unclear whether Eastern or Western Christianity came first to Belarus in the 10th century, but Belarus suffered from their confrontation. However, the clash of faiths did not split Belarusians along religious lines – rather, it made them extremely flexible in their beliefs. Even great Belarusian statesmen switched faiths in their lifetime as they found suitable; Duke Vitaut, for example, reconverted between Paganism, Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism.

Religion in Belarus is less important than even in neighbouring Russia or the Ukraine. While Ukrainians fill stadiums to hear sermons and clash with each other over religion, Belarusians show almost no interest. Adherence to the Orthodox Church is mostly declarative and could disappear once all denominations obtain equal treatment.

Belarusians hardly allot any room for religion in politics either. Politicians have to be cautious about referring to religion. Only general adherence to Christianity is accepted – excessive talk of God are viewed with deep suspicion. Paval Sieviaryniec, the former leader of the Christian Democrats, once preached his religious ideas to some old ladies while serving his sentence in Eastern Belarus. They answered: 'Yes, we know there is God. But we do not believe in Him.'

Green Christmas and the “Kind Button” – Civil Society Digest

This month's notable events included the Green Christmas initiative, which urged Belarusians to give a second life to old things and make an original Christmas gift. Belarusian ATMs may soon have a "kind button" to make charitable donations. Important cultural events included celebration of anniversary of Belarusian Philosophy Space and Rock Solidarity campaign.

Social

Green Christmas. On December 22, the Center for Environmental Solutions [organized](#) Green Christmas event. The idea is to give a second life to old things and make an original Christmas gift. One can bring old clothes and materials and together with the designers give them a new life. If desired, each participant has a possibility to pass his/her presents to children's home.

The "Kind Button". Association of Persons with Disabilities on Wheelchairs [prepared](#) a social advertising film which calls for accessible living environment for persons with disabilities. In addition, the organization signed a contract with a major Belarusian state-owned Belarusbank to add the so called "kind button" on its ATMs. That would enable bank cards holders to transfer charitable donations in Belarusian rubles for the benefit of the Association. The "Kind Button" will be launched in two weeks.

The first Club House is opened Minsk. A new social service for people with psychological disorders that [helps](#) to organize life beyond the boundaries of the hospital has been opened. This a system to transform a patient into a personality and help them to realize the reality around. The round table was held during the opening discussing employment and social security of this target group.

The international organization "Our home" ("Nash Dom") on the nuclear power plant. A video of the program "Dom-show" ("Home-show") [highlights](#) pros and cons of and controversies of construction of atomic power station in Belarus. One of the most interesting and surprising assumptions indicates that such a station would give an impetus for the development of an atomic bomb, which is considered to be just a red herring tactic.

Human Rights

Kovalev's relatives filed a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee. On December 15th relatives of the convict in the case of terrorist attack in the subway, who was sentenced to the death penalty, [compiled](#) a personal address to the UN Committee regarding the violation of the human right for life. Principles of just prosecution are stated to be disregarded, as well. Kovalev himself wrote a petition for mercy addressed to President Lukashenka.

Belarusian Orthodox Church is not against death penalty. The Orthodox Church does not see enough evidence for univocal treatment of the death penalty. The press centre of the Church [emphasized](#) on 15 December that it can not ask for the categorical abolition of the death penalty, which is supported by a considerable part of the population of Belarus.

Belarusian Catholic Church Will Seek Abolition of the Death Penalty. The Catholic Church will [direct](#) its efforts to abolish death penalty in Belarus, regardless of the convicted persons. According to Archbishop Tadeush Kandrusievich's statement on 15 December, the death penalty is not based on the principles of humanism and deprives the convicted of an opportunity to repent.

Fundraising campaign for Ales Byalyatski. Famous Belarusian human rights activists [appealed](#) to the Belarusian society to show solidarity and raise money for the payment for human rights defender Ales Byalyatsky as “damage caused by the crime.” Compensation of the penalty, according to campaign organizers, can affect the release of Ales Byalyatski or at least decrease the measure of sentence. The required amount to be collected is Br 757 526 717 (approx. \$88 000).

Book about victims of post-election crackdown published in Minsk. A book-launch event for journalist Alyaksandr Tamkovich's [Suprats Plyni](#) (Against the Flow), which describes the fates of 18 victims of the post-election crackdown on government opponents in Belarus, was held in the office of the Belarusian Popular Front in Minsk on December 21. The book was published with the support of Human Rights Centre Viasna.

Culture

The new online portal Usebelarusy.by. On December 20, an interactive portal [Usebelarusy.by](#) has been launched. This is the first national web-portal, where everyone can become an author. Portal was created within the project "[Dakranisya to](#)

[vytokau](#)" ("Touch to the source") by a number of NGOs (APB BirdLife Belarus, "Rest on Village"), governmental bodies, and private companies.

Birthday of "Belaruskaya Filasofskaya Prastora". Belaruskaya Filasofskaya Prastora (Belarusian Philosophy Space) [invites](#) to celebrate its second anniversary, which will be held on December 28 in the Gallery "Ź" in Minsk. BFP is a community of Belarusian intellectuals who seek to fill the Belarusian cultural field with bright events, create a platform for discussion, support educational projects, open new horizons for reflection on current social issues. Among the participants there are representatives of state research institutions, as well as public initiatives.

Campaign "Rock-Solidarity." A public campaign has been launched in support of independent music culture "Rock-Solidarity", initiated by the Belarusian fan-club musicians, rock lovers and NGOs' activists. The campaign aims to express solidarity with the banned musicians, to inform the public about the existence of "black lists". One can join the campaign via social networks – [Vkontakte](#) and [Facebook](#).

BelSat started new series of stories called "Obsessed" ("Oderzymye"). This reporting on well-being of civic society in Belarus will cover eight different organizations and individuals, eight kinds of public activity, as well as, eight different civic initiatives. The coverage will include those groups and individuals, who incurably ["obsessed"](#) with what they are doing. The opening program was devoted to Vitebsk civic initiative "Our home" ("Nash dom").

A compilation of films about Belarus during the Soviet era. Civic initiative "Za Novya Smaliavichy" [compiled](#) a selection of films about Soviet history of Belarus, which has not been always adequately described. With the motto: "History does not claim absolute truth!" on its cover the disk contains films about Hatyn tragedy, the period of German occupation,

Sluck military uprising, Stalin's times and many other controversial historical issues.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

No Official Mourning In Belarus After Death of Kaczyński So Far



Today Belarus is the only country in the region that has not declared a day of national mourning following the death of the Polish president in a plane crash Apr. 10. Lithuania, Ukraine, Czech Republic, and Russia have all declared mourning, and events in Lech Kaczynski's memory will be held by the EU official bodies. Even Brazil and [Canada](#) have joined in. However, the Belarusian government has so far limited its reaction to a brief statement of condolences.

To the contrary, the Belarusian civil society is actively expressing its solidarity with Poland. Many people have come to the Polish embassy to lay flowers (see a photo [report](#) by *Naša Niva*), and the leaders of both the Orthodox and the Catholic Church in Belarus have held memorial services.

The Belarusian authorities did help Poland after the plane crash. An airplane with relatives of the victims of Saturday's tragedy landed in the Viciebsk airport, and the Belarusian government provided the relatives of the victims with a visa-free entry into Belarus as well as a transportation means to Smolensk.

It seems that nothing more should be expected from the Belarusian officials. Poland was and remains an unfriendly country to Aliaksandr Lukashenka's regime. After all, Warsaw actively supports the democratic opposition in Belarus and criticizes human rights violations and repressions against the Union of Poles of Belarus. In addition to that, the Polish state television sponsors independent Belarusian satellite TV channel Belsat.

Lech Kaczyński's unwillingness to contact the Belarusian authorities could have been one of the reasons why the pilots of the Polish presidential plane [refused](#) to land in Minsk, neglecting the advice of the Russian dispatchers at Smolensk airport.

On the day of the funeral ceremonies, flags on official buildings in Germany will be lowered to half-mast. On Monday, the EU flags in front of the EU and EC buildings in Brussels, Strasbourg, as well as capitals of all the 27 EU states were lowered to half-mast in sign of mourning.

The Council of Europe has also declared Monday a day of mourning and lowered flags in front of its seat in Strasbourg. In front of NATO headquarters in Brussels, the Polish flag was hoisted half-mast since Saturday. On Monday, flags there were lowered by Lithuania, Estonia and Great Britain.

A number of countries declared national mourning. Among them are Brazil and Lithuania, which declared a three-day mourning. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Turkey will mourn

the Polish president on the day of his funeral. Estonia, Ukraine, Spain, and Latvia have declared mourning on Monday. In Moldova, national mourning will be observed on Tuesday. Flowers were laid and candles were lit in front of the Polish mission in Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

[Read the story at People's Daily.](#)

AČ