

## **Unequal by default: Church and state in Belarus in the period of consolidated authoritarianism**

### **General context. Religiousness and confessions**

In early 2000s, a sociologist of religion Larysa Novikava, who analysed the dynamics of the religiousness of Belarusians in the second half of 1990s, came to two conclusions. Firstly, the “religious boom” of 1990s was mostly “external” by nature since faith was weakly institutionalised and quasi-religious. Secondly, the trend of religiousness is decreasing. The ideological “pendulum” that caused an increase in faith has passed its maximum point of swing and, starting from 2000, is going in the reverse direction.<sup>1</sup>

As numerous opinion polls have demonstrated, that forecast was not accurate. During 2000s, the number of assumed “believers” with confessional identity continued to grow. Evidence for that can be found in polls with an identical structure of questions, that take place regularly.<sup>2</sup> These polls not only demonstrate what is happening at a given moment of time, but also allow us to see the dynamics of the processe and compare the situation in Belarus with other countries. The analysis of data allows us to observe the following trends:

Steady increase in numbers of those who say they believe in God accompanied by a decrease in numbers of non-believers (see Table 1);

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<sup>1</sup> Novikova L.G. *Religioznost v Belarusi na rubezhe vekov: tendentsii i osobennosti proyavleniya (sotsiologicheskii aspekt) // Religiousness in Belarus on the Verge of the 21st Century: Main Trends and Peculiarities (sociological aspect)*. Minsk, 2001. Pp. 83–86.

<sup>2</sup> There were two such surveys for the Belarusian society: World Value Survey in 1996 and 2011 and European Value Survey in 1999 and 2008. Data quoted in this article are taken from officially published results of those surveys according to Asep / JDS, Madrid, Spain i GESIS Data Archive, Cologne.

Table 1.

Faith in God	1996 WVS	1999 EVS	2008 EVS	2011 WVS
Yes	67,9%	82,9%	85,9%	84,9%
No	19,4%	17,1%	14,1%	13,8%
No answer	12,7%			1,3%

Growing number of those who say God plays an important role in their lives (see Table 2);

Table 2.

Importance of God	1996 WVS	1999 EVS	2008 EVS	2011 WVS
Very important	18,7%	20,3%	16,6%	19,3%
Rather important (6–9)	29,0%	29,8%	46,5%	44,8%
Not too important (2–5)	34,7%	40,6%	29,7%	29,4%
Totally unimportant	12,1%	9,2%	7,4%	5,8%

Growing number of respondents who, with at least some regularity, attend worship services (see Table 3);

Table 3.

Attending worship	1996 WVS	1999 EVS	2008 EVS	2011 WVS
More often than weekly	1,6%	1,7%	1,2%	1,7%
Weekly	4,2%	3,9%	5,6%	6,8%
Monthly	8,2%	8,9%	12,5%	13,0%
Christmas/Easter	27,4%	28,3%	36,2%	40,8%
Other special holidays		6,2%		
Annually	13,4%	12,3%	11,3%	8,5%
Less often than annually	12,2%	10,9%	10,5%	8,4%
Never or almost never	30,4%	27,8%	22,8%	20,2%

Decrease in numbers of “devout atheists” and increase in numbers of those who consider themselves religious (See Table 4);

Table 4.

Religiousness	1996 WVS	1999 EVS	2008 EVS	2011 WVS
A religious person	58,7%	27.5%	31,8%	62,2%
A non-religious person	22,1%	63.1%	60,8%	32,2%
Devout atheist	3,4%	9.3%	7,4%	5,1%
No answer	15,8%			0,5%

If in 1995–99 the number of those who did not have a confessional identity was growing and one could see a reciprocal trend of decreasing numbers of Orthodox and Catholic believers, in 2000s that trend reversed. The number of those who identify themselves either with Orthodox or with Catholic churches grew while the number of confessional non-identified decreased (See Table 5,<sup>3</sup> Figure 1).

Table 5.

Denomination	1996 WVS	1998 Novikava	1999 EVS	2008 EVS	2010 IAC	2010 IISEPS	2011 WVS
None	34,2%	20,4%	47,8%	28,5%	8%	8,8%	13,5%
Orthodox	54,7%	62,8%	44,3%	61,6%	78%	78,8%	72,9%
Roman Catholic	7,7%	10%	6,6%	8,7%	12%	11,1%	10,5%
Protestant	0,1%	0,5%	0,5%	0,9%	1%	0,7%	2,0%
Islam	0,1%		0,2%	0,2%	0,5%	0,1%	0,3%
Judaism			0,1%	0,1%	0,5%	0,1%	0,2%

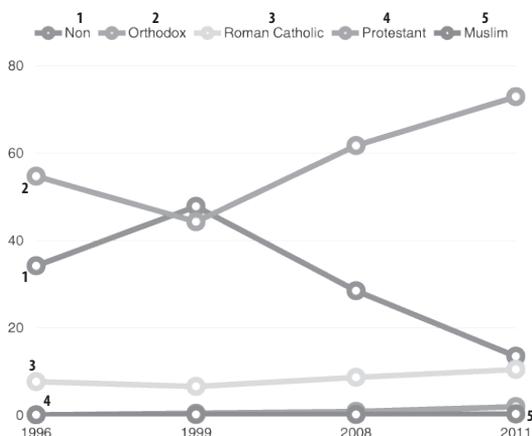


Figure 1. Dynamics of self-assessment of denomination

<sup>3</sup> As an illustration, the data presented include: 1) 1998 – according to Novikova L.G. *Religioznost v Belarusi...* Annex 1. P. 89; 2) 2010 – according to Informaitonal and Analytical Centre at the Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus. *Respublika Belarus v zerkale sotsiologii // The Republic of Belarus in the Mirror of Sociology // Collection of materials of opinion polls in 2010*. Minsk, 2011. P. 73; 3) *Religiousness and Moral of Belarusians. IISEPS survey. 09.2010 // http://www.iiseps.org/analitica/143*.

Despite the growth of religiousness, Belarusians admit a relatively low influence of religion on their daily life. According to the results of a specialised Gallup poll in 2009,<sup>4</sup> among 114 countries Belarus is in 11th place among the least religious ones, and there is a steady trend towards a reduction of this parameter (See Table 6).

Table 6.

Importance of religion	1996	1999	2008	2011
Very important	20,0%	12,2%	13,6%	15,9%
Rather important	31,0%	33,5%	41%	32,1%
Not too important	25,2%	32%	30,9%	33,4%
Totally unimportant	15,4%	22,3%	14,5%	17,4%

While Belarus is an extreme example of the low level trends of religiousness taking place, they are typical for Europe as a whole. These are two contradicting yet interrelated processes, in which Jose Casanova sees traits of desecularisation: 1) spread of confessional identity without religious belief (belonging without believing), 2) growing individualization of faith, which becomes less and less related to any forms of churchism or communalism (believing without belonging).<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the researcher of (de)secularisation, Peter Berger, claims that the loss of influence and impact of religious institutions of power, which is often understood as secularisation, does not necessarily bring along a decrease in faith and religious practices in daily life. Moreover, religious institutions that lose believers can still play an important social and political role.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the low level of religiousness is not enough to make a statement about the low level of impact of church institutions and religion on society. Both mentioned trends are present, first of all, in traditional majority churches and demonstrate themselves differently depending on the denominational congregation.

Religion can influence society, its cultural patterns and political culture indirectly, via identity. This role of religion was described by Samuel Huntington, who included religious identity into his division of the world into civilisations. On his map of civilisations, Huntington first places Belarus into the array of “divided” countries taking into account the dominating role of the Orthodox Church alongside the importance of Catholicism,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Crabtree, Pelham. *What Alabamians and Iranians Have in Common* // <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114211/Alabamians-Iranians-Common.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> Casanova J. *Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective* // *The Hedgehog Review*. Spring/Summer 2006. Vol. 8. P. 7–22.

<sup>6</sup> Berger P.L. *Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview* // *Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* / Ed. P.L.Berger. The Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, D.C, 1999. P. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Huntington S. *The Clash of Civilizations?* // *Foreign Affairs*. Summer 1993. № 72 (3). P. 30.

but then adds it to the Orthodox civilisation which is centred on Russia (and even to Russia itself).<sup>8</sup> However, is the role of the Orthodox Church in Belarus big enough to define some forms of social life?

In the 1990s, some authors wrote about a “confessional revolution” that may transform Belarus into a “protestant country.”<sup>9</sup> In 1999, the number of registered communities of only one protestant sect, evangelical Protestants adhering to Pentecostalism, became higher than the number of Catholic communities: it grew from 357 to 414,<sup>10</sup> while the Catholics grew from 387 to 399.<sup>11</sup> Protestant believers were more active than Orthodox believers.<sup>12</sup> The latter, while keeping their position of a leading denomination, showed the weakest link with their religious community, both in their worship behavior<sup>13</sup> and based on the socio-cultural strategy related to religious belief<sup>14</sup> (See Table 7).

Table 7.

Denomination	Attend worship more often than monthly (IISEPS, 2010)	Percentage of the whole population (based on denomination IISEPS, 2010)	Socio-cultural strategy (Katsuk, 2008)	Percentage of the whole population (based on denomination IISEPS, 2010)
Orthodox	22,2%	17,4%	21,1%	16,6%
Catholic	55%	6,1%	38,1%	4,2%
Protestant	90,9%	0,6%	79,6%	0,6%

Such statements are not unfounded but they do not reflect the reality in full. Religious protestant groups, especially in the local context, can indeed dominate in quality and even generate new types of activities that have an impact, including an economic impact, on the local community. For instance, in the small town of Alšany in the South of Belarus more

<sup>8</sup> Huntington S. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996, P. 163–164.

<sup>9</sup> Shevtsov Yu. *Belarus: strana bazirovaniya. Geopoliticheskiye tendentsii, v sfere deistviya kotorykh nakhoditsya Belarus' / Belarus: base country. Geopolitical trends that influence Belarus.* // Shevtsov Yu Minsk, 2001. Glava 6. Ob'edinennaya natsiya: fenomen Belarusi. // Chapter 6 United Nation. Belarus Phenomenon. Moskva, 2005. Pp. 46–48.

<sup>10</sup> Pastukhova E. *Sovremennoe sostoyanie pyatidesyatnicheskogo dvizheniya v Belarusi. Postkommunisticheskaya Belarus' v protsesse religioznykh transformatsii. // Current condition of Pentecostal movement in Belarus. Post-Communist Belarus in the process of religious transformation.* // *Sbornik statei / Pod. red. A.V. Danilova.* Minsk, Adukartsyya i vykhavanne, 2002. P. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Serdyuk V. *Rimo-katoliki Belarusi 1991–2001 // Catholics in Belarus // Ibid.* P. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Tsyhankou V. *Relihiynaya palityka tsi palitychnaya relihiya? // Religious policy or political religion? // Svaboda.* 10 January 1997. No 2. Pp. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Novikova L. *Religioznost belorusov...*

<sup>14</sup> Katsuk N. *K metodologii empiricheskogo issledovaniya sotsiokul'turnykh strategii veruyushchikh razlichnykh konfessii // On the methodology of research of socio-cultural strategies of believers of different denominations // Sotsiologiya.* 2008. № 3. P. 118.

than half of the 7500 inhabitants are members of the Pentecostal community.<sup>15</sup> However, if we look at the average size of a community as such, in 2001 the average number of believers in a given Pentecostal community was 112 people (including children) or 64 full-fledged church members.<sup>16</sup> The average size of a Baptist community was even smaller: 50 church members.<sup>17</sup> The “membership” principle is important specifically for protestants since members have special rights and obligations and take certain responsibility.

Catholics have a lower influence of their religious identity on social positions and behaviour, than protestants,<sup>18</sup> but their identity is stronger than that of Orthodox churchgoers. The indirect evidence for that can be found in the fact that in the regions where Roman Catholicism dominated in the 1990s, there was a very insignificant growth of Protestant communities.<sup>19</sup>

Many researchers rightly point out that one should not use general polls to measure the real impact of religion on society,<sup>20</sup> while the sample for the surveys should be selected not on the basis of subjective self-assessment but on the basis of the real participation of a person in a given institution’s activities.<sup>21</sup> For mainstream churches that unite people with quite weak denominational identity and low level of religious practices, the influence on society and the public presence is provided by their historical status; on the public level the Church is perceived as a referent group of a high order. This reflects in “trust in the Church” parameter.<sup>22</sup>

Minor church denominations, as a rule, have a sect-like structure and the main mode of affiliation there is membership in a community, especially if the community is under the influence of the personality of its leader and founder and conversion happens under the influence of personal contacts with members of the community. In such cases, the community is rather a private and family organisation than a public organisation. It is characterised by horizontal ties, mutual help and solidarity but discourages social ties

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<sup>15</sup> Yegorov A. *Malye goroda: who governs? // Small cities: who governs? // Palitychnaya sfera*. 2009. No 12. P. 50.

<sup>16</sup> Calculated on the basis of the data in: Pastukhova Ye. *Sovremennoye sostoyaniye... // Modern condition...* Pp. 67–68.

<sup>17</sup> Calculated on the basis of the data in: Mandryk S. *Soyuz Evangeliskich christian-baptistov v Belarusi // Union of Evangelical Christians – Baptists in Belarus // Postkommunisticheskaya Belarus...*, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> Katsuk N. *K metodologiyi...*

<sup>19</sup> Ozem G.Z. *Territori Ozem Г.3. Territorial'naya struktura religioznoi sfery i konfessional'noe raionirovanie Belarusi. Avtoreferat dissertatsii. // Territorial structure of the religious sphere and confessional development of Belarus. Abstract of a thesis*. Minsk, BSU. 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Mitrokhin N. *Tserkov', Etnonatsionalizm i gosudarstvo // Ethnic National and State // Pro et Contra*, September–October 2013, № 5 (60), pp. 6–16.

<sup>21</sup> Breskaya O. *Rol' Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v protsesse sotsializatsii v period transformatsii: na materialakh Respubliki Belarus'. Avtoreferat dissertatsii. // Abstract of a thesis*. Moscow 2004. P. 188.

<sup>22</sup> *Orthodox Church traditionally has one of the highest trust rankings. See for instance: Trust as a borrowed resource. IISEPS survey on 01.12.2010 // <http://www.iiseps.org/analitica/159>.*

with people from other communities. Membership in such communities, according to Berger, is a “school of democracy and social mobility”.<sup>23</sup>

As for “membership” in religious organisations, the above mentioned audience polls show that around 10 percent of Belarusians declared their active or passive membership in such organisations. The dynamic shows the growth of “membership” (See Table 8). Only trade unions have more members than religious communities; the rest, including political parties and NGOs, have even fewer members.

Table 8.

Membership in religious organisations	1996 WVS	1999 EVS	2008 EVS	2011 WVS
Active member	2,3%	2,1%	1,2%	5,1%
Passive members	5,5%			5,6%
Not a member	92,2%	97,9%	98,8%	89,3%

## Politicisation of Protestants: phase one

At the beginning of the period 1990–2000s, the increase in the number of neo-Protestant sects resulted in the fact that just one Protestant community, the Pentecostals, had more registered parishes than the Catholics. That process naturally brought a sense of discomfort to traditional churches which became wary of a new, dynamically growing, competitor. The growth of neo-Protestant churches was happening outside the control area of the political regime, that at that time was consolidating and increasing its pressure on the political opposition and civil society. As a result, the state-owned media started a campaign of defamation of Protestant communities describing them as “destructive sects”.<sup>24</sup> “Anti-sectarian” paradigm ruled the research of Protestants both by scientists<sup>25</sup> and Orthodox scholars.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Berger P. *Desecularisation...*, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Yanovich N. *Belarusi ugrozhaet perspektiva prevratit'sya v protestantskuyu respubliku, ili Nas nastoichivo tolkayut k predatel'stvu very nashikh predkov // Belarus is under threat of turning into a protestant republic, or We are pushed to betraying our ancestors // Narodnaya gazeta. 19 April 2000; 20 April 2000. P. 2; On 26 October and 2 November 2000 Belarusian state TV showed the documentary “Expansion” by an anonymous author.*

<sup>25</sup> D'yachenko O.V. *Missionerskaya deyatel'nost' pyatidesyatnicheskoi tserkvi v Belarusi. // Missionary activities of the Pentecostal Church in Belarus. Mogilev: A.A. Kuleshov's MSU Publishing House, 1999. P. 113.*

<sup>26</sup> Martinovich V.A. *Bibliography // http://minds.by/persons/martinovich#.VSWxV0aczDk. In 1997, the Belarusian Orthodox Church created the Information and Consultative Center in the name of Iosif Volatski that aimed at fighting sects.*

According to Aleh Dzyachenka, the catalyst for the politicisation of the Pentecostal movement<sup>27</sup> was

*incorrect ideological propaganda against the Pentecostals, combined with the insult to the religious feelings of the believers by the mass media... publishing of a school textbook on the “Man. Society. State” subject where Pentecostals were described as “Christian sect” believers.*

In 2000, several Evangelical churches filed a suit against a journalist called Nina Yanovich.<sup>28</sup> On 16 November 2000, 1907 believers from the Pentecostal Union filed a petition to the President Alyaksandar Lukashenka asking him to become the guarantor of their rights.<sup>29</sup>

Besides the intensive growth in the number of Pentecostal churches, the late 1990s brought the growth in the number of Charismatic (Full Gospel) churches that attracted big numbers of believers. For instance, the Church of Jesus Christ by 1998 had 90 in-house groups counting 949 members; a year later – 115 in-house groups counting 1053 members.<sup>30</sup> Other Charismatic churches also had quite a big number of believers. That growth was caused by the big number of evangelization attempts, including missionary activity in the streets.

The weakness of all those religious communities was the lack of premises for worship (none of the 54 communities had their own chapel). Therefore, they had to rent for prayer, halls with a big capacity in cultural centres, etc. The pressure on those communities started after the introduction of the Decree No 36 “On Certain Measures to Prevent Accidents During Mass Meetings” dated 9 September 1999, which prescribed getting permission for all mass gatherings that happened not in “specifically assigned for that purpose” places, or in the open air. Starting from 2000, the state started cancelling the rental contract with churches: that complicated worship and increased the potential for churches’ politicisation, which, in turn, created grounds for increased pressure against them.

The political pressure that started in 1999–2000 led to the growth of a mood of opposition in Protestant communities. That pressure led the highest ranking Protestant in

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<sup>27</sup> D’yachenko O.V. *Politizatsiya pyatidesyatnichestva v Belarusi: prichiny, genezis, sledstvie. // Politicisation of the Pentecostal movement in Belarus: causes, genesis, consequences. // Religiya i obshchestvo – 3: aktual’nye problemy sovremennogo religiovedeniya: sb. nauch. trudov. / Pod obshch. red. V.V. Starostenko, O.V. D’yachenko. Mogilev: UO “MGU im. A.A. Kuleshova”, 2008. P. 18.*

<sup>28</sup> Gorevoy M. *Protestant Communities of Full Gospel Christians Demand an Administrative Case against Narodnaya Gazeta newspaper and its Journalist Nina Yanovich // BelaPAN. 06/12/2000 // [http://dossier.by/media.net/index.php?option=com\\_apressdb&view=publications&layout=entry&id=7331](http://dossier.by/media.net/index.php?option=com_apressdb&view=publications&layout=entry&id=7331).*

<sup>29</sup> Pastukhova Ye. *Sovremennoye sostoyaniye...*, p. 67.

<sup>30</sup> Church of Jesus Christ Full Gospel Religious Community website // <http://jesuschurch.by/cjc2.html>.

the Presidential Administration, deputy head of the Administration Ivan Pashkevich, to leave the ruling elite. His attempt to soften the state's policies towards Protestant churches were not supported by Lukashenka.<sup>31</sup> Pashkevich became the head of the initiative group that collected signatures for the nomination of Mikhail Marynich to the presidency in 2001.

At the same time, youth opposition, especially nation-oriented, became more prone to Christian ideas. In 1999, one of the biggest opposition youth movements, Young Front, became evangelised. The Second Congress of Young Front in 1999, that gathered around 450 delegates, was clearly pro-Christian with speeches rich in religious references. In October 1999, Young Front helped to create the "Christian Initiative" organisation that united believers of different denominations, including the ones from the Kanstantsin Astrozhsy youth Orthodox group (affiliated with the St. Petr and Pavel Church) and St. Roch Catholic Church community. In the early 2000s, the leader of Young Front, Paval Sieviaryniets, came up with the new slogan: "Christian content for the Belarusian form".<sup>32</sup> That slogan reflected two important processes: "Belarusianisation of Christianity" and "Christianisation of Belarusians" (i.e. nationally conscious, politically active youth). As Paval Sieviarynetsh recalls:

*Then, in 2000, a cardinal split happened that determined the future path of Belarusian contemporary history. Christians quickly gained strength and joined the national movement and opposition, strategically uniting against the "Orthodox atheism" of the dictatorship and [Russian] empire.<sup>33</sup>*

Although the Christianisation of Young Front was supported by the majority of 1 July 2000 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress delegates, some youth leaders left the organisation. Former political prisoner Aliaksei Shydouski called Young Front a "sect"<sup>34</sup> and linked the religious turn of the organisation to the John the Baptist Evangelical Church community.

The John the Baptist community in Minsk, indeed, influenced the youth political movement in Belarus in the early 2000s. Many political and civic youth activists continue attending this church, including former political prisoners Zmitser and Nasta Palazhanka, Zmitser Khvedaruk (Young Front leaders), leaders of the Belarusian Christian Democracy, Aliaskei Shein and Dzianis Sadowski, and civic activists Andrei Kim and Barys Haretski. The Catholic community affiliated with St. Roch Holy Trinity cathedral in Minsk left the Catholic Church in 1999-2000 and created their own Protestant Church led by the pastor

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<sup>31</sup> Galko N. *Ivan Pashkevich: "Radicals Rule in the Lukashenka's Circles Now"* // Nezavisimaya Gazeta. 27 March 2001 // [http://www.ng.ru/cis/2001-03-27/5\\_pashkevich.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2001-03-27/5_pashkevich.html).

<sup>32</sup> Sieviarynets P. *Pakalennie Maladoha Frontu // Young Front Generation* // [http://knihi.com/Paval\\_Sieviaryniec/Pakalennie\\_Maladoha\\_Frontu.html](http://knihi.com/Paval_Sieviaryniec/Pakalennie_Maladoha_Frontu.html).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Shydouski A. *Dawn of the Young Front* // Nasha Niva. 31 July-7 August 2000.

Jarosław Łukasik. Thus, the statement that “Belarusian Protestants do not cooperate with the Belarusian national movement”<sup>35</sup> is not true anymore. Since 2000, following the example of the John the Baptist community, Protestant communities in Belarus have gradually become more “national”. The official history of the Jesus Christ Church tells us that in 2000 “God brought the revelation about the Evangelical History of Belarus to the national level”. The John the Baptist Church played a significant role in that: while state media labelled neo-Protestants “non-traditional”, “alien” and “sectist”, the church suggested its own vision of Protestants as successors of the Great Duchy of Lithuania. In 2002, one of the Church’s leaders, Antoni Bokun, suggested that the flourishing of this statehood was possible only due to the spread of Evangelistic, reformist Christianity:

*The Golden Age of Belarus, the 16<sup>th</sup> century, show us the good path that Belarus has to take in order to claim its rightful place among other nations.*<sup>36</sup>

Pastors spread the Golden Age ideas and interests and the influence of the Reformation on the history of Belarus in the scientific environment, too.<sup>37</sup> 11,000 copies of the book of Antoni Bokun were distributed in Belarus. In 2001 and the first half of 2002, around 200 Congresses and seminars took place in Protestant churches all across the country; in 2002, a big conference “The Reformation and Golden Age of Belarus” took place. In 2003, John the Baptist Church inspired a celebration of the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation in Belarus in churches all across Belarus. That celebration included an international conference “The Reformation and Society. 16<sup>th</sup> Century” and mass worship in the Bangalore square in Minsk.<sup>38</sup> Before that worship Sergey Khomich, the Bishop of the Pentecostal Union of Belarus, said:

*For Evangelical Christians, the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation in Belarus is important because it shows our historical basis, it shows that the roots of Protestantism are deeply bedded in the history of our country. This is especially important today where we are often portrayed as “alien” to Belarus.*<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Latyszonak A. *Belarusian Nationalism and Clash of Civilisations* // ARCHE. 2007. No 7–8. P. 111.

<sup>36</sup> Akinchyts S. *Zalaty viek Belarusi. // Golden Age of Belarus*. Khabarovsk: Novyi Vzgljad, 2001. P. 128; Minsk: Unipak 2002 and other editions.

<sup>37</sup> Special ARCHE issue No 1–2 in 2012 “Under the Gospel Flag” was published with the participation of John the Baptist Church; special issue of Spadchyna magazine No 1 in 2003 published Stanislaw Akinchyts article City, Where the Tradition Has Preserved, p. 50–54.

<sup>38</sup> *Under the Gospel Flag. Foreword* // ARCHE. 2012. No 1–2. P. 8–17.

<sup>39</sup> Protestants will celebrate the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in Belarus by mass worship. BDG-Online, 15 August 2003 // <http://www.bdg.by/news/news.htm%3F49703,1>.

After the amended Law “On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations” was signed, in 2000–01, the new movement “New Reformation” was formed<sup>40</sup> by John the Baptist Church and Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup> One of the Movement’s main projects is the East European Leadership Forum, the directorate of which is based in Ukraine. This Forum has taken place in Kiev since 2011 and gathers thousands of Christian activists,<sup>42</sup> including many participants from Belarus. The Forum has created the Eastern European network of Christian leaders with the goal of promoting values, exchanging experience and influencing public life in Eastern European countries.

The new 2002 amendments of the Law “On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations” were adopted with a background of growth in the activeness of Protestant communities and growth of their protest potential.

### **“Statutory” freedom of conscience**

Before the amended Law was signed, the new National Security Concept was adopted in 2001.<sup>43</sup> According to that Concept, one of the main threats to the Republic of Belarus in the sphere of humanities is “activisation of foreign religious organisations and missionaries who attempt to monopolise the spiritual life of society” (paragraph 7.2.6), while

*counteracting the negative influence of foreign religious organisations and missionaries*

and “monitoring of ethnical and confessional sphere” were named a security priority (paragraph 7.3.7).

The “security” rhetoric was present in the official Orthodox Church discourse, as well. Metropolitan Philaret at the Second All-Belarusian People’s Assembly demanded that the state ensure “spiritual security” and limit activities of

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<sup>40</sup> Reformation in Belarus website // <http://www.belreform.org/>.

<sup>41</sup> History of the Jesus Christ Church // <http://jesuschurch.by/cjc2.html>; Malukha M. *Khozhdenie vo vlast'. Osobennosti vzaimootnoshenii vlasti i protestantskikh tserkvei v Rossii i Belarusi // Visiting the Government: Peculiarities of Relations between Authorities and Protestant Churches in Russia and Belarus* // <http://religo.ru/journal/10334>. The “New Reformation” movement has several research and scientific projects aimed at the popularisation and legitimisation of Protestantism as a traditional Belarusian denomination, as well as the popularisation of Protestant historic figures from 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is done via organization of and participation in conferences, screening films, organising concerts, publishing articles, organising tours in Belarus, meetings of “Licvinski” Club. The ideas of the “New Reformation” are spread among other Protestant communities via educational events and projects, including the School of New Reformation.

<sup>42</sup> East European Leadership Forum official webpage. // <http://www.forumeast.eu>.

<sup>43</sup> Edict of the President of the Republic of Belarus No 390 dated 17 July 2001 “On the Concept of National Security of the Republic of Belarus”.

*destructive and pseudo-Christian communities that destroy the spiritual, social and cultural unity of the Belarusian people.*<sup>44</sup>

Most probably, he was referring to the Protestant churches.

The first draft of amendments, were made public in the autumn of 2000 and evoked a wide response. Human rights defenders were alerted to several new repressive norms and inequalities within the law for majority and minority religious organisations.<sup>45</sup> Protestants were the main target of the new law, but, since before the presidential election of 2001, as authorities did not want to cause politicisation of Protestant believers, the process of adopting the amended law stalled for some time. New attempts to pass amendments took place in 2002. On May 31, without consultation with other denominations, the amended law that was supported by the Orthodox Church, passed on first reading.

In response to that, religious communities mobilised themselves by creating the civic initiative “For Religious Freedom” and organising public consultations with more than 150 participants: experts, diplomats, politicians, human rights defenders and believers themselves. Participants signed the appeal to the President and the Parliament, where they stated that passing the new law would mean declaring a war against religious minorities.<sup>46</sup> One of the members of the initiative, a member of parliament Ivan Pashkevich, called the bill “igniting religious war” against the three big denominations: Catholics, Protestants and Jews. According to him, those denominations became influential in society and, therefore, were more dangerous to the political regime than political parties.<sup>47</sup> Another MP, Volha Abramava, spoke against the Law, as well.<sup>48</sup> One more MP, speaking at the House of Representatives session, warned that passing the law may bring about the

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<sup>44</sup> Philaret (Vakhromeev). Speech at the II All-Belarusian People Assembly on 18 May 2001.

<sup>45</sup> *V Respublike Belarus' podgotovlena novaya redaktsiya Zakona "O svobode veroispovedanii i religioznykh organizatsiyakh" // New amendment of the Law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations has been prepared in the Republic of Belarus // Religiya i pravo. 2001. No 1; Zaklyuchenie Slavyanskogo pravovogo tsentra na proekt Zakona Respubliki Belarus' "O vnesenii izmenenii i dopolnenii v Zakon Respubliki Belarus' "O svobode sovesti i religioznykh organizatsiyakh" // Conclusino of the Slavic Legal Centre regarding the draft Law of the Republic of Belarus on Amendments to the Law of the Republic of Belarus On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations. // Religiya i pravo. 2001. No 4; Later the Institute of Human Rights also conducted its own expertise and found numerous non-conformities with the international freedom of conscience standards. // Belaya Kniga. Issue 2. Materials of the Monitoring of religious situation in Belarus (August 2002–December 2003). Minsk: Civic Initiative “For Religious Freedom”, January 2004. P. 62.*

<sup>46</sup> *Appeal of participants of public consultations // Belaya kniga. Materialy po proektu zakona „O svobode sovesti i religioznykh organizatsiyakh”.* Minsk: Civic Initiative “For Religious Freedom”, 2002. Pp. 120–121.

<sup>47</sup> Gorevoy M. *Is the Government Planning a New Crusade?* // Belorusskiye Novosti. 26 June 2002 // [http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2002/06/26/ic\\_articles\\_116\\_146910/print/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2002/06/26/ic_articles_116_146910/print/).

<sup>48</sup> *Belarusian Parliament Adopts Bill On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations on Second Reading // Blagovest-info.* 28 June 2002.

destabilisation of society.<sup>49</sup> As a result, the majority of MPs voted for postponing the review of this Law until the autumn. But the government reacted rapidly, and next day the bill was adopted on second reading with only two votes against.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the new stage of the confessional policy started: favourisation of the Belarusian Orthodox Church and pressure on all other religious communities.

The lawmakers deleted from the text articles about allowed limitations of the freedom of faith that were originally present in the Law's version of 1992 and almost word-for-word quoted paragraph 3 of Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. That paragraph limited interference of authorities into the activities of religious organisations. By ratifying the Covenant, the Belarusian state assumed the responsibility to fulfil it; however, after passing the amended Law it de facto refused to follow through on its commitments on the national level.

Article 16 of the new Law obliged religious organisations to receive state registration for religious activities. Until 2009, acting in the name of a non-registered religious organisation was regarded as an administrative offence (part 1 of the Article 9.9 of the Administrative Code) and there were cases when people were held liable for that.<sup>51</sup> In addition to that, starting from 2005, criminal liability is envisaged by the Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code for acting in the name of the non-registered religious organisation. As of now, there have been no cases of criminal liability for religious activities; however, criminal cases were started and the prosecutor's office issued warnings.<sup>52</sup> Authorities exerted pressure by threatening to persecute an organisation on the basis of that article.

The new Law limited foreign citizens and people with no citizenship, including those who permanently reside in Belarus, from the right to become founders of religious organisations (Articles 13, 14). Only citizens of the Republic of Belarus got the right to be the head of a religious organisation (Article 13). Foreign citizens were allowed to

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<sup>49</sup> Alekseyev V. *KGB Warned the Parliament about Religious Protest Actions* // *Narodnaya Volya*. 17 June 2001. № 127.

<sup>50</sup> For materials on the history of the initiative "For Religious Freedom" and events surrounding adopting the Law See: *Belaya kniga. Materialy po proektu zakona „O svobode sovesti i religioznykh organizatsiyakh"*. Minsk: Civic Initiative "For Religious Freedom, August 2002; *Belaya Kniga. Issue 2. Materials of the Monitoring of religious situation in Belarus (August 2002–December 2003)*. Minsk: Civic Initiative "For Religious Freedom", January 2004.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, administrative fines were used against pastor Valiantsin Baravik and churchgoer Ludmila Batsiuk (See: <http://forb.by/node/280> , <http://forb.by/node/291>).

<sup>52</sup> Forum has counted 7 such cases since 2010: Gleys O. *BELARUS: Obozreniye religioznoy svobody. Sentyabr 2014* // *BELARUS: Review of Religious Freedoms*. September 2014 // <http://forb.by/node/468>; cases were started against the representative of Mun Church Yauhen Volkau: [http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2009/07/02/ic\\_news\\_116\\_313903/print/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2009/07/02/ic_news_116_313903/print/), Catholic believer Aliaksei Shchadrou: [http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2013/07/22/ic\\_articles\\_116\\_182423/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2013/07/22/ic_articles_116_182423/); in 2007, warning was issued even to the head of the Orthodox brotherhood Siarhei Niestsiarovich in Homel: <http://churchby.info/rus/134/>.

participate in religious activities only after they get special permission, by following the Procedure of invitation established by the Council of Ministers<sup>53</sup> and by the agreement of the Commissioner on Religious and Ethnic Affairs. The decision on the extension of stay of foreign citizens engaged in religious activities is taken by the office of the Commissioner. Lack of permission or violation of the rules for religious activities is liable under the Administrative Code. This legal status is used most often against Protestants<sup>54</sup> and Catholics.<sup>55</sup>

The new Law limits the list of religious organisations: religious communities, religious associations, monasteries and monastic communities, religious brotherhoods and sisterhoods, religious missions and religious educational establishments. Some types of activities can be performed only by a religious association: for instance, the creation of other religious organisations, founding mass media or publishing religious literature (Articles 15, 19). In this way, the government imposes greater confessional centralisation of religious communities. A single church, according to the Law, cannot have its own newspaper or create a brotherhood, since only big national or local associations can do so.

The Law limits mass gatherings in, not assigned for these purposes, open-air places and in premises. They can be carried out only after the appropriate decision by the head of the local executive and administrative body, or there assistant, in the order established by the Law On Mass Gatherings of the Republic of Belarus. Other articles of the Administrative Code are used for persecution of believers, as well:

a) Article 23.34 of the Belarusian Administrative Code, provides punishment for the violation of the procedure for “organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration”.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Procedure of Invitation of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons to the Republic of Belarus for the Purpose of Carrying out Religious Activity, and on Repealing of Certain Resolutions of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus // Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus No 123 dated 30 January 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Pastor Jarosław Łukasik was deported in 2007 for, as it was stated in the motivational part of his deportation decision, “activities aimed at damaging the national security of the Republic of Belarus in the sphere of interdenominational relations”, including his participation in post-election protests in 2006: Trigubovich V. *Gosudarstvo i tserkov’ v 2007 godu: “Vy sol’ zemli” // State and Church in 2007: You Are the Salt of the Earth* // <http://forb.by/node/207>. In 2008 pastor Veniamin Brukh, who was also deported, named his participation in protests as a the reason for deportation, as well: Veniamin Brukh Explains Why He Was Departed from Belarus // <http://www.jesuschurch.by/cjc273.html>.

<sup>55</sup> The government decided to decrease the number of foreign Roman Catholic priests in Belarus; their number decreases every year, indeed. See: Vasilevich N. *Belarus: Visa Ban List for Catholic Priests* // FORB Initiative // <http://forb.by/node/255>; Vasilevich N. *Belorusskoe gosudarstvo, Rimsko-Katolicheskaya Tserkov’ v Belarusi, Vatikan i pol’skie svyashchenniki // Belarusian state, Roman Catholic Church in Belarus, Vatican and Polish priests* // FORB Initiative // <http://forb.by/node/499>.

<sup>56</sup> In 2006, the pastor of the Redemption Church was fined for baptising: <http://charter97.org/rus/news/2006/09/04/shtraf>; the pastor of non-registered Baptist community Heorgi Viazouski was fined for

Even though in 2011 the text of the Article was changed to exclude “other” events from the list of mass events (including religious events), courts continue punishing believers;<sup>57</sup>

b) Article 21.16 of the Administrative Code (“Not using living premises for their purpose”).<sup>58</sup> This Article gave grounds to the state to accuse the New Life Pentecostal Church of using the land at Kavaliova Str. 72 in Minsk for different from stated purposes. This conflict between the state and believers lasted for many years and was described by the political scientist Andrei Yahorau as “core, the centre of civic life”.<sup>59</sup>

## **Politicisation of Protestants: new phase, New Life Church**

The protest potential of Protestant churches remained high despite the new Law. Therefore, the government continued its pressure on them. The anti-Protestant propaganda in state-owned media forced representatives of Evangelical churches to organise a protest action on 13 July 2003: around five thousand believers gathered for public worship.<sup>60</sup> Participants of the action demonstrated two distinct trends: firstly, they were unhappy with the anti-Protestant propaganda and pressure from authorities that was compared by the deputy bishop of the Union of Evangelical Christians Sergey Tsvor to “1937” (the year of the peak of Stalin’s repressions); secondly, they confirmed their loyalty to the Republic of Belarus (“We love Belarus, we are patriots of our country”, “We abide by the laws”, “We prayed, we pray and we will continue to pray for the flourishing of our country and its leaders”) and therefore signed an appeal to president Lukashenka as a guarantor of their Constitutional rights. Believers claimed that they would stand for their civic dignity and Constitutional rights with “legal methods and tools” and hoping for “comprehensive support and assistance from the President”.<sup>61</sup>

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organising worship: <http://spring96.org/ru/news/9477>; in 2007, pastor of John the Baptist Church Antoni Bokun was put under administrative arrest: <http://news.tut.by/society/88917.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Shavtsova D. *Praktika privilecheniya k administrativnoi otvetstvennosti za narushenie poryadka provedeniya massovykh meropriyatii v otnoshenii religioznykh obshchin // Practice of administrative punishment for breaking the rules of mass events organisation applied to religious communities / Initiative FORB //* <http://forb.by/node/400>. In 2013, based on that Article, Baptists Piotr Yashchanka, Valiantsin Shchadranok, Mikalai Varushyn were fined: <http://forb.by/node/389>; in 2014 – Baptists Aliaksandar Zalararou, Aleh Danileuski, Dzmitry Sidarenka: <http://forb.by/node/416>, Yehova witness Andrei Kuzin: <http://forb.by/node/505>.

<sup>58</sup> Baptist Andrei Tupalski was arrested in 2014: <http://forb.by/node/416>.

<sup>59</sup> Yegorov A. “Fasting Hunger Strike” system // <http://worvik.org/news/2006/10/10/254>.

<sup>60</sup> Around 5000 Christians gathered in Minsk on Bangalore square on July 13 // <http://spring96.org/ru/news/7525>.

<sup>61</sup> Appeal of the participants of the Joint Worship of Christians of Protestant Denomination on Bangalore square to the President of the Republic of Belarus Aliaksandar Lukashenka. // <http://forb.by/node/524>.

In 2003–04, leaders of Protestant religious communities appealed to authorities to stop “the defamation and insult to believers of Evangelical churches” in school textbooks.<sup>62</sup> The New Life Church (NLC) that appeared at the centre of the conflict was trying to solve that conflict peacefully. Before the conflict, the pastor of that church claimed that

*officials have no moral right to tell us that we did not use all peaceful means available to solve the problem.*<sup>63</sup>

In 2002, NLC bought a disused collective farm cow shed on the outskirts of Minsk, rebuilt it and then attempted numerous times to convert it into a place of worship. However, authorities kept issuing denials. Moreover, they created hurdles in re-registration and issued fines for worship in the building; threatened to destroy the building, or confiscate it or its land, or liquidate the NLC itself by withdrawing its licence.

Finally, believers realised that the “peaceful” strategy of solving the issue was not effective, since,

*all the correspondence that our churches have in defence of their Constitutional rights leads only to one thing: authorities openly claiming that either Protestants will fully obey their unlawful decisions or their churches will be liquidated.*<sup>64</sup>

The open letter of the leaders of the Full Gospel churches, that demanded the state to take firm action finished with an unambiguous threat:

*Let us remind you: in 1989, cruel and not well-thought out actions of the Romanian authorities against Protestant Churches led to the change of the political regime.*<sup>65</sup>

After the amendments to the Law On Freedom of Conscience, some politicians decided to initiate the creation of a Christian political force. In 2005, Uladzimir Matskevich created the Rushennie movement that tried to utilise the protest potential of Protestant churches. Then, the Organising Committee for the creation of the Belarusian Christian Democratic party was formed, and included believers of various denominations. The core of that committee consists of former Young Front activists close to Protestant communities.<sup>66</sup> Leaders of the Evangelical churches, inspired by the Ukrainian Protestant

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<sup>62</sup> The Letter from the heads of the Protestant churches in Belarus regarding the distribution by the Ministry of Education through school textbooks (supplementary materials) defamation and insult of believers of Evangelical churches // <http://forb.by/node/122>; Letter of the Bishop of the Religious community of Full Gospel Christians in the Republic of Belarus A.V.Sakovich about the Religiovedeniye textbook // <http://forb.by/node/136>.

<sup>63</sup> [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=656](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=656).

<sup>64</sup> Open appeal of the religious association of Full Gospel Christians in the Republic of Belarus // <http://forb.by/node/152>.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Belarusian Christian Democracy. History // <http://bchd.info/history.html>.

Church “The Embassy of God” that supported the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, showed their solidarity with protesters during street actions in 2006, by “raising their voice for truth, freedom and justice”.<sup>67</sup>

After the presidential election of 2006 the government strengthened repressions against the New Life Church. On 13 July 2006, the Economic Court of Minsk City refused the church’s demand, that Minsk City Executive Committee allocate the plot of land where the disused cowshed is situated, for it to be build as a house of worship.<sup>68</sup> A week later, the Court ruled that the Church had to sell the cowshed at a low price. When the money reached the account, the believers were given 10 days to leave the building, after which it would be demolished.<sup>69</sup> In response, on 5 October 2006 NLC started a massive hunger strike in the form of fasting that lasted for 23 days and involved 132 protesters across the country. As a result, all court judgements were reversed.<sup>70</sup> That was a victory for NLC, although, as pastor Barys Charnaglaz rightfully claimed, treatment of NLC was not the only case of “unjust attitude to Evangelist believers, which became rather a regularity.”<sup>71</sup>

Despite the reversal of the court judgement, authorities up to 2013 tried either to evict the church or to hold this religious organisation and its members liable for trumped up charges.<sup>72</sup> Still, the 2006 protest brought about several important effects.

Firstly, the protest became a referent case for other believers in their struggle with authorities. Right after NLC, Catholics in Hrodna started their own hunger strike that brought success: authorities allowed them to build a new church. Hunger strikes of Catholics in Yuratsishki and Lazduny village, however, did not bring positive results.<sup>73</sup>

Secondly, after the hunger strike, Protestants established a closer link with the BChD organising committee. Together, they started a joint signature collection campaign to inspire changes in the legislation on religion, coordinated by New Life Church lawyer Sergey Lukanin. 50 thousand signatures collected during that campaign could be used as a database of those who were ready to support Christian political force.

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<sup>67</sup> Veniamin Brukh Explained... by default. On en the Orthodox Church and the state in Belarus are unequal and disfunctional ses the simulation of partnershipew

<sup>68</sup> Decision of Minsk Economic Court to compel the repurposing of title documentation on belonging to New Life Religious Organisation, building in Minsk at Kovaleva Str. 72 as place of worship // <http://forb.by/node/91>.

<sup>69</sup> Minotoring of violations of Christians’ rights in Belarus in 2006 // <http://www.osce.org/ru/odihr/27169?download=true>.

<sup>70</sup> Also: For Religious Freedom. Special issue in 2006 // <http://forb.by/bulletin/13>.

<sup>71</sup> Pastor Barys Charnahlaz speaking at the street action in support of the Church at Bangalore square in Minsk on 21 October 2006. Quoted as in: Trigubovich V. *Gosudarstvo i Tserkov’ v 2006 godu*: “Stoite v svobode, kotoruyu daroval nam Khristos» // *State and Church in 2006*: “Stand in freedom that was given us by Jesus Christ” // <http://forb.by/node/182>.

<sup>72</sup> Gleys, O. *BELARUS: Raid and fines are back, but eviction is postponed* // Forum 18 // <http://forb.by/node/389>.

<sup>73</sup> Trigubovich V. *Gosudarstvo i Tserkov...*

Thirdly, NLC became a symbol of religious persecution in Belarus. The European Parliament in its 2009 Resolution on Belarus appealed to Belarusian authorities to safeguard “freedom of religion for religious denominations other than the Orthodox Church, in particular, to let New Life Church operate freely”.<sup>74</sup>

## **Orthodox Church: partnership or dancing to the whistle?**

The Law on Freedom of Conscience in its preamble admits the superiority of the Orthodox Church over others, mentioning its determining role

*in the historical formation and development of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people.*

The law also mentioned the “spiritual, cultural and historic role [of the Catholic Church]... on the territory of Belarus” and the “inseparability [of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Judaism and Islam]... from the general history of the people of the Republic of Belarus.” However, the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus in its 1996 revision establishes that

*relations between the State and religious organisations shall be regulated by law with regard to their influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people (Article 16).*

The preamble to the Law, thus, de facto determines the level of that influence, giving dominance to the Orthodox Church.

President Lukashenka, addressing Orthodox believers after the amended Law was signed, stated that in Belarus “secular authorities and the Church are united”, that the Orthodox Church “struggles with destructive forces”, “fruitfully cooperates with the state authorities”, is “not divided from the state” and moreover, plays “the most significant role”, being a “cement” that unites society.<sup>75</sup> In fact, the Law became the political investment of the government into the Orthodox Church in order to guarantee its loyalty. The “unity” mentioned in the speech does not reflect the real influence of the Orthodox Church on state policy; quite to the contrary, the government does not view it as an independent actor of social life. Assigning to the Church greater autonomy brings the risk of transforming

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<sup>74</sup> European Parliament resolution of 17 December 2009 on Belarus P7\_TA(2009)0117 // <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P7-TA-2009-0117&language=EN&ring=P7-RC-2009-0248>.

<sup>75</sup> Speech of the President of the Republic of Belarus in Holy Spirit Cathedral in Minsk at the Christmas worship on 7 January 2003. // Official website of the president // [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/vystuplenie-prezidenta-respubliki-belarus-aleksandra-lukashenko-v-svjato-duxovom-kafedralnom-sobore-minskana-5816/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vystuplenie-prezidenta-respubliki-belarus-aleksandra-lukashenko-v-svjato-duxovom-kafedralnom-sobore-minskana-5816/).

it into the antagonist, a competitor of the state. As Lukashenka's advisor Anatol Rubinau said,

*the increase of influence of the religion means the weakening of the influence of the state, of state ideology... it will be difficult for the state to get on its side those who are under the influence and control of the church.*<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, if Protestants are kept under control via repressions, the Orthodox Church is controlled via "cooperation" and "diplomatic agreements", i.e. elements of the paternalist policy. Volha Brestskaya, for instance, says that the paternalist policy caused the situation in which "in the years of independence, the Church could not become the autonomous participant of public life in Belarus."<sup>77</sup>

In other words, although the state gives the Orthodox Church priority in the institutional sphere and in public discourse, this does not mean that the Orthodox Church can influence state policies; this form of cooperation puts the Church under the "shadow of the state".<sup>78</sup>

Nevertheless, unlike other religious organisations, the Orthodox Church is a formal partner of that state. This is possible due to, and envisaged by the law, according to which "the state can establish relations with religious associations by signing agreements according to the civil legislation of the Republic of Belarus" (Article 8). As one of the major official researchers pointed out,

*the Belarusian model of state-church relations is based on the principle of 'selectiveness', i.e. the state selects partners among religious organisations in order to solve selected issues.*<sup>79</sup>

Agreements of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) with state institutions existed before the amended Law. However, only after the Law entered into force, i.e. since 2003, did they become widespread.<sup>80</sup> Cooperation between the Church and state bodies can

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<sup>76</sup> Rubinov A. *Nauka i Obshchestvo* // Sovetskaya Belorussiya. 2006.12.12.

<sup>77</sup> Breskaya O. *Model relacji między Cerkwią a państwem na Białorusi w kontekście postsekularyzacji społeczeństw europejskich*. // Politeja. 2012. № 9 (22/1). P. 152.

<sup>78</sup> Vasilevich N. *Belorusskaya pravoslavnaya tserkov' v teni gosudarstva* // *Belarusian Orthodox Church in the shadow of the state* // Pro et Contra (Cerkov', gosudarstvo i obshhestvo v stranah vostochnogo hristianstva, ch. II). Sentjabr'-oktjabr' 2013. № 5 (60). P. 80-96.

<sup>79</sup> Beznjuk D. *Gosudarstvenno-konfessional'nye otnoshenija v Respublike Belarus' (sociologicheskij aspekt)*. // *Relations between the state and denominations in the Republic of Belarus* // Minsk: RIVSh, 2006. P. 131.

<sup>80</sup> See more for institutional partnership: Vasilevich N., Kutuzova N. *Partnerstvo religioznykh organizatsii Belarusi s organami vlasti*. // *Partnership of Belarusian religious organisations with authorities*. Kutuzova N., Karaseva S., Vasilevich N. i dr. *Religioznye organizatsii v obshchestvennom prostranstve Belarusi i Ukrainy: formirovanie mekhanizmov partnerstva*. // *Religious organisations in the public space in Belarus and Ukraine: development of mechanisms of partnership* // Vilnius, EHU 2004. Pp. 53-68.

take the form of formal agreements or programmes of cooperation on either national or local level; they can be either framework or sectoral (See Table 9). These agreements and programs with state bodies and organizations do not have a unified form or structure: they can be either formulated in the form of “declaration of purposes” or a strict calendar plan of events with assigned responsible persons and organisations. A Framework agreement on cooperation between Belarus and the BOC signed in 2003<sup>81</sup> is of an abstract nature. According to it, the government provides the BOC with

*autonomy in its internal affairs, freedom to perform religious rites and other activities, and the right for church jurisdiction on its canonical territory within the framework of the Constitution and Legislation of the Republic of Belarus (Article 1.4).*

Table 9.

	Framework agreements	Sectoral agreements
National level	Framework agreement between the BOC and the Republic of Belarus, 2003	Ministry of Internal Affairs Correction department of the MIA Internal forces of the MIA Border guard forces State Committee Ministry of Defence Ministry of Education Ministry of Culture Health Ministry Ministry of Labour and Social Protection Ministry of Information Ministry for Emergency Situations Ministry of Natural Resources and Protection of Environment Committee on the Problems of the Consequences of the Catastrophe at the Chernobyl NPP Ministry of Sports and Tourism State Aviation Committee National Academy of Sciences Belarusian State TV and Radio Company
Local level	Framework agreements between separate dioceses in the regions and regional administrations	Programmes in the following spheres: Social protection, charity, strengthening family, motherhood and childhood; Cultural and creative activities; protection, restoration and development of historical and cultural heritage

The Agreement also defines the priority spheres of cooperation:

*public morals, education, culture and creative activities, health, social welfare, charity, support for the family, maternity and childhood, spiritual guidance of the imprisoned,*

<sup>81</sup> Framework agreement between the Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church dated 12 June 2003 // <http://exarchate.by/resource/Dir0009/Dir0015/>.

*educational, social and psychological work with the military, environmental protection (Article 3).*

Generally, the research of religious organisation became quite popular in Belarus before and after the amended Law was signed. However, researchers mostly focus on providing grounds for existing denominational policy in Belarus and do not write about institutional mechanisms of interactions.<sup>82</sup> This is caused, first of all, by the lack of clearly formulated relations that, in turn, causes the simulation of partnership.<sup>83</sup>

Relations between the Orthodox Church and the state in Belarus are unequal and dysfunctional by default. On the one hand, the authoritarian centralised power strives to gain maximum control as much as resources will allow, and, therefore, it regards any alternative autonomous institutions as a political threat. On the other hand, the weak church tries to keep its dominant status. The church has no real influence on public discourse or political decision-making even in the most publicly lobbied issues, such as the ban or limitations on abortion, usage of some reproductive technologies or introduction of facultative religious education in schools. Tension is eased with the help of small compromises: “weeks without abortions”, the abolition of some social factors for abortion in the late stages of pregnancy, etc. In the sphere of education, the government has signed a formal agreement with the Orthodox Church on coordination of actions in educating schoolchildren, which formally opens a possibility for facultative teaching of religion at schools but in reality puts up barriers for its realisation.

Declarative recognition of the Church’s status compensates actual inability to influence society but at the same time demands from the Church loyalty to authorities, since loyalty is the most precious resource for the government. This requires from Church’s leadership control over activities of groups and believers that represent the Church.

A telling example of tensions in the Orthodox community is the online forum Besedka.<sup>84</sup> Active participants of that forum once organised an event for the Orthodox youth in the name of the forum and without any politics involved. However, the very fact of this spontaneous initiative put pressure on the administration of the forum, which resulted in the following changes introduced into the Forum’s Statute:

*By its nature, this Forum cannot be an organisation, an association or a group and therefore it cannot perform the functions of such in its relations with state, public, commercial, religious and other organisations. Therefore any referrals to the Forum as*

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<sup>82</sup> Vasilevich N. *Satsyologiya religii yak pradukt palitychnay idealogii. // Sociology of religion as a product of political ideology // Palitchnaya Sfera. 2006. No 7. Pp. 88–97.*

<sup>83</sup> In this way partnership between the National Academy of Sciences and the Belarusian Orthodox Church was evaluated by experts working in humanistic institutes of the National Academy of Sciences in their open interview for Vasilevich N., Kutuzova N. *Partnerstvo religioznykh organizatsii...*, p. 67.

<sup>84</sup> Besedka – Forum of Belarusian Orthodox Youth // <http://besedka.info>.

*such an organisation, a public association, etc. are not rightful or legitimate... any events organised by a group of Forum participants cannot be regarded as the Forum's events and are an exclusively private initiative of the Forum's users.*

This is how one of the Forum's managers explained the leadership's official position on interaction with the church:

*Everything that is done in the name of the Church should get the blessing of the Church first... The word "Orthodox" already means that the noun following this word is blessed by the Bishop... If some people or organisations that call themselves "Orthodox" behave in a way that is contrary to the Church's rules, the Church is forced to separate its image from them... The actions of such "Orthodox" people puts them into opposition to the Church and, as a result, turns them into a sect.<sup>85</sup>*

The Orthodox Church is not the only church that aims to control private "grass root" initiatives. When in 2009 a group of Catholic youth tried to organise a trip to the Ecumenical meeting of the Teze community and to some other events, the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Belarus issued the Resolution "On Non-Sanctioned Activities of Youth Catholic Organisations". In that Resolution, the leadership of the Catholic Church requested from

*all participants of unofficial organisations and groups who call themselves or consider themselves Catholics to stop non-sanctioned activities, since they harm the discipline in the local Church in Belarus and hurt its unity.*

The Catholic Church's leadership also paid attention to

*illegitimacy, according to the Canonical Legal Code and overall norms of the international law, of using the title "Catholic" without permission of the competent Church authorities". Thus, the Church regarded that it was "morally irrelevant to use the words "Catholic, Catholics" in the titles of groups that were not approved by those authorities.*

To ensure its right on a monopoly on Orthodox religious tradition, the Belarusian Orthodox Church registered its exclusive right to the "Orthodox Christian" trademark.<sup>86</sup> This trademark is used for organisation of colloquiums and conferences, guided tours, book publishing, film production, activities of cultural and educational clubs as well as social services.

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<sup>85</sup> What Is Going On? // Ibid. // <http://besedka.info/viewtopic.php?t=2293>.

<sup>86</sup> National Centre for Intellectual Property, No 16557 dated 14 February 2003.

## **Parish: a community of care or the factory of religious services?**

The basic unit of Christian religious organisations is a community (a parish), which is defined in the Belarusian legislation on religion as a voluntary

*association of a group of citizens of the Republic of Belarus, being adherents of a uniform creed and satisfaction of other religious needs, within the limits of the territory of one or several settlements.*<sup>87</sup>

The total number of registered religious organisations in Belarus reached 3,280 religious communities as of January 1, 2014, of which 1,615 were of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (49.24%), 488 – of the Roman Catholic Church (14.88%), 907 – of the Protestant parishes (27.65%), 520 (15.85%) being of Pentecostals and 287 (8.75%) – of Baptists.<sup>88</sup>

In the ideal world, religious communities should serve as “communities of care”<sup>89</sup>, providing material and emotional support to their members. For instance, Volha Breskaya compared three referent groups (a university, church and private company) and came to the conclusion that the Orthodox parish in Brest city showed the highest level of internal solidarity. In that parish participants of the community showed the highest level of individuality, independence and responsibility within their social group.<sup>90</sup> However, such parishes are rather an exception than a rule.

Another exception is self-assessment of believers as members of a religious organisation. This is especially visible when one compares data on those who say that they belong to some confession and on those who say that they are members of a religious organisation (See Tables 5 and 9) (from one to ten percent of the population claim their membership). At the same time, as stated above, the membership in other types of organisations (political parties, public associations) are lower in all categories, except for trade unions. One should take into account that membership of a religious organisation does not always mean that a person belongs to a parish. Membership can be the way a person describes her or his confession.

Several parishes of the BOC do not limit their activities to worship and spontaneous small-scale social activities, cultural events or joint trips. Among them:

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<sup>87</sup> Law of the Republic of Belarus On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations dated 17 December 1992 No2054-XII as amended on 22 December 2011, Article 14.

<sup>88</sup> Reference material about ethnic and confessional situation in the Republic of Belarus and cooperateion with compatriots abroad in 2013 // <http://forb.by/node/406>.

<sup>89</sup> Wuthnow R. *Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>90</sup> Breskaya O. *O vozmozhnosti sotsial'noi etiki v Vostochnoi Evrope // On possibilities fore social ethics in Eastern Europe // Perekrestki*. 2011, № 1–2. P. 37–55.

Parish in the name of Joy of All Who Sorrow icon,<sup>91</sup> where worship is translated into the sign language and workshops are organised for people with physical and mental disabilities. These workshops allow people with disabilities to participate in social life and get much needed professional skills. The parish hosts the correspondent bureau of Soyuz Russian TV channel. It also hosts several other organisations of the BOC. Cossacks (Public Association “Belarusian Cossacks”) play an important role in the life of the parish, and the pastor of that parish is also a chaplain of the Cossacks association;<sup>92</sup>

St. Peter and Pavel Cathedral’s parish<sup>93</sup> hosts several Orthodox youth brotherhoods, a sports and history club,<sup>94</sup> and a scout unit. It regularly organises worship in the Belarusian language, has a special commission on the translation of Bible and liturgical texts into the Belarusian language. The parish also organises discussions, video lectures and hosts several organisations of the BOC such as The Union of Youth of BOC, *Tsarkounaye Slova* weekly, the brotherhood in honour of Vilnia martyrs Anthony, John and Eustaphy of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (that promotes the Belarusian language and culture), as well as serves as a “base” to attract civic activists and Belarusian-speakers to the Church life;

Saint Elisabeth monastery’s<sup>95</sup> parish that is active in publishing literature, producing audio- and video materials, as well as producing church-related goods, food, etc. The Parish implements several social projects and seriously influences the local community in the Navinki settlement. The status of the parish is strengthened by its charismatic leader, archpriest Andrey Lemiashonak.

One should also mention mass celebrations: long queues for consecrated water, blessing willow branches, mass ice-cold water washes on Epiphany, etc. Such practices are spontaneous and emotional and do not require institutional interaction but they can demand huge effort from believers. For instance, in January 2014, several hundred thousand people came to bow to “Magi gifts”, standing in a street queue for hours while the outside temperature was -15–20C.

## **Religious organisations and movements: inside and outside the Church’s ring-fence**

The Law of the Republic of Belarus On Freedom of Conscience defines religious activity in the following way:

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<sup>91</sup> Informational portal Sobor.by // <http://sobor.by>.

<sup>92</sup> Webpage of the Public Association “Belarusian Cossacks” // <http://belkazak.by/org/rukovodyashhijj-sostav.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Webpage of St. Peter and Paul’s Cathedral // <http://sppsobor.by>.

<sup>94</sup> Website of the sports and history club of St. Daumantas of Pskov // <http://www.dovmont.by/> Comment: in the header of the webpage the club is called “military and patriotic”.

<sup>95</sup> Webpage of St. Elisabeth’s Convent // <http://obitel.by>.

*The activity directed to satisfaction of religious needs of believers, expansion of religions, religious education, conducting divine services, prayerful assemblies, training of clergymen, and also other activity directed at organizational and material maintenance of the cult practice of the religious organisation (publishing and distribution of the religious literature, manufacturing and distribution of subjects of cult, manufacture of vestments for clergymen and other activities.*

The main, although not the only type of the religious activity is the religious cult:

*consisting of a certain behaviour and specific actions expressing the religious worship of the supernatural.*

In reality, the activities of religious organisations are often non-religious by nature and fulfil other goals than the Law envisages: social, research, educational, value-based, etc. Certain activities can be motivated by religion but that does not automatically make them religious: such as translation of religious texts into the Belarusian language, theological research, restoration and reconstruction of heritage that is related to religious tradition, etc.

An example of the state's confusion about religious activities is the Ministry of Justice's reply to the complaint of Dzina Shautsova. Ms. Shautsova complained about the refusal of the Justice department of Minsk City Council to allow a non-profit organisation to have such titles as "Centre for Religious Freedom", "For Freedom of Faith" or "Centre for Legal Research of the Freedom of Faith"; the profile of the NGO was related to research, education, information and human rights. The reply of the Ministry states that such titles for "external consumers (clients that receive services) have exclusively religious connotation because they use such words as "religious", "faith", etc."<sup>96</sup> The Justice department of the Minsk City Council explained their refusal to register the title by the fact that "it is assumed that such an organisation would have a religious profile" and therefore suggested the applicant create a legal person in the framework of the Law of the Republic of Belarus On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations.<sup>97</sup>

Since acting in the name of non-registered organisations is punished by the Criminal Code, all religious activities, according to the legislation, should be registered, the status of informal communities of believers who are members of already registered religious communities is not clear. This relates, first of all, to such forms of Protestant organizations as "home groups": weekly meetings of rather small groups of believers that take place usually at the place of residence of the group's leader and have regular participants. If

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<sup>96</sup> Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus. Reply to D.M. Shautsova "On Consideration of the Appeal" No 10-15/III-339-341 dated 13 December 2012 // Author's archive.

<sup>97</sup> Main Department of the Minsk City Council. Document confirming the denial to allow the title of the legal person, given to D.M. Shautsova No2/27/vkh-76/468 dated 12 December 2012. Author's archive.

believers are not members of religious communities, they can be persecuted for non-registered religious activities: this is true for all denominations, including the Orthodox.<sup>98</sup>

The majority of religious organisations in Belarus focus on a limited number values and issues: pro-life agenda, family values and social and charitable activities.

A traditional, and even archetypical type of activity of religious organisations is social activity, which is reflected in the concept of charity or “mercy”, i.e. assisting people in need. This type of activity is implemented by parishes (communities of care) as well as by specialised organisations.<sup>99</sup> A typical Orthodox charity organisation is “charitable sisterhood”. These sisterhoods pay visits to different type of social institutions: hospitals, orphanages, houses for people with special needs. They help the elderly, large families, etc. Currently, there are more than 100 sisterhoods in Belarus with at least a thousand members – mostly, women. This is the most numerous and developed religious structure of civil society.

If in the 1990s social activity of religious organisations was mostly related to receiving and redistributing foreign humanitarian assistance and organising health improvement trips, by the mid-2000s focus had shifted to in-country activities. The work of volunteers plays a crucial role (according to the data of the Union of Sisterhoods in Belarus, around 80 percent of sisters have education or a profession that is not related to medicine or professional social services). However, these organisations are not widespread or professional due to a lack of professional human resources, organisational capacity and financial problems; it is also impossible to organise “a grass root” professional structure without the support of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. In 2000, in order to coordinate the activities of sisterhoods as well as provide them with methodological and other kinds of assistance, a network organisation Union of Charitable Sisterhoods of Belarus was created,<sup>100</sup> chaired by Alena Ziankevich. This organisation has a professional team of staffers and experience of inter-denominational cooperation; it undertakes analysis and monitoring of social activities, organises campaigns, project activities, including the ones that are financed by church and inter-church foreign organisations and UNFPA, and cooperates with state institutions and organisations.

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<sup>98</sup> Warning was issued to the head of the informal Orthodox brotherhood in Homel, Siarhei Nestsiarovich, in 2007. The brotherhood consists of believers of the registered religious organisation Belarusian Orthodox Church // <http://churchby.info/rus/134/>.

<sup>99</sup> More details: Vasilevich N. *Satsyyalnaya rabota tserkvau // Social work performed by churches // Assambleya. Chasopis hramadskikh aktyvistau*. 2009. No 1. Pp. 13–16; Vasilevich N., Kutuzova N. *Blagotvoritel'naya i sotsial'naya deyatel'nost' religioznykh organizatsii v Belarusi // Charitable and social activities of religious organisations in Belarus // Kutuzova N., Karaseva S., Vasilevich N. i dr. Religious organisations in the public space...*, pp. 101–116.

<sup>100</sup> Webpage of the Union of Sisterhoods in Belarus // <http://sestra.by>.

In the Catholic Church, the traditional organisation of diaconal work is the Caritas international network that unites more than 120 independent national units worldwide. Departments of Caritas are present at the Conference of Catholic Bishops and in each episcopate of the Roman Catholic Church. According to Caritas's principles, national organisations from more developed countries give donor support to poorer countries. Belarusian Caritas organises summer camps for children in Belarus and abroad, provides humanitarian, material and technical support to physical persons and social organisations, assists in integration of people with disabilities (Betel Centre in Viciebsk), organises social workshops, hairdresser salons for people with low income; runs the social school of preparation of handicapped people for social activities.

There are also special women's orders in Belarus (such as the Mother Teresa order) that are Catholic analogues of charitable sisters. These organisations cooperate with social welfare organs in Belarus.

Protestant churches have a network of rehabilitation centres for drug addicts, such as the religious mission of the United Church of Evangelical Christians Charitable Religious Mission "Return"<sup>101</sup> that has branches in several Belarusian cities; Public Association "Life" founded by believers of the Religious association of Full Gospel Christians with the rehabilitation centre in Piatryshki village in Minsk region; International Public Association "TOS-Weissrussland" in Astroŭčycy village in Svietlahorsk region and others.

Church Youth organisations, youth brotherhoods engage in volunteer social activities rather irregularly. They visit orphanages, assist elderly people, people with disabilities, large families, in their household duties. The most systematic social activity is performed by the John the Evangelist Brotherhood,<sup>102</sup> St. Nicholas's Greek Catholic Christian Volunteer Movement,<sup>103</sup> Protestant Christian Labour Teams<sup>104</sup> as well as the religious mission of Full Gospel Christians Association "Youth With a Mission".

In 2011–12, the discussion on the draft Law on Assisted Reproductive Technologies in Belarus (signed on 7 January 2012)<sup>105</sup> and the discussion on the amendments to the Law On Healthcare<sup>106</sup> inspired the pro-life movement in Belarus. The main criticism from the churches, concerned articles that allowed in vitro, germinated cell donating, surrogate motherhood and experiments with embryos. The Orthodox Church, officially, harshly criticised those bills. According to the press secretary of the Minsk Diocese, the

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<sup>101</sup> Webpage of Charitable Mission "Return" // <http://tcb.by/>.

<sup>102</sup> Webpage of John the Evangelist Brotherhood // <http://bratstvo.by/>.

<sup>103</sup> Webpage of St. Nicholas's Christian Volunteer Movement // <http://valancer.by/about/>.

<sup>104</sup> Webpage of Protestant Christian Labour Teams // <http://xto.by/>.

<sup>105</sup> Law On Assisted Reproductive Technologies No 343-3 dated 7 January 2012 [http://etalonline.by/?type=text&regnum=H11200341#load\\_text\\_none\\_1\\_](http://etalonline.by/?type=text&regnum=H11200341#load_text_none_1_).

<sup>106</sup> Law on Healthcare No 2435-XII dated 17 June 1993 <http://www.pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=3871&p0=v19302435&p2={NRPA}>.

bill on Assisted Reproductive Technologies was “in sharp contradiction with the point of view and teachings of the Orthodox church.”<sup>107</sup> The bill underwent moral and ethical expertise;<sup>108</sup> the Orthodox pro-life community filed appeals to the state institutions and, as a result, some cosmetic changes to the law were made.<sup>109</sup>

In 2012, the Belarusian Orthodox Church joined consultations on the amendments to the Law on Healthcare. It was inspired to do so both by the legislative process and by the campaign of the Belarusian Christian Democracy organising committee “For Family Values”, coordinated by Volha Kavalkova. BChD organising committee, on the one hand, appeals to believers and tries to articulate church values; but on the other, since it is independent of the Church leadership, becomes a competitor to churches on their thematic field, thus stimulating church leaders to support more neutral initiatives.

Until mid-2014, the largest organisation in this sphere that united several smaller initiatives was the Pro-Life Belarus Movement.<sup>110</sup> The Movement translated and published online articles dedicated to pro-life themes, organised conferences, filed petitions, lobbied the officials and members of the parliament measures against destruction of the traditional family via abortions, reproductive technologies, juvenile justice, LGBT-lobby, gender equality programmes and programmes preventing domestic violence. Pro-Life Belarus distanced itself from the BChD organising committee.<sup>111</sup> After the key leader of the Movement Tatsiana Tarasevich died, the activities of the Movement dropped; other pro-life initiatives took over some of its projects, including the ones in association with parishes: Centre for Defence of Family and Motherhood “Mother”,<sup>112</sup> Youth Team Eleysan<sup>113</sup> and others.

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<sup>107</sup> Press-secretary of the Minsk Diocese, archpriest Sergiy Lepin: “National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus signed the law that contradicts Christian values” // <http://churchby.info/bel/news/2011/05/01-2/>.

<sup>108</sup> Religious and ethical expertise of the draft Law of the Republic of Belarus On Assisted Reproductive Technologies and Guarantees of their Application for Citizens // <http://www.church.by/resource/Dir0301/Dir0302/2011/Page3440.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Suggestions of the Belarusian Orthodox Church related to the public consultation on the draft Law of the Republic of Belarus On Assisted Reproductive Technologies and Guarantees of their Application for Citizens // <http://churchby.info/rus/756/>.

<sup>110</sup> Webpage of Pro-Life Belarus campaign // <http://pro-life.by>.

<sup>111</sup> Pro-Life Belarus Movements’s official statement // <http://www.pro-life.by/life-protection/ofitsial-noe-zayavlenie-dvizheniya-prolajf-belarus/>; See also: Vasilevich N. *Tserkvy u Belarusi: Staryya prablemy i novyya lidary* // *Churches in Belarus: old problems and new leaders* // Belarusian Yearbook 2013. Analysis of the situation in the major segments of the Belarusian state and society in 2013 // Pod red. Pan’kovskogo A., Kostyugovoi V. *Nashe mnenie*, ASPE, Minsk, 2014. Pp. 188–198.; “Ban Abortions in Belarus”: campaign. Pro-Life Belarus. // <http://www.pro-life.by/life-protection/kampaniya-za-zapret-abortov-v-belarusi-podpishis/>.

<sup>112</sup> Webpage of the Centre for Defence of Family and Motherhood “Mother” // <http://matylya.by/>.

<sup>113</sup> Webpage of Volunteer Youth Team Eleysan // [http://www.sobor.by/volonterskij\\_otriad\\_eleison.htm](http://www.sobor.by/volonterskij_otriad_eleison.htm).

The initiators of the anti-abortion campaign achieved substantial results. Firstly, lawmakers included into Article 27 of the Law On Healthcare,<sup>114</sup> wording that allowed the doctor to refuse an abortion if some conditions would be met. Secondly, the Health Ministry narrowed the list of medical indications for abortion.<sup>115</sup> Thirdly, the government introduced cosmetic changes into the document regulating the abortion procedures and deleted a significant amount of so-called “social” abortion indications.<sup>116</sup>

Mahilou local charity fund “Open Hearts”<sup>117</sup> is one of the major pro-life Catholic organisations in Belarus. It is chaired by Władysław Wołochowicz. In addition to anti-abortion activities (including their participation in the campaign “Ban Abortion in Belarus”), this organisation conducts seminars on struggling with infertility for spouses. One of the most notable pro-life initiatives is the Inter-Church Protestant “Creative Laboratory”. Led by Dzmitry Zialenski, this laboratory organises on Children’s Day every year, several cultural events: concerts, contests of childrens’ drawings, etc. Since 2010, it stages the musical “My Heart is Beating”.

Religious organisations and active believers have reached a certain consensus on basic pro-life values. However, organisations divide into pro-governmental (that often use anti-Western rhetoric, criticise UNFPA and other international organisation and appeal to the state as the chief arbiter<sup>118</sup>) and oppositional (more critical towards the government and its policies).

The Belarusian Orthodox Church never hid its pro-Russian position. In the late 2000s, the pro-Russian discourse had developed into the intellectual and political Western Rus’ project<sup>119</sup> which opposes Belarusian nationalism and its interpretations of Belarusian history. Orthodox intellectuals and priests play a significant role in the promotion of this concept via teaching it at the BOC’s educational institutions, presenting at scientific conferences and publishing research and other publications on the history of Belarus. In this way, they influence the formation of the identity of broad circles of Orthodox priests and believers.

Another way of conducting pro-Russian activities is an endorsement of Cossack organisations that often use Orthodox rhetoric and work in the “military and patriotic” sphere. Although Cossack organisations of pro-Orthodox profile have existed in Belarus

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<sup>114</sup> Law of the Republic of Belarus On Healthcare...

<sup>115</sup> Resolution of the Ministry of Health No 88 dated 10 December 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Resolution of the Council of Ministers No 23 dated 11 January 2013.

<sup>117</sup> Webpage of “Open Hearts” Charitable Foundation // <http://www.prolife-belarus.org/>.

<sup>118</sup> Category “Threats” on the webpage of the Spiritual and Enlightening Movement “Family, Unity, Motherland” // <http://edinenie.by/category/negativ-ugrozyi-institutu-semi-i-demograficheskoy-bezopasnosti-belarusi> The following threats are mentioned: abortions, postmodernism, sexual education, gender ideology, counteraction to “domestic violence”, juvenile justice, “childfree” etc.

<sup>119</sup> Webpage of Western Rus’project // <http://zapadrus.su>.

since the early 1990s, their cooperation with the BOC intensified in 2011 when the Church created the Synodal department on interaction with Cossacks.<sup>120</sup> Cossacks organise events in Church parishes; their activities are regularly covered in the Church's mass media. They attempt to indoctrinate youth with their ideology via the creation of satellite organisations, cooperation with martial arts clubs and state educational establishments. They also organise military training.<sup>121</sup>

The Nationally oriented wing of the Belarusian Orthodox Church is represented by several organisations. The Brotherhood, in honour of Vilnia martyrs Anthony, John and Eustaphy of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, supports Belarusian national values in the most systematic and traditional way, i.e. avoiding politicisation and supporting Belarusian traditions in their popular, not political dimension.<sup>122</sup> Founded in 1992 in the St. Peter and Paul's Cathedral in Minsk, it invites the Belarusian intellectual elite to participate in social and church projects, liaises with the Belarusian diaspora, including NGOs in the Podlasie region in Poland, coordinates the research on the Belarusian Orthodox culture and history of Orthodox Church in Belarus, promotes worship in the Belarusian language etc. The Brotherhood is de facto the only official organisation inside the BOC that systematically undertakes such activities.

Another nationally oriented community of the BOC believers is Kanstancin Astrožski's Brotherhood. Founded in the early 2000s on the basis of the Vilnia martyrs Brotherhood, it had among its members politically active Orthodox believers from various political parties and non-governmental organisations. Since the very beginning, the Brotherhood was independent of the Belarusian Orthodox Church and organised catechesis for civic activists. Since the mid-2000s, its activists participate within the organising committee of the Belarusian Christian Democracy. Pro-Belarusian groups exist in other parishes and organisations, as well.

## **Conclusions**

Churches and religious organisations in Belarus are underdeveloped as civil society actors. This can be explained by several factors.

Firstly, the low level of Belarusian society's religiousness, which causes the insignificant relations between religious organisations and the population, in general, gives little possibilities to influence the population's values, behaviour and level of solidarity. Denominational communities with a higher level of religiousness are minority churches,

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<sup>120</sup> Sobolvevskaya I.A *Cossack without Faith is not a real Cossack*. Interview with Georgi Arbuzov. Official webpage of the BOC // <http://church.by/news/kazak-bez-very-ne-kazak>.

<sup>121</sup> See more on this issue at the webpage of the Cossack movement <http://kazak.by>.

<sup>122</sup> Webpage of the Brotherhood in honour of Vilnia martyrs Anthony, John and Eustaphy // <http://sppsobor.by/bractva/vilna>.

i.e. more isolated and limited in their possibilities to influence public and social processes. Protestant communities that are focused on closer interaction and social activities in several cases (Young Front, Belarusian Christian Democracy) have caused an intensive but not a sustainable trend of closer relations between Christian activists and the political opposition.

Secondly, since the middle of the 2000s, a state policy of regulation of activities of religious organisations has become increasingly repressive. The brief period of greater religious freedom was not enough for the institutionalisation of religious revival and creation of a sustainable, independent of political power, infrastructure that could provide organisational and ideological autonomy for religious organisations.

Thirdly, church structures, especially in majority churches, had an imbalanced development with the domination of centralised corporate and bureaucratic apparatus. Influence centres are not equally distributed at different levels of church communities; they are concentrated on the management level. On the one hand, this helped to preserve the mechanical corporate solidarity of grass-root initiatives, but on the other, determined the orientation of religious organisations in social processes not on the network of autonomous structures of civil society but on the institutes of power. As a result, the subjectness of church communities is under-developed and lacks feedback. This, in turn, influences the cooperation between the churches and the state, which is often hypocritical, and causes a gap between churches' leaders and common believers.

Nevertheless, despite the underdevelopment of the religious sector of civil society and unfavourable legal basis for its activities, combined with lack of organisational and human resources and narrow focus of activities, voluntary grass-root religious organisations possess motivation and potential for joint participation in civil processes. They do it independently of church corporations, state institutions or civil society organisations.

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