Environmentalists confront Catholics in a construction conflict

A recent construction conflict, lasting from May 2016 to January 2017, has divided Belarusian civil society. Residents, along with environmental activists, were able to halt the erection of a Catholic church in a Minsk park. Eventually, the Archbishop of Belarus even accused environmental NGOs of persecuting the Catholic Church.

Even according to official data, the population of Minsk is increasing by around ten thousand people every year. This growth is naturally accompanied by the building of housing complexes, malls, hotels, and even a new metro line. However, over the past years, Minsk has witnessed several construction conflicts. Residents of the capital often oppose construction and rally together to confront both developers and local authorities.

Development in Minsk

Minsk is one of the most rapidly growing cities in Eastern Europe. Currently, the population of the Belarusian capital is estimated at almost 2 million. But urban growth in Minsk has its own unique characteristics: according to Minsk's general development plan, the city must not expand beyond its current limits until the year 2030.

Urban development will continue at the expense of areas within the city proper. Neighbourhoods of wooden cottages and older two or three-storey houses are up for demolition. Despite the fact that some of these buildings have historical value,
shopping malls, apartment complexes, and related infrastructure are appearing in their place. Obviously, this provokes conflict between local residents and environmentalists and construction companies and the authorities.

This problem could be solved if the authorities permitted the building of new residential areas outside city limits. However, Aliaksandr Lukashenka himself rejects this idea. He has stated many times that land outside the city should be used only for agricultural purposes, and more compact construction inside the city is possible.

For this reason, Minsk authorities have no qualms about making the city ever denser. Even public parks are not immune from development. For example, in 2010 the authorities permitted construction of a hotel in the Central Children's Park in the very centre of the city. The huge glass building spoiled the panorama of Independence Avenue – Minsk's main street and a unique monument the the Stalinist Empire architectural style.

When the media reports on such cases, commentators usually criticise the authorities and condemn overbuilding. However, a recent case regarding a Catholic church in a park has divided public opinion.

Catholics against Environmentalists?

Why did a construction conflict between local residents and the Catholic Church receive so much attention in the media? First and foremost, for once the locals were successful and the developer was forced to change plans; this happens rarely.
The developer – the Catholic Church, whose relations with the Belarusian authorities can be characterised as strained, was on the same side as its habitual antagonist.

The conflict started in May 2016 when inhabitants of the cottage district of Sialgaspasilolak learned that in just a few days, the authorities planned to cut down part of the local Kotauka Park. The local Catholic parish of Peter, Paul, and Eugene De Mazenod had received permission to build a church there in 2011. According to parish priest Dzmitry Zaniamonski, Kotauka was the only the place local authorities had proposed.

Sialgaspasilolak already has experience dealing with developers. In recent years, a large part of the district was demolished and replaced by high-rise residential blocks. To protect the park from development, local activists sought assistance from the environmental NGO Green Alliance. This led journalists to cover the story as a conflict between Catholics and Environmentalists.

A few days later, on 23 May, tractors arrived in Kotauka and the felling started. However, locals and environment activists managed to set the workers back. Eventually, public protests forced the authorities to stop cutting down trees in the park. On 31 May, they announced that the felling would pause until 15 August due to birds nesting in the trees.

The authorities operated as usual. Residents were only informed about the construction just before it began. Usually, local activists are not able to resist builders and the authorities because time is so short. However, in this particular case, the local community was successful.

Meanwhile, representatives of the Church supported the actions of the authorities. Priest Dzmitry Zaniamonski claimed that a public hearing on construction of the church took place in
spring 2011. However, the park defenders knew nothing about the event.

Kotauka Controversies

According to civil activist and publicist Yulia Halinouskaya, construction of the church was really the only way to save the park, as it would occupy only one-tenth of its area. Felled trees would be replanted in a different location. In the long run, thanks to the church, the park would be well-maintained and available for recreation.

In the very beginning of the conflict, environmentalists and local residents requested that developers move the construction site to another place. They insisted that construction on park land is illegal, and thereby allocation of land for a church in Kotauka should be impossible.

The Sialgaspasiolak incident is hardly an isolated case. Environmentalists claim that six similar conflicts occurred in Minsk in 2016. At present, they have filed ten lawsuits against local authorities countrywide to stop park destruction. They assert that preservation of Kotauka is crucial for local residents. Many are convinced that after the park is destroyed, authorities will not consult residents before demolished their cottages.

According to Green Alliance coordinator Yaraslau Bekish, the NGO had tried to act as a mediator between the locals and the Catholic Church, but Church officials were not interested and continued to operate side by side with the authorities. In the beginning of December, tractors and bulldozers arrived once again. This time, in order to neutralise the activists, municipal workers used force against dozens of park defenders, while the police
simply stood by. Nevertheless, activists able to defend the park. In the beginning of 2017, the authorities announced that construction would be halted, and they proposed another location to Catholics.

Civil society divided

Shortly following the clashes in the end of December, the leader of the Belarusian Catholics, Archbishop Tadeush Kandrusievich, claimed that he sees the incident at Kotauka Park as a new form of persecution against the Catholic Church, this time by the 'greens'. He went as far as to compare environmentalist NGOs with a totalitarian communist regime.

It should be noted that according to the Analytical Centre of the Presidential Administration, 10 per cent of the Belarusian population identifies as Catholic. Among them, many cultural figures see the Catholic Church as an ally in strengthening national consciousness and promoting the Belarusian language. The Catholic community remains much more active in the country than the Orthodox majority.

The archbishop's statements added fuel to the fire. Catholic activists lambasted ecologists on social networks, even though they knew the church would be erected at a different location. Some commentators blamed environmentalists for conspiracies and even collaboration with the Putin regime.

In the end, Catholics, the local community, and NGOs were unable to reach a compromise. In this way, both sides lost. Environmentalists made enemies in the Catholic community. In turn, many residents of Sialgaspasiolak no longer want Catholics in the area. According to surveys, 30 per cent of the residents of Sialgaspasiolak are now against a Catholic church in their district no matter the location.

The Kotauka conflict shows that Belarusian civil society
struggles to cooperate in crisis situations. This is a shame, as engaging in dialogue remains a crucial element for changing an authoritarian society into a democratic one.

**Mysteries of the first Belarusian nuclear power plant**

On 26 August 2016, a 43-year old worker was injured and killed as a result of the explosion of an oxygen gas tank at the Astraviec nuclear power plant (NPP) construction site.

This death was the latest in a series of accidents which have already started to raise nuclear safety concerns, both domestically and internationally.

In July 2016, the Belarusian media reported another dangerous incident which occurred during the installation of a reactor. It also turned out that the NPP's management had been concealing this news for more than two weeks. This lack of transparency is reminiscent of the suppressed news of the Chernobyl catastrophe back in 1986.

As a result, NPP construction has come under closer scrutiny and even the state-run media picked up the topic of nuclear security. However, all these events have not led to massive anti-nuclear protests in Belarus.
A series of unfortunate events

Reports of incidents at the Astraviec construction site have been piling up in 2016, bringing more and more attention to the first Belarusian nuclear project. For instance, in April 2016, Poland-based TV channel Belsat reported the collapse of a supporting structure in one of the maintenance buildings on the site.

Despite the fact that an employee tipped off journalists, the NPP management responded by denying that the accident had even taken place and referred to the news as “absolute nonsense.” Later, the Belarusian Ministry of Energy nevertheless confirmed the accident, trying to downplay its severity.

Less than two months ago, authorities tried to conceal another, more serious accident which interrupted the installation of the nuclear reactor. On 10 July 2016, the reactor casing, weighing over 330 tonnes, reportedly fell to the ground from a height of 2 to 4 metres.

However, the wider public became aware of this disaster only on 25 July. Local anti-nuclear activist and United Civil Party member Mikalai Ulasevich reported that more than ten anonymous insider sources could confirm that something went wrong during the test lifting procedure.

“We have to live with this nuclear power plant”

The Belarusian media immediately tried to obtain confirmation,
but did not receive a response either from the NPP management or the Ministry of Energy. The latter released a statement only in the late afternoon of 26 July. It merely confirmed the accident, assuring the public that it would prioritise the “absolute safety” of the NPP.

Rosatom, the primary contractor, offered another vague explanation. Its first deputy manager, Aleksandr Lokshin, stated that his company ran tests on the reactor casing and these did not reveal any damage. However, Rosatom agreed to replace the notorious casing in order to “mitigate rumours and panic among the population.”

By that time, even the Belarusian state-run media started to question nuclear safety, asking the Ministry of Energy inconvenient questions. For instance, a major official Belarusian TV channel inquired if the ministry had planned to inform the public of accidents at the NPP at all, or if they only admitted to problems because of the leaks and whistleblowers. Journalists also doubted Rosatom’s credibility, implying that an outside contractor was more interested in doing business than dealing with the NPP in the long term.

Lithuania also expressed its concerns. On 23 August, president Dalia Grybauskaite referred to the Belarusian NPP as an instrument which could potentially be used in an unconventional manner against the Baltic states. In her opinion, the Belarusian NPP potentially represented “an energy, military, health, and territorial security problem, if used by a hostile country.”

What about Belarusian
environmentalists?

Belarusian environmentalists had already adopted a clear anti-nuclear position by 2005, when officials started mentioning plans for an NPP. In 2006, the Belarusian NGO Ecodom, backed by the opposition parties, pioneered an organised anti-nuclear movement. By 2008, major anti-nuclear initiatives united within the Belarusian Anti-Nuclear Campaign.

However, Belarusian authorities did everything possible to neutralise the dissenting green movement. For instance, during the so-called public debates on the NPP construction in October 2009, only a few anti-nuclear activists were allowed to attend. The event ended with the arrest of anti-nuclear expert Andrei Ozharovskii.

Moreover, the Institute of Sociology at the National Academy of Sciences produced surveys indicating a surprising turn in public opinion towards acceptance of nuclear energy. While reportedly only 28 per cent of Belarusians supported the construction of the NPP in 2005, in 2016 this figure grew to 50.3 per cent. At the same time, the number of opponents decreased from 50 to 17.3 per cent.

Environmentalists criticised these surveys as unreliable and biased, as apparently researchers from the Institute of Sociology put pressure on the respondents to answer "correctly." Survey participants were not anonymous and faced psychological pressure, as they had to disclose all personal information in questionnaires.

Finally, authorities used the “divide and conquer” tactic against environmentalists by supporting loyal NGOs with a clear pro-nuclear agenda. For instance, Ecological Initiative
has been actively cooperating with the authorities and promoting nuclear energy. In September 2012, this NGO acted as one of the founders of the Public Information Centre to monitor environmental safety at the Astraviec NPP.

What's more, Ecological Initiative's chair, Yury Salaueu, used to hold a top management position with the pro-regime Belarusian Patriotic Union of Youth. Moreover, the experts of this NGO happen to work for the Institute of Nuclear Physics at the National Academy of Science of Belarus, one of the institutions immediately involved in the NPP construction.

Even though in 2016 the anti-nuclear movement has captured more attention, environmentalists fear that Belarusian society is dangerously naive when it comes to NPP construction. According to the coordinator of the Green Network association, Yaraslau Bekish, this explains why even serious accidents in Astraviec have not catalysed significant public protests.

So far, Belarusian authorities have succeeded in protecting their pet project in Astraviec. Neither Belarusian independent anti-nuclear activists nor the EU have the leverage to interfere in these plans. However, there is a chance that their voice could be heard if such emergencies and accidents continue in the future.

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**IMF Negotiations, Denomination, Drunk Cossacks — Belarus State Press Digest**

The Belarusian leadership negotiates reform plans with the IMF mission and is ready to gradually introduce more market-
oriented policies. The new denomination of the national currency will bring in new banknotes in 2016, and Belarusian coins will appear for the first time since the collapse of the USSR. Belarus needs venture funds and new legal regulation to enhance the support of startups.

The authorities plan to punish people who write too many complaints to public organisations. The police cooperate with a civil-force organisation, which was used in the Soviet period. A group of Cossacks were convicted and jailed for hooliganism.

All of this and more in this edition of the Belarus State Press Digest.

**IMF reform offer is not rejected.** Belarus Segodnia reported that there was a meeting between president Lukashenka and the chief of the IMF mission in Belarus, Peter Dolman which removed many misunderstandings. However before the negotiations politics often interfered into the economic and political negotiations, but now the sides have reached a mutual understanding. Minsk accepts broader introduction of market principles, which can be seen in the example of the increasing price of public utilities.

The same issues concern privatisation, as Belarus continues to look for the best owner of particular pieces of state property. However, Lukashenka emphasised that Belarus is not going to quickly destroy the existing system of the social state and so gradual economic reform is the only solution. The IMF seems to understand this principle, the newspaper says.
Coins come back to Belarus after 25 years. Narodnaja Hazieta writes about government plans to newly denominate the national currency. It is scheduled for 1 July 2016 at the rate of 10,000 to 1. The new design of the banknotes has already appeared in the media. The new banknotes resemble the euro, but have preserved the same concept of images as the earlier Belarusian Rouble. They will also have the architectural monuments on them.

The monuments on banknotes come from each of the six regions of Belarus and the capital of Minsk. Moreover, Belarus will introduce coins, rubles and kopek, for the first time since USSR's collapse. The banknotes are interesting from an identity viewpoint, since most of them display medieval monuments, respected by the nationally oriented part of society. Two new denominations have already occurred in Belarus in 1994 and 2000.

Overly active complainants will be fined. Znamia Yunosti writes about amendments to the Law on the Appeals of Citizens, which introduced punishment for people who see complaint writing to public organisations as a part of their lifestyle. The government will fine those who complain without having serious grounds. Such complaints are especially widespread in housing, public utilities and healthcare.

The director of the Minsk state dental clinic, Aliena Daškievič, shares in an interview with the newspaper that her colleagues dream of this law becoming effective. In Belarus, where public control of the state has hardly ever existed, complaints remain the only channel for citizens to reach officials with their problems. However, many dissatisfied Belarusians, particularly the elderly, continue to write letters to these organisations and therefore seriously annoy
Why startups receive too little support in Belarus. Narodnaja Hazieta asks Aliaksej Šabloŭski, the director of Centre for Entrepreneurship Support ‘Startup Technologies’, why the ideas of Belarusian programmers receive high acclaim abroad but little financing at home. According to him, Belarus has certain niches for new technologies but its domestic market is too small, so programmers prefer to work abroad.

Belarus also needs to develop an effective system of entrepreneurial support: technology parks, business incubators, venture funds and private investors. The country urgently needs legislation to regulate the creation of such a system. However, the expert concludes that since startup funding remains quite new in Belarus, the country also needs time to let it grow.

Internet project Green Map will map the environmental spots of Belarus. Zviazda newspaper informs its readers that the project of the Centre of Environmental Solution, the Belarusian green NGO, seeks volunteers for their Green Map project. Earlier, the e-map included the spots which collect recycling materials, dangerous waste and second-hand material for further use. The updated e-map will create three new blocks: the addresses of organisations which provide environmental information and consultation, existing renewable energy projects, and natural zones in cities and nearby areas. Today the project unites 26 Belarusian cities and is expected to cover all cities with the help of volunteers.

Russian Cossacks sentenced to prison. Vecherniy Brest reports that three participants of the horse ride from Moscow to Berlin who crossed Belarus this summer, received prison terms after a trail lasting a few months. In a
state of alcohol intoxication they beat a student of Pinsk agrarian college.

The conflict occurred after the Cossacks started to harass girls in the college dormitory where local authorities hospitably accommodated their Russian guests. The Cossacks who organised the ride say this was a big disgrace for their organisation and they will punish their colleagues after they finish serving prison terms in Belarus.

Civil support of police thrives in Mahilioŭ. Vecherniy Mogiliov reports that this year voluntary squads (družynas) took an active part in the enforcement of law together with the Mahilioŭ police. Družynas emerged in the USSR in the 1950s to assist police at the local level and still function in Belarus until today. They can be seen in the streets wearing red armbands.

This year the Mahilioŭ družynas have detected a few hundred administrative and some criminal offences. They have also conducted numerous preventive meetings with vulnerable social groups. An active member of the družyna, Valer Prudnikaŭ, who worked as a policeman in the past, looks happy when saying that he managed to attract youth to this civil activity. They enjoy learning how to behave in various situations, and moreover, they receive some payment for that, the activist said.

The first congress of Belarusians of Karelia. Around 100 delegates from 15 municipalities, representatives of the State Duma and regional authorities took part in the first congress of Karelian Belarusians, Soyuz newspaper reports. Belarusians are the third largest nationality in Karelia, the northern region of Russia on the border with Finland, with 23,000 inhabitants of Belarusian origin there. They started to migrate there in 1930s-1940s, when the Soviet government decided to populate the former Finnish territories. Along with voluntary migrants, however, the Stalin regime exiled rich
peasants or 'kulaki' to these lands. Now Karelian Belarusians plan to unite into one regional association.

The State Digest Digest is based on review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.