

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.

Alternative Civilian Service in Belarus: Possible, but Only in Theory

Belarus has mandatory legal conscription, but Alexander Lukashenka has ordered the preparation of a law on alternative civilian service in 2013.

For a long time the absence of this law has been putting many young people in a legal trap of having such a right and but having no possibility to exercise it.

But rather than solve the problem, the law is much more likely to become another one. The Belarusian government has rejected a public and open discussion of the draft law. And according to the views of experts, the law may be rigid and may serve the interests of the military officials.

Compulsory conscription in Belarus means that the army is not staffed with professional soldiers, but rather it is formed with the understanding that all healthy men aged between 18 and 27 have a constitutional duty to protect their fatherland and serve in the army.

The Gap between Law and Reality

At the same time, Article 57 of the constitution guarantees Belarusian citizens a right to choose to serve in an alternative civil service. In other states this means serving not in a military barracks but working at some socially-orientated institutions: hospitals, retirement homes, hospices, post-offices etc. The usual reason for this is so-called "conscientious objection", which means refusing to serve in the army because of religious, political and other beliefs.

But in Belarus no one has used their right to alternative service. And the reason is a simple absence of legislation clarifying such a right. Since 1994, when the constitution was adopted, such a law has been absent.

In 2000, even the Constitutional Court of Belarus ruled for the need to prepare legislation in this area. In 2003, several members of the parliament raised this issue. At the beginning of 2010 Alexander Lukashenka himself ordered the preparation of such a law. Yet nothing has changed.

In the meantime, several Belarusians have acted upon their rights and refused to enter the army. Their legal cases were rather strong – they had a constitutional right to alternative civilian service, but the courts rejected their claims invoking the absence of any corresponding legislation. Instead, they were convicted of "evading conscription" which is a criminal offence in Belarus punishable by imprisonment

Take the case of Ivan Mikhailau, a member of a Jewish-messianic religious community from Homel, the second largest city in Belarus. After he had refused to go to the army and had applied for alternative civilian service, on 15 December 2009 he was arrested.

The court found him guilty of "evading conscription" and sentenced him to three months in custody. Amnesty International recognised the young man as a prisoner of conscience. Only on 10 March 2010, after Lukashenka ordered drafting of a law on alternative civilian service, was Ivan's sentence revised and he was found not guilty in the appeal trial.

Main Opponents are Top Military Officials

A very long delay in adopting such an important law can be explained only by powerful forces inside the ruling elite. And in Belarus' case it is the Ministry of Defence and related agencies.

"A real man must smell gunpowder", – Alexander Lukashenka once proclaimed. It is a perfect reflection of the position of Belarusian military officials, successors of the Soviet military tradition, who believe in the shamefulness of any type of alternative service.

Another reason is their fear to compete. If the young Belarusians have a right to choose the kind of state service they prefer, the traditional army will have to start attracting recruits instead of simply forcing them to serve. Like any monopoly they are afraid of competition.

The sad irony here is that the Belarusian ruler in 2010 appointed the Security Council of Belarus as the body responsible for drafting this law. This council consists of top military, KGB, police and other related officials. In other words, the military were made responsible for drafting something that they had always opposed.

In the best of KGB traditions, the drafting of the new law was done in secret. From there, any interested civil society groups could not openly access the materials concerning the future law. As a result, only rumours are available concerning its content.

Small Chances of Getting a Proper Law

Alternative civil service should not be a punishment for a person's unwillingness to serve in the army. In Russia, the term of alternative service is almost twice the length of the term of usual military service. Moreover, "the objector" cannot change their workplace, which is always remote from his home. His salary is extremely low and the working conditions are often horrible. In addition he is deprived of a right to strike.

But there are also successful examples of alternative service regulation among Belarus' neighbours. In Moldova, the term of alternative civilian service is only one year. The conscript's

motivation to refuse military service can vary: from ethical views to religious and political views. Young people work at normal jobs, and simply paying 25 per cent of their salary to the state.

In Lithuania, the alternative civilian service term is 18 months, while "the objector" is also not limited in grounds for choosing alternative service. And he is also allowed to keep his entire salary. The same rules (with a small difference in the conscription period) exist in Estonia.

Belarusian lawmakers are likely to choose the worst. The latest available draft, dating back to 2010, contains all restrictions imaginable: long-term appointment, a minimal salary, service in remote areas and serious deprivations of social rights.

Mikhail Pashkevich, the coordinator of the For Alternative Civilian Service campaign, says that according to his sources, the Belarusian authorities have gone even further in their desire to make alternative civilian service unbearable for young people. They plan to forbid distance learning during the alternative service and leave only one ground for conscientious objection: religion.

It is good that the Belarusian authorities are starting to at least do something about civil service, but their attitude may undermine its whole purpose.

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