

# Research Contest Winners, EBRD, Conference on Belarusian Studies – Ostrogorski Centre Digest

In March Ostrogorski Centre (OC) analysts discussed a variety of issues in the fields of foreign policy, religion and migration. As the economic crisis unfolds in Belarus and Russia, many Belarusians will seek refuge in the west, where Poland is providing increasingly attractive conditions for migrants from the former USSR.

Sweden is changing its approach towards cooperation with Belarus, shifting from only supporting civil society and the opposition to engaging the government.

Meanwhile, inside Belarus the authorities continue to search for an identity that could save them from the “Russian World”. They may try to reanimate the independent Greek Catholic Church.

Vadzim Smok [analyses](#) the **Card of the Pole** – the Polish authorities’ instrument to attract a young labour force from former USSR countries. As the negative demographic trend in Poland increases and the economic crisis across the post-Soviet space continues, an increase in the migration flow of Belarusians to Poland seems very likely. Many Belarusians see it as an opportunity to work and study in Poland with the prospect of getting EU citizenship. The Belarusian authorities definitely dislike the initiative, but have proved unable to counter it so far.

Ryhor Astapenia [highlights](#) the Belarusian authorities’ seeming change in attitude towards the **Greek-Catholic Church in**

**Belarus**, which has long been on the margins of public life. The situation is difficult because it 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.



Igar Gubarevich [discusses](#) the recent visit and talks of a delegation of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) with Belarus officials. SIDA used to have democratic activists and NGOs as its preferred partners in Belarus, but the situation seems to be changing. The Belarusian government has been stressing its greater openness to cooperation with Europe, and **Sweden** may try to see whether greater involvement of government actors in cooperation can be a more effective means of triggering policy change in Belarus.

Director of the Ostrogorski Centre Yaraslau Kryvoi takes part in consultations in Minsk on the political climate in Belarus with Acting Vice President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (**EBRD**) Alain Pilloux and the head of EBRD Belarus office Francis Delaey (pictured).

## Winners of research contest announced

On 15 March in Minsk the Ostrogorski Centre delivered a training session on writing up research for winners of a competition organised in cooperation with the Pontis Foundation and the Mott Foundation (pictured).

The selection panel approved five research projects on

Belarusian foreign policy and education:

- Belarusian Analytical Workroom, **‘Geopolitical orientations of Belarusians: sociological analysis and survey’**
- Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, **‘Belarusian soft power in the region: evaluation of its potential and impact’**
- Belarusian State University, School of Business and Management of Technology, **‘Conditioning factors of entrepreneurial activities of Belarusian students’**
- Centre for European Studies, **‘The problem of modernisation of higher education in Belarus: social sciences and humanities’**
- Political Sphere Institute, **‘Challenges for Belarusian foreign policy and the post-Soviet space after 2008’**.

## **‘Belarusian Studies in the 21st Century’ Conference**

Organisers released the programme for the Belarusian Studies in the 21st Century conference and Annual London Lecture on Belarusian Studies which will take place on 23-24 March 2016 in London. The conference will serve as a multidisciplinary forum of Belarusian studies in the West and offer a rare networking opportunity for researchers of Belarus.

It is organised by University College London’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) and the Ostrogorski Centre in partnership with Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library and Museum, the Anglo-Belarusian Society and the Journal of Belarusian Studies. For those who complete the registration form before 22 March 2016, attendance is free. The programme is available [here](#). The registration form is [here](#).

# Comments in the media

- Ryhor Astapenia, analyst of the Ostrogorski Centre, explains to [Polish Television 24](#) why **Belarus detained major oligarch Jury Čyž**. According to Astapenia, Čyž's arrest is part of a struggle between different factions of the Belarusian regime and an attempt by the authorities to find money inside the country.
- Siarhei Bohdan discusses with the Belarusian Programme of [Polish Radio](#) **the current situation in and around Syria**. Bohdan sees the breakup of Syria as a likely scenario, as Kurds are receiving support from all over the world and Assad's army has made no major breakthrough, even with Russian support. He thinks that Iran's relations with the west will play a key role in determining the fate of Syria.
- Igar Gubarevich gives [Polish Radio](#) a foreign policy forecast for 2016. He predicts that **relations with the EU and US will get better**, but will not lead to high-level mutual visits. Belarus will continue its old brotherhood game with Russia while at the same time trying to reduce dependence on it, and will make efforts to enhance cooperation with China.
- Siarhei Bohdan discusses with the Belarusian Programme of [Polish Radio](#) **the current situation around Iran** and sanctions against this country. Influential groups in all countries are interested in rapprochement with Iran, yet many hindrances still remain.
- Ryhor Astapenia in a comment to [Polish Radio](#) opines that **the role of the opposition and civil society** in the dialogue between Belarus and the West will decrease as a result of EU sanctions being lifted. In contrast, contact between officials and business will grow. However, this step will not bring more democracy to domestic politics in Belarus, as the authorities will continue to carry out occasional repression.

# Belarus Profile

The BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following personalities: [Jaŭhien Šastakoŭ](#), [Paviel Vinahradaŭ](#), [Aliaksiej Šein](#), [Arciom Šrajbman](#), [Voĺha Šparaha](#), [Paviel Šaramiet](#), [Aliaksandr Smaliančuk](#), [Iryna Vidanava](#), [Siarhiej Nikaliuk](#), [Alieś Suša](#).

We have also updated the profiles of [Natallia Ejsmant](#), [Mikałaj Jafimčyk](#), [Andrej Jahoraŭ](#), [Andrej Švied](#), [Siarhiej Kaliečyc](#), [Uladzimir Makiej](#), [Mikałaj Samasiejka](#), [Hienadź Svidzierski](#), [Paviel Sieviaryniec](#), [Anatol Sivak](#), [Siarhiej Sidorski](#), [Halina Skarachod](#), [Alieh Sližeŭski](#), [Viktar Sniażycki](#), [Valiancin Čakanaŭ](#).

# Belarus Policy

The Ostrogorski Centre continues to update the database of policy papers on BelarusPolicy.com. The papers of partner institutions added this month include:

- Aliaksandr Autuška-Sikorski. [Improving the country competitiveness of Belarus: what the state development programs miss](#). BISS, 2016.
- Uladzimir Akulič, Uladzimir Valietka, Darja Suškievič, Sierž Naŭrodski, Alieś Aliachnovič. [CASE Belarus Macroeconomic Review of Belarus \(Is. 4, February 2016\)](#). CASE Belarus, 2016.
- Maryja Akulava. [Foreign investment: a focus on borrowing](#). BEROC, 2014.
- Voĺha Biełskaja, Darja Urucina. [Belarusian business associations: problems and potential for development](#). BEROC, 2012.
- Ihar Pielipaś. [Is inflation in Belarus inertial?](#) BEROC, 2012.

Any partner organisation of BelarusPolicy.com can submit its research for inclusion onto the database by completing this [form](#).

*The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its projects include Belarus Digest, the [Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), [BelarusPolicy.com](#), [BelarusProfile.com](#) and [Ostro.by](#).*

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## **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. Siarhiey 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.

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## **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 10<sup>th</sup> century. The Catholic Church appeared here in the 14<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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.

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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*