

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

On 2 February 2016, Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs of Belarus [Lieanid 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 Kosinieć](#) 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.

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