

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.'