



A Religious Factor in Belarus' Protest: Mediation of the Political Crisis by the Church

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Abstract: During the mass protests in Belarus before and after the presidential election in August 2020, several high-ranking religious representatives in the country publicly took a critical stance to the political repression of the protest – a development which is remarkable for religious communities in the autocratic regime. Since then, faith-based dissent and public activities of the faithful became an important element of the opposition movement, while the churches' leaderships largely complied to the demand of the political leadership to refrain from political statements. This essay reflects on the Church's public stance including the use of media platforms during this time. I consider 'mediation' as both a category to analyse the use of media by the Church and in the sense of a mediator as a go-between actor. The analysis shows, however, massive fragmentation within the churches and a reduced ability to act as consistent mediating actors.

Keywords: Belarus, faith-based protest, churches and media, Belarusian Orthodox Church, Belarus protests, social ethics

Until recently, religious communities/denominations in Belarus have been largely reluctant to get involved in political protest. In 2020, however, this changed. During the mass protests before and after the presidential election in August, several high-ranking religious representatives in the country publicly took a critical stance – a development which is remarkable for an autocratic regime that guarantees religious freedom under the conditions of political non-interference or loyalty.¹ This essay reflects on the Church's use of media platforms during this time. I consider 'mediation' not only with regards to the use of media by the Church but also in the sense of a mediator as a go-between actor, which I discuss in turn. Before doing this, a note on the religious composition of Belarus is due.

¹ See Shramko (2020), Vasilevich (2018).

Belarus is less religious compared to other post-Soviet countries (Pew 2018). Although a majority of about 70-75% of the population identifies with the Belarusian Orthodox Church, everyday religiosity is quite low and there is no such cultural significance or political lobbying comparable to Russia or Ukraine. The Roman Catholic Church is with about 12-15% the second largest community and especially in the West of Belarus an important public actor, but without the claim to national identity that the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine, for example, represents. Protestant communities and other religions are small minorities, although the protestant churches are quite prominent due to their societal activities.

In the run-up to the 2020 elections, Catholics had called on the religious members of the election committees to refrain from supporting possible electoral fraud with the motto 'A Catholic does not falsify'. In turn, an Orthodox deacon took up the initiative with the slogan 'The Orthodox are against forgery, humiliation of the person and oppression', which was widely circulated. In the face of the repressions against the opposition presidential candidates before the elections, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant priests openly criticised the violence in sermons and on social media. Moreover, the religious believers/groups used social media like Facebook and Telegram to spread their information, activities and mutual support.

When, after the elections and the obvious electoral fraud, peaceful mass protests were violently suppressed throughout the country, Christian protest showed a new and unique dynamic for the post-Soviet space. Although both Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and Metropolitan Pavel of Minsk promptly congratulated Lukashenko on his election victory as a matter of protocol (Elsner 2020a), Metropolitan Pavel met with victims of police violence in a hospital shortly afterwards and personally came to an ecumenical prayer for peace to talk to believers about the situation of the protesters and prisoners. The Catholic Archbishop of Minsk, Tadeusz Kondrusewicz, expressed clear criticism of the actions of those in power including a personal conversation with the Minister of Internal Affairs in August 2020 in Minsk (Archbishop Kondrusevich met' 2020). Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant believers organised a regular ecumenical public prayer for peace and non-violence from August 13, and numerous priests and pastors voiced criticism of state violence. The solidarity of the faithful with the political prisoners and victims of police violence was expressed in public prayers, open letters to the church leadership as well as material support.

Later on in August 2020, two church leaders – the Catholic Archbishop Kondrusewicz and the Orthodox Metropolitan Pavel – were forced to leave Belarus, Metropolitan Pavel by a recall from the Moscow Patriarchate; Archbishop Kondrusewicz – by an entry ban at the Belarusian border, as he was returning back from his trip abroad. Several priests who had publicly expressed solidarity with the protest were interrogated and some briefly arrested (Monitoring 2021). Aleksandr Lukashenko threatened the churches several times if they do not stop their critical public statements: most prominently on August 22, 2020 during a mass gathering ('Lukashenko: Churches are not for politics' 2020), and on November 27, 2020 (Monitoring 2021). This harsh reaction by Lukashenko shows an increasing concern about the possible influence of the churches on public opinion. While the doctrine of Orthodoxy is of little relevance to him, Lukashenko nevertheless counts on the loyal and stabilising social role of the Orthodox Church (in particular).

The growing unity and confidence of believers, both Catholic and Orthodox, accompanied by an active and creative use of social media changed the dynamic of protest by en-

abling a greater visibility of faith-based critique as well as open disloyalty of the repressive state. Already before the election, protests of priests went viral on social media ('Orthodox religious believers are against falsification 2020). During the first days of national protest against the election fraud, the publication of the sermons of bishop Artemij of Grodno, archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz and bishop Jurij Kosobutskij empowered believers in their solidarity with the protesters. Orthodox priests Aleksander Kuchta and deacon Dmitrij Pavlyukevich already had a huge audience on YouTube (Batushka otvetit)² and Instagram ('Bogoslovie'³) and used these channels to draw attention to the election's falsification and subsequent repressions. Joint action such as petitions, open letters and newsletter used the popularity of social media, especially Telegram, to spread the message. Accordingly, new structures of grassroots engagement also occurred online, with the most prominent being the working group 'Christian Vision' of the Coordination Council. However, there was a backlash against the Church's higher visibility on social media. Most of the documented arrests, interrogations and bans of ministry of priests and believers was due to their public statements on social media (Monitoring 2021).

Can the attitude and activities of the churches in the political crisis be understood as systematic engagement, or is it more a sporadic activism, which can be easily cracked down on? Looking back at the Catholic and Protestant churches' public resistance against political and social injustice in the region, it is clear that it is based on a social-ethical theological tradition. For the Eastern European context, the situation in Poland in the 1980s or the participation of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and Protestant churches during the Maidan in Ukraine can be seen as examples of regular public dissent and mobilisation. In Belarus, Catholic and Protestant churches have so far been rather cautious, as they are particularly vulnerable under their stance defined by the autocratic regime as foreign or non-traditional religions.

Orthodoxy, however, lacks a theological social ethical tradition, which would allow evaluating social justice and structural violence on a theological basis, and this is particularly so in the post-Soviet countries (Elsner 2020b). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Orthodoxy had to quickly find a theological and a pragmatic way of dealing with the emerging civic society. In many countries, such as Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Belarus, various factors led to a new alliance with the political elites, as the Orthodox Church demonstrated a high degree of loyalty to the respective regime and readiness to quell internal church protest movements.

In that light, the Moscow Patriarchate's clear unambiguous support of Belarusian protest would have been unexpected and uncharacteristic, especially since any emerging protest mood among Russian or Ukrainian believers has been suppressed in recent years. However, at least Moscow's silence regarding the open repression of Orthodox believers stands in stark contrast to its vocal advocacy for allegedly persecuted Christians in Western democracies.⁴ As recent survey data shows (Results 2021), it is this double standard of alleged 'neutrality' that leads to the fragmentation and loss of trust within the church.

² <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfOMwpmqvDj49hTicfmhKDg> (09.02.2021).

³ <https://www.instagram.com/blogoslovie/> (09.02.2021).

⁴ See the special webpage <http://orthodoxrights.org/> dedicated to report 'the violations of Orthodox Christians' rights in Europe' to the Council of Europe. Reports about Belarus are missing (last accessed 09.02.2021).

To sum up, the current trends are the following. Firstly, the continued engagement of grassroots believers by some of the priests and even bishops. Clearly, the civil identity in certain circumstances might override the identification with church leadership. To some extent, their support of the protest stems from the society's demands for basic rights, which overlap with Christian values. Secondly, the involvement of the parishes and believers may also be triggered by the lack of support from the respective church leaders. For instance, taking into account Pope Francis' commitment to justice, the public support of the Catholic Church by the Vatican would have been appropriate and expected. In an open letter of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to the Pope she asks him for a clear criticism of the state violence by referencing his most recent social encyclical 'Fratelli Tutti – On Fraternity and Social Friendship' (Tsikhanouskaya 2020). The subsequent silence from Rome and the ambivalent attitude of the Vatican diplomats in Minsk is particularly questionable.

Thirdly, what is new is the active and publicly visible participation of believers from all denominations in the functioning of a democratic social forum such as the Coordinating Council, without the institutional blessing of church leadership or guiding representation of clergy. The 'Christian Vision' working group brings together believers from different denominations and contributes their vision of the country's future together with other social groups. This is done – so far – without any claim to interpretative sovereignty, a special identity-forming or moral role of the churches. Instead, the focus is on fundamental ethical demands for non-violence, justice, freedom and truth, without political slogans.

In August 2020, political scientist Artem Shrajbman suggested that religious communities in Belarus should be used as mediators in the conflict between those in power and the society (Shrajbman 2020). Could the religions, especially the two main denominations, fulfil such a role? In view of the developments described above, this is highly unlikely. The analysis shows fragmentation and a reduced ability to act as consistent mediating actors. Lukashenko himself has expressed a deep mistrust of the churches and the need for tighter controls in view of the ongoing protests, which once again underlines his instrumental approach to religions as a whole.

For the churches themselves, to take some massive political responsibility as mediators would mean to leave to a certain degree their solidarity with the civil society, which they just achieved. The involvement in the social opinion-forming processes on equal terms – rather than once again standing as a neutral authority above the social processes – is an enormous opportunity to develop a consistent and contextual theological social ethics, to empower the competences of all believers, regardless of hierarchical ranks, and to foster an interreligious cooperation. Thus, the churches in Belarus probably will not become a game-changer for the political situation in Belarus, but they can become a game-changer for the role of churches in the post-Soviet countries.

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