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Religious Diversity in Belarus

Officials and state-controlled media like to stress the lack of tensions among various faiths and denominations, attributing this fact to the government's wise policies. While it is true that there is no religious enmity, this is rather thanks to the traditions of tolerance and generally amicable relations that have been established by various religious groups co-existing for centuries. It is basically the authorities that give believers reason to worry from time to time. In general, members of various religious congregations do not need to sort out their relationship with each other, but with the authorities.

The government has been criticized for offering preferential treatment to the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, often referred to as the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), and discriminating against other denominations.

The last few months of 2006 saw several strong protests by members of various religious communities. Hunger strikes by Protestants and Catholics

forced authorities to bow to their demands. A more detailed account of the protests will follow, but let us start with some background.

Mosaic formed over centuries

Belarus' religious mosaic has been shaped over the last 1,000 years. Along with the Orthodox religion, adopted in this land in the late 10th century, the Roman Catholic Church has occupied a strong position since the 13th-14th centuries. Judaism and Islam obtained a foothold around the same time. Protestant movements began attracting followers in the early 16th century, and the Eastern-rite (Uniate) church expanded a little later. Old Believers fled from prosecution in Russia to Belarus in the 16th century.

In 2006, the country had 2,943 religious communities with the Orthodox Church accounting for nearly half (1,391). There were 1,006 churches and 274 under construction.

The Roman Catholic Church has four eparchies, the Conference of Catholic Bishops, 439 parishes, nine missions, eight monasteries and two higher theological seminaries. Most Catholics live in Western Belarus and have Polish ethnic roots. There are about 170 Roman Catholic congregations in the Hrodna region alone.

The Uniate Church, which reemerged in the early 1990s, has 13 parishes.

The number of Protestant congregations has been growing vigorously in the last few years. There are more than 1,000 communities in the country — Evangelical Christians (492), Evangelical Christian Baptists (266), Seventh's Day Adventists (74), and Lutherans (27), among others.

Less numerous are Jewish communities (46), Old Believers (33) and Muslims (24). There are six Krishna and five Baha'i groups.

The Orthodox Church has 1,159 churches with 188 under construction, the Roman Catholic Church 427 and 45 respectively, the Evangelical Christian Church 183 and 25, the Baptist Church 139 and 12. The Jewish communities own eight synagogues, and the Muslims have six mosques with one being built.

In all, there are 27 denominations in Belarus. About 50 percent of Belarusians

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Metropolitan Filaret, chief of the Orthodox Church, subordinated to Moscow patriarchate.

consider themselves religious, according to polls. Of all people who profess a religious faith, 80 percent belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, 14 percent identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church, two percent represent Protestant churches, and four percent practise other religions. Just 5.5 percent of believers worship and perform religious rites on a regular basis.

Legacy of empires

Belarus' current religious landscape was considerably influenced by the fact that for two centuries the land was part of an empire — first tsarist Russia and later the Soviet Union. Tsarist Russia sought to expand the domination of the Russian Orthodox Church, while the Bolsheviks spread atheism.

It is astonishing that the Belarusian government has adopted both approaches. Alaksandr Łukašenka once said that he was “an Orthodox atheist.” The oxymoron may be used to describe government's policies with regard to religious denominations.

For instance, in late 2006 President Łukašenka reiterated, “We will always remember and appreciate the outstanding role of the Orthodox Church in Belarus' history, its favourable influence on spiritual and cultural traditions.” The country's Orthodox leader attends various state ceremonies like a member of the government.

On the one hand, the government declares respect for all faiths, while on the other, government-controlled newspapers occasionally run articles calling for a fight against “religious opium” in general and “destructive sects” in particular (the authorities often informally include in the “destructive sects” category all denominations except for the BOC).

Obviously, the current government inherited a suspicious attitude to religious minority groups from the empire. It should be noted, however, that bureaucrats avoid using the term „religious minority groups” in official statements to emphasize allegedly equal treatment of all denominations. But in practice, they unofficially distinguish between loyal and „suspicious” religious groups.

The 2002 law „On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations” creates conditions for the preferential treatment of the BOC.

On the one hand, Article 6 of the religion law declares that „all religions and faiths are equal before the law,” while on the other, Article 8 provides that „relations between the state and religious organizations are regulated by the law taking into consideration their influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people.”

The meaning of this clause becomes clear when one reads the preamble, which says that the law recognizes “the leading role of the Orthodox Church in the historical formation and development of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people.”

In 2003, Prime Minister Navicki and Patriarchal Exarch Filaret, head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus, inked a concordat between the government and the Belarusian Exarchate.

Demons of politicization

Draft versions of the religion law met with opposition from religious groups, especially from Protestants concerned that the law would create conditions for discrimination against religious minority groups and grant the BOC privileged status. Congregations also expressed concern about tighter registration requirements that made it especially difficult for small religious communities to obtain official registration.

Alaksandr Łukašenka defended the draft law in his public statements saying it did not contain any provisions “bullying other denominations”.

The authorities started a witch-hunt in response to the criticism. The Belarusian leader's press office blamed unspecified political groups for allegedly “manipulating religious sentiments”.

Łukašenka reiterated the charge in October 2004. “Some opposition figures, acting on advice from western hench-

men, put forward provocative proposals that the sphere of traditional denominations, that of the Orthodox Church above all, should be narrowed to give more room to various sects and non-traditional faiths,” he said addressing Belarus’ Orthodox leaders. “Such anti-Slavic plans and intentions are directed not only against the Orthodox Church and its parishioners who represent the majority of Belarusians, but also against the state. They target the most valuable achievement of our country — sociopolitical stability, peace and order.”

This statement proves that the authorities needed the law to legalize the persecution of religious minorities.

The government-controlled media have repeatedly attacked “non-traditional” religious groups in the last few years.

The authorities play the religious card with creativity, occasionally using religious communities to achieve their political ends. In early 2006, the authorities used alleged concerns of a small Muslim community over the publication of Muhammad cartoons as a pretext to close down the critical weekly *Zhoda*. After the paper ran the cartoons, state television stations and newspapers broadcast and reprinted angry comments by Muslim clerics (who might not have seen the small-circulation paper distributed mainly among members of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party).

As soon as the weekly was closed down, the clerics disappeared from television screens and newspaper pages.

Fear of the “fifth column”

The Roman Catholic Church is the second largest religion in Belarus (the largest religious minority group). The authorities consider the Roman Catholic Church a “traditional faith” (this official terminology implies a selective approach) and declared its major holidays, Easter and Christmas, official national holidays along with the respective dates of the Orthodox calendar.



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Budslau Catholic fest.

Analysts believe that the government, which has pursued anti-Western policies, is wary of Catholicism mainly because it promotes Western values. The authorities consider Catholic believers as the “fifth column” of the treacherous West.

The government’s attitude toward the church is determined by “the Polish syndrome” — a general suspicious attitude to all that comes from Poland. This suspicion has historic roots in the periods when Belarusian territories were under Polish control, and is also linked to the general mistrust of the authorities for policies associated with the European Union and NATO, as well as the current tensions between the two countries over the Union of Poles in Belarus.

Many Belarusian bureaucrats look at local ethnic Poles, members of the Roman Catholic Church, as potential agents of the West.

In particular, the authorities moved to purge the church of Polish priests. The Roman Catholic Church still has a shortage of Belarusian priests because there was not a place where they could be trained during the Soviet era. Foreign priests are often denied visa extensions.

Seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns of the Hrodna diocese were forced out of Belarus at the end of 2006. The move prompted parishioners in the village of Lazduny, Iuje district, to go on a hunger strike demanding the authorities to extend a visa for local priest Mariusz Iljaszewicz.

The authorities have also harassed Protestant congregations for the same reason, suspecting them of being agents of Western influence. Protestant groups put up tough resistance in the face of a serious threat to their interests.

Back in 2002, Volha Abramava, a member of the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly (who was considered one of few moderate critics of the government in the parliament), criticized the draft new religion law as discriminatory against Protestant congregations. Some analysts alleged that the law was drafted under pressure from the BOC concerned about the growing competition from Protestants.

Abramava predicted, however, that the law would weaken positions of the Orthodox Church. “Protestants can work successfully in an aggressive environment. They can resist strong pressure by an all-out missionary effort,” she said.

Later, Protestant communities proved her right. Protests by members of Protestant congregations, especially a hunger strike that took place in Minsk in 2006, created considerable discomfort for the authorities.

Catholics also showed a strong character. The abovementioned House of Representatives member accurately predicted religious groups' reaction to the new law.

Wave of protests

Observers note signs of cooling between the authorities and the Orthodox Church.

Interestingly, displayed until recently on the official presidential website was Łukašenka's quote: "I cannot take in with my soul and understand that the church [the BOC] is somehow separated from the state." The quote has been removed.

In December 2006, Łukašenka cautioned Orthodox priests against "making excessive haste" in recruiting parishioners. At the meeting with the BOC clerics, he also voiced opposition to introducing religion in schools.

Although the government's honeymoon with the Orthodox Church is over, this does not mean that the authorities are leaning toward other religions.

Political analysts believe that the authorities are watchful of any uncontrolled activity of people, including that of religious groups.

Officials have started to exercise greater vigilance after both hunger strikes — by the New Life Church and by Catholics in Hrodna — forced authorities to yield to believers' demands.

Members of the charismatic New Life Church, affiliated with the Association of Full Gospel Evangelic Christians, were on a hunger strike from October 5 to 28, 2006 in an attempt to defend the church property. The New Life Church had bought a disused cowshed in Minsk and converted it into a church. But the city authorities launched and won a court

action that could force the congregation to sell the building and land beneath it. The move sparked the 23-day hunger strike that involved more than 100 believers. The authorities backed down and the case was sent to the Supreme Economic Court for review.

Catholics in the town of Hrodna, who prayed for New Life during the strike, drew on this community's example in turn by declaring their own hunger strike on December 1 for permission to build a new church. The congregation had been trying to obtain permission from the authorities for 10 years. The authorities backed down in a few days, probably scared by the repercussions of the strike by New Life members, and handed the written permission to the group on December 6.

Commenting on the outcome, Priest Alaksandr Šemiet noted, "The spark that started the hunger strike in defense of the New Life Church in Minsk reached Hrodna and helped us overcome the injustice."

New Life worshippers were also triumphant. "Last year's developments and the victory over the authorities as a result of the hunger strike inspired the faith-

ful, each of whom feels himself or herself a victor," New Life Pastor Viačaslau Hančarenka said in early 2007. He added that the Association of Full Gospel Evangelic Christians should drop a doctrine that commands only passive resistance to injustice.

"We need to change this strategy and take a position of active development," the pastor was quoted as saying. The New Life Church plans to set up its own media outlets — a website, a newspaper and even a radio and television station. But the current authorities are unlikely to allow them to put their plans into practice.

Recurrence of "belligerent atheism"

It can be reasoned that the defeats prompted senior officials to take a more hostile attitude toward religion in general. Many observers were alarmed by an article written by Anatol Rubinau, first deputy head of the Presidential Administration, published in the largest state-controlled national newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* in December



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"New Life" protestant church adherents went on hunger strike to prevent the church building from confiscation.

2006. In the article, the official promotes Bolshevik-style belligerent atheism.

The International Religious Freedom Report 2006 released by the US Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor says, "The government continued to restrict religious freedom."

"Respect for religious freedom continued to be uneven during the period covered by this report, although some improvements occurred."

US experts note that the government restricts religious freedom in accordance with the provisions of a 2002 law on religion and a 2003 concordat with the Belarusian branch of the Russian

Orthodox Church. Although there is no state religion, the concordat grants the BOC privileged status.

The report says that authorities imprisoned a clergyman and a lay activist, and harassed and fined members of certain religious groups.

It is true to say that the authorities do not take a civilized and fair attitude to religious groups and respect the rights of religious minorities.

This attitude could however change if the country made progress toward democracy. A democratic government by its nature will not grant privileges to some denominations at the expense of others.

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