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RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN BELARUS DURING PROTESTS AGAINST THE REGIME OF ALEXANDER LUKASHENKO (August-November 2020)

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Abstract

After the presidential election in Belarus on August 9, 2020, which according to the official data, was won by the then President Alexander Lukashenko, mass protests against falsifications began in the country. Believers of various denominations joined these actions. Therefore, the leadership of the country's religious organizations were faced with the question of determining their attitude toward these actions. The leadership of the largest religious organization in Belarus, the Belarusian Orthodox Church, initially expressed some dissatisfaction with the authorities' violence. The then exarch of this church, Pavlo, despite congratulating Lukashenko on his election victory, still expressed some sympathy to the protesters. However, after the change of the head of this church, which was carried out on August 25 by the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church (part of which is the Belarusian Orthodox Church), the situation changed. The new exarch of Belarus, Benjamin, met with Lukashenko and showed a positive attitude towards his regime, although many Orthodox believers and even the priesthood supported the protesters. However, the leadership of the Catholic Church in Belarus condemned the violence of the authorities, upon which the authorities started putting pressure on the Catholic Church. They have isolated its head, Metropolitan Tadevush Kandrusевич, by not allowing him to re-enter the territory of the Republic of Belarus. As for Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Old Believers, and other religious organizations that do not have much influence in Belarusian society, their leaders try to distance themselves from political issues without explicitly supporting either side. However, some members of these denominations, including clergy, participated in the protests.

Keywords: Alexander Lukashenko, protests, Belarusian Orthodox Church, Exarch of Belarus, Catholic Church in Belarus, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Old Believers.

Introduction

On August 9, 2020, the sixth presidential election took place in Belarus. According to the official data, Alexander Lukashenko became the winner for the sixth

time.¹ He has held the presidency since 1994. The announcement of the results of the election on August 9, 2020, provoked mass protests in contrast to the situation in the previous presidential election, despite repression by the security forces.

Many Belarusians actively oppose Lukashenko's regime. The Belarusian religious organizations have to make a choice whether they are on the side of the current government or on the side of the protesters who have mass support in the Belarusian society. The difficulty of this choice is due to the fact that Lukashenko is not willing to give up his position. Despite the odious course of the election campaign and the mass protests caused by the falsification of its results,² on September 23, 2020, his inauguration took place in a closed ceremony.³ Lukashenko controls the administrative apparatus he has formed during his tenure in power, the security forces and the army, which generally show loyalty to him.

The activity of the religious organizations in Belarus under such circumstances is of interest to political scientists and religious scholars. There are studies that deal with this issue. In particular, this applies to the analytical articles of Archimandrite Kirill (Govorun)⁴ and *Tatiana Derkach*,⁵ which mainly deal with the attitude of the Belarusian Orthodox Church toward the protests. In general, this issue needs a comprehensive consideration of the activities of both the Orthodox and other denominations, including Catholics.

Opposition to Lukashenko's regime poses significant risks to the religious organizations. By taking the side of the protesters, they can be subjected to oppression and repression. This is happening now, as some priests who have supported the protesters are under pressure from the authorities. The biggest religious organization in the country, the Belarusian Orthodox Church (which is closely associated with the

¹ "Заседание Центральной комиссии. Центральная комиссия Республики Беларусь по выборам и проведению республиканских референдумов." <http://www.rec.gov.by/ru/novosti/14-08-2020-zasedanie-centralnoy-komissii>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

² "Доклад докладчика ОБСЕ в рамках Московского механизма в связи с сообщениями о нарушениях прав человека в контексте президентских выборов 9 августа 2020 г. в Беларуси." *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*. <https://www.osce.org/ru/odihr/46954>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

³ "Инаугурация Лукашенко на закрытой церемонии. Фоторепортаж." <https://www.rbc.ru/photoreport/23/09/2020/5f6b0fee9a7947cb350ed6cc>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

⁴ Кирилл Говорун. "Протесты в Беларуси и Православная церковь." *Public Orthodoxy*. <https://publicorthodoxy.org/ru/2020/08/20/7351/>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

⁵ Татьяна Деркач. "Судьба президента. Чем аукнется Белорусской церкви верность Лукашенко." *Credo.press*. https://credo.press/232755/?fbclid=IwAR0XvBiHNQeGuY8132qXM4KuNKQEKgfKC_aVYEM6Da6Rkok7ZWwERLaviPrI. Accessed 15/11/2020.

authorities), is particularly at risk. However, support for Lukashenko's regime and distancing from the protesters can also have negative consequences for the religious organizations. Among the believers there are large numbers of people who either take an active part in the protests or morally support them. To turn away from them is to lose the congregation. Finding the "golden mean" in this situation is quite problematic.

The position of the country's religious organizations in relation to the protests depends on a number of factors—such as the level of their independence, integration into the government structures, ties with foreign religious centers, and the extent to which the leaders and priesthood of these organizations consider the point of view of the congregation.

Before speaking about the role of the religious factor in the current political events in Belarus, it should be taken into consideration that the level of religiosity in Belarus is not high. During the Soviet times, particularly in 1987, only 15% of the population of the then Republic of Belarus considered themselves believers. After the collapse of the Soviet Union when Belarus became independent, this number grew significantly. Half, or even more than half, of the country's population considers themselves believers. However, they are not active.⁶ Among them, about three-quarters are Orthodox, of which the religiosity of most is reduced to occasional visits to churches and participation in rites. According to the official data of the Commissioner for Religions and Nationalities of the Republic of Belarus, as of January 1, 2020, there are 25 denominations in the country with 3,389 religious communities and 2,725 functioning places of worship⁷—which is not much for a country of 9.4 million people. In general, Belarus is one of the least religious countries in the world.⁸ However, the role of the religious factor in the social life of Belarus should not be underestimated. At least recent events in this country have demonstrated its importance.

⁶ "Почти половина населения Белоруссии – верующие." *NEWSru*. <https://www.newsru.com/religy/09jul2001/verobel.html>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

⁷ "Информация о конфессиональной ситуации в Республике Беларусь." *Уполномоченный по делам религии и национальностей Республики Беларусь*. <https://belarus21.by/Articles/1439296790>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

⁸ *What Alabamians and Iranians Have in Common*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/114211/Alabamians-Iransians-Common.aspx>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

The Belarusian Orthodox Church: from “Soft Opposition” to Loyalty

It is difficult to classify Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus for more than 26 years as a believer. He has essentially identified himself as an “Orthodox atheist,”⁹ which looks strange at first glance. After all, it would seem that the Orthodox faith should not be combined with atheism. However, such “Orthodox atheism” was characteristic of many Soviet people, including the members of the nomenclature (high-ranking functionaries), to which Lukashenko belonged. As a rule, such people did not care about religious issues and did not consider themselves as believers. Nevertheless, many of them were brought up within the Orthodox tradition. They showed a certain tolerance of it and even participated in some Orthodox rites. Despite the fact that Lukashenko tries to preserve and even cultivate the Soviet traditions and stereotypes, he is forced to turn his attention to a “religious revival” in modern Belarus. Lukashenko approaches religious structures quite pragmatically, realizing that they are able to influence and control people. In this regard, the religious organizations are of interest to the Belarusian leader because they can help him maintain power. Therefore, he is ready to demonstrate non-confessionalism. He also shows a willingness to cooperate with the religious organizations, even to help them, trying to integrate them into the government agencies.

This is especially true of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, the country’s largest religious organization, which is part of the Russian Orthodox Church as an exarchate. In fact, this religious organization is often referred to in official documents as the Belarusian Exarchate, which has existed since 1989. It currently includes 15 eparchies. As of January 1, 2020, the Belarusian Orthodox Church had 1,709 parishes and 35 monasteries. It owned 1,683 churches, and 190 more were built later.¹⁰ Training of Orthodox priesthood in Belarus is carried out both in confessional educational institutions (Minsk Theological Academy, two theological seminaries, and four theological schools) and in a secular educational institution (the Belarusian State University, which has an institute of theology).¹¹ Training of priesthood at the state

⁹ “Дни рождения я вообще не отмечаю. Это для меня самый паршивый день в жизни”: президент Беларуси – обо всем.” *RTVi*. <https://rtvi.com/stories/dni-rozhdeniya-ya-voobshche-ne-otmechayu/>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

¹⁰ “Информация о профессиональной ситуации в Республике Беларусь.” *Уполномоченный по делам религии и национальностей Республики Беларусь*. <https://belarus21.by/Articles/1439296790>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

¹¹ “Белорусский Экзархат: структура.” *Официальный портал Белорусской Православной Церкви*. <http://www.church.by/beloruskiy-ekzarhat/>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

university is unique. Such institutions are controlled by the authorities and, accordingly, the students are brought up in the spirit of loyalty to the existing regime.

One can talk about a “double loyalty” of the Belarusian Exarchate. On the one hand, this religious structure, being part of the Russian Orthodox Church, is loyal to the current Russian government which works closely with this church. It is noteworthy that the first two Belarusian exarchs appointed by the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, Filaret (Kirill Varfolomeyevich Vakhromeev) and Paul (George Vasilevich Ponomaryov), were ethnic Russians who had been clergy in Russia for a long time before appearing in Belarus. On December 25, 2013, Paul’s appointment as Metropolitan of Minsk and Slutsk and, accordingly, Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus provoked a negative reaction among public activists. After all, this hierarch did not have Belarusian citizenship but continued to retain Russian citizenship, and he could not speak the Belarusian language. He openly opposed the creation of a national Belarusian church, considering the case as a “temptation of the devil.”¹² In his person, the Orthodox believers of Belarus acquired a typical follower of the “*Russkiy mir*” [Russian world.]

On the other hand, the Belarusian exarchate has shown and continues to show loyalty to the current regime—to Lukashenko’s regime. Moreover, the latter provides some assistance to this religious organization, including some terms of doing business. The enterprises associated with the exarchate are the supply of alcohol, ownership of cafes and hotels, medical services, publishing houses, and so on. Exarch Paul even advocated that “profitable houses” be built near the temples (cafeterias, hotels, shops, and other commercial structures that would make a profit), out of which the church premises would be maintained.¹³ The close relationship between the state bodies and the Belarusian Exarchate is enshrined in the relevant document, the Agreement on Cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church, which was signed in 2003.¹⁴

Lukashenko is even inclined to view the Belarusian Orthodox Church as “the country’s main idea-monger.” In particular, he stated this on January 7, 2008, during a

¹² “Митрополит Павел против создания национальной белорусской церкви, он сравнил эту идею с искушением дьявола.” *Наша Ніва*. <https://nashaniva.by/?c=ar&i=183139&lang=ru>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

¹³ “Митрополит Павел хочет заняться строительством доходных домов в Беларуси.” *Недвижимость. TUT.BY*. <https://realty.tut.by/news/money/488628.html>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

¹⁴ “Информация о коффессиональной ситуации в Республике Беларусь.” *Уполномоченный по делам религии и национальностей Республики Беларусь*. <https://belarus21.by/Articles/1439296790>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

visit to the Holy Spirit Cathedral in Minsk. Then he said: “We have never separated ourselves from the Church. And I, sinfully, sometimes told my mentor that I did not quite understand what it meant to separate the Church from the state. After all, we are solving a common problem. We have never denied the thesis of the separation of church and state, but you see that we are always together.” At the same time, Lukashenko claimed that he would rely on other “good denominations,” in particular, Catholics.¹⁵ These statements reveal the religious pragmatism of the Belarusian leader, who is willing to cooperate with “good denominations,” especially with the Orthodox believers.

Lukashenko divides denominations into “good” and “bad.” The “bad ones” are, in fact, banned. These include the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. This religious organization was mainly formed during the Second World War, when the Belarusian lands came under German occupation. In the postwar period, this church continued its activities in the Diaspora, particularly in the United States. In the 1980s it split.¹⁶ After 1991, there were attempts to resume the activities of this church in Belarus. However, they did not succeed because it turned out to be unnecessary for Lukashenko. Firstly, it was divided and did not receive the canonical recognition from other Orthodox churches. Secondly, this church had a Belarusian national orientation and was an undesirable competitor for the Belarusian Exarchate, which had the pro-Russian orientation.

The “double loyalty” of the Belarusian Exarchate (in fact, to the Russian and Belarusian authorities) is not contradictory. Despite some conflicts with Moscow, Lukashenko still pursues a pro-Russian course, although some of his steps caused alarm on the part of Russian hierarchs. Thus, in October 2010, Lukashenko met with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul during his visit to Turkey. There were reports in the media that he was discussing with that hierarch the issue of granting autocephaly to the Belarusian Orthodox Church.¹⁷ Of course, doing so in Belarus is very problematic. Lukashenko needed a meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch, rather, as a kind of blackmail of the Russian leadership, with which the President of Belarus then

¹⁵ “Белорусскую православную церковь Лукашенко назвал главным идеологом страны.” *NEWSru.com*. https://www.newsru.com/religy/08jan2008/luka_shenko.html. Accessed 15/11/2020.

¹⁶ Н. Гардзіенка, Л. Юрэвіч. *Рада БНР. 1982-1997. Падзеі, дакументы, асобы*. (Мінск: Кнігазбор, 2015), 6-11.

¹⁷ “Был таков приход.” *Газета.ru*. https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2010/10/12_a_3428143.shtml. Accessed 15/11/2020.

had conflicts. As if to say, if you do not make concessions to me, I will liquidate “your church” in Belarus. The meeting, as well as some of Lukashenko’s curtsies toward the Catholics who have become a “good denomination” for him, show that he is willing to play his game in the religious field—which may or may not be liked by the leaders of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. And here some disagreements with the Belarusian Exarchate are quite possible.

Such inconsistencies became apparent after the presidential election in Belarus in August 2020, when mass protests began in the country. Russian President Vladimir Putin was one of the first to congratulate Lukashenko on his victory, which was also done by Moscow Patriarch Kirill. It is natural that the Belarusian Exarch Paul joined these congratulations. This happened on August 10. Already on August 12, when a wave of protests and mass detentions of protesters began in Belarus, Exarch Paul held a press conference calling for “an end to hostility and hatred,” and “to preserve peace and unanimity.”¹⁸ On August 14, Paul apologized for congratulating Lukashenko. A spokesman for the Belarusian Exarchate, Archpriest *Serhiy Lepin* said: “The Metropolitan received information about the events in Belarus, he saw a video of the detentions, he was indignant, terrified and agitated.”¹⁹ The spokesman also said that prayers in support of the detainees would be held in Orthodox churches. Such a statement by the press service of the Belarusian Exarchate was a challenge to Lukashenko’s government.

On August 15, the Synod of the Belarusian Exarchate issued an “Appeal to the people of the Republic of Belarus to end the people’s confrontation.” In particular, it said: “Strongly condemning violence, torture, humiliation, unjustified detentions, extremism in all its forms and manifestations, lies and treachery, we call on all those for whom our Motherland is dear, children, relatives and friends—stop and put an end to the confrontation.”²⁰ In general, the leadership of the Belarusian Exarchate called for reconciliation. Instead, some Orthodox priests supported the protests in one form or another. On August 13, prayers and processions began in Minsk to support the

¹⁸ “Митрополит Павел: Давайте вместе остановим вражду и ненависть.” *Официальный портал Белорусской Православной Церкви*. <http://www.church.by/news/day/12-08-2020/>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

¹⁹ “Предстоятель Белорусской церкви извинился за поздравление Лукашенко с победой.” *Радио Свобода*. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30784028.html>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

²⁰ “Обращение Синода Белорусской Православной Церкви к народу Республики Беларусь о прекращении народного противостояния.” *Русская православна церковь. Официальный сайт Московского патриархата*. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5677056.html>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

protesters. The organizers of these actions were young Orthodox laity, who were also joined by representatives of other denominations. Exarch Paul took part in them. He even visited in the hospital those protesters who suffered at the hands of security forces.²¹

Some Orthodox priests spoke in support of the protesters. In particular, that concerned Archbishop of Grodno and Vaukavysk *Artemy*. On August 14, he published his appeal to the flock, condemning the government's actions. It said: "Eternal memory to the dead and consolation to their relatives and friends! A speedy recovery to all those who had suffered and freedom to those who are still waiting for it! And let all the facts of deception, violence and cruelty be investigated fairly, honestly and openly, so that Justice may be done and the truth may prevail!"²² In principle, it is not surprising that the Archbishop of Grodno did it. The Grodno region is the western part of Belarus, which until 1939 was a part of interwar Poland. Western influences are noticeable here. Many people in the region have ties to the European Union, especially Poland and Lithuania, which condemned Lukashenko's regime for rigging the 2020 presidential election. Archbishop Artemy defended his doctoral dissertation in theology in Poland at the Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw.²³ In addition, the level of Belarusian national consciousness in the Grodno region is relatively high compared to other regions of Belarus. This makes the region one of the most "oppositional" to Lukashenko's regime. Furthermore, there is a noticeable influence of Catholics in the region, who from the very beginning condemned the falsifications in the presidential election in Belarus in 2020. Therefore, many representatives of the local Orthodox clergy supported the protesters.

It is not for nothing that Lukashenko came to Grodno specifically for the pro-government rally on August 22, where he said the following: "I am surprised by the position of our denominations. People should come to the churches to pray! Churches and cathedrals are not for politics." At the same time, he actually threatened the clergy:

²¹ О. Вагнер. "Власть показала сатанинское лицо." Церковь и белорусские протесты." *Радио Свобода*. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30792357.html>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

²² "Обращение архиепископа Гродненского и Волковысского Артемия к клиру и пастве Гродненской епархии." *Гродненская епархия. Белорусская православная церковь*. <https://www.orthos.org/eparhiya/bishop/speech/2020/08/14/obrashchenie-arhiepiskopa-grodnenskogo-volkovysskogo-artemiya-k>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

²³ "Архиепископу Гродненскому и Волковысскому присуждена учёная степень доктора теологии." *Гродненская епархия. Белорусская православная церковь*. <https://www.orthos.org/eparhiya/bishop/speech/2020/08/14/obrashchenie-arhiepiskopa-grodnenskogo-volkovysskogo-artemiya-k>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

“Don’t allow to be run by renegades. You will be ashamed of what position some of you are taking now. And the state will not look at it indifferently.”²⁴ At that time, Lukashenko decided to “bring order to the churches” in his country. It is difficult for him to influence the Catholic Church, which ranks second in Belarus in the number of adherents. Still, he tries to do so, but he managed to “deal” with the Orthodox Church.

Belarusian Exarch Paul did not belong to the people close to Lukashenko. They “kept their distance.” In the end, Paul was not happy that he had been sent to serve in Belarus. He felt more comfortable in Russia,²⁵ so he did not mind going back there.

Why did Paul risk expressing support for the protesters? It should be borne in mind that there was some tension between Lukashenko and the Russian political leadership before and shortly after the presidential election in Belarus in 2020. Lukashenko made it clear that the Russian leaders were preparing protests against him, and the representatives of Russia’s top political authorities saw that Lukashenko did not have adequate support in his country. They could consider a scheme of supporting someone of Lukashenko’s pro-Russian rivals. Therefore, Exarch Paul allowed himself some liberties regarding the Belarusian leader. However, shortly after the election the latter managed to reach an agreement with the Russian politicians and enlist their support. In this context, the fate of Paul, who resigned on August 25, at the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, was decided. In his place, the Synod appointed Bishop Venyamin (Benjamin),²⁶ who became Metropolitan of Minsk and Zaslavl, as well as the head of the Borisov Eparchy. The new exarch turned out to be an acceptable figure for Lukashenko.

Venyamin (Vitaly Ivanovich Tupeko) is the first non-Russian Belarusian exarch. Unlike previous exarchs, he was born, educated, and had a church career in Belarus. However, he states that it is easier for him to pray in the Church Slavonic language. He also believes that it is not necessary to hurry to translate the service into Belarusian. Benjamin firmly defends the “spiritual unity” of Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. Accordingly, he believes that they should be united by one religious

²⁴ А. Вагнер. “Лукашенко: церкви и костёлы – не для политики.” *Белта*. <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-hramy-kostely-ne-dlja-politiki-403780-2020/>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

²⁵ “Митрополит Минский и Слуцкий Павел: ‘Покидаю Рязань с грустью.’” *Правмир*. <https://www.pravmir.ru/mitropolit-minskij-i-sluckij-pavel-pokidayu-ryazan-s-grustyu/>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

²⁶ “Журналы заседания Священного Синода от 25 августа 2020 года.” *Русская Православная Церковь. Официальный сайт Московского Патриархата*. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5681796.html>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

structure—the Russian Orthodox Church. He is categorically against the creation of an autocephalous Orthodox Church in Belarus and even against the Belarusian Orthodox Church gaining more autonomy.²⁷ However, the idea of the Belarusian autocephaly has the support of some members of the Belarusian opposition and is spreading among protesters. However, the Coordination Council, led by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Lukashenko’s main rival in the presidential election, does not risk raising the issue.

In his public speeches, Exarch Benjamin makes it clear that when Lukashenko was in power in the years previous, there was peace and tranquility in the state. Such things should be appreciated. He believes that in the current situation, when the protests continue, the position of the church should be neutral.²⁸ At the same time, he meets with Lukashenko. Their first known meeting was on October 3, 2020, in the agricultural town of Shershuny near Minsk, at the opening and consecration of the Church of St. John the Baptist. According to the local mass media, the meeting was held in a warm atmosphere.²⁹

The meeting between Lukashenko and Benjamin, which took place on November 2, 2020, is more significant. According to the official information posted on the official websites of the President of Belarus³⁰ and the Belarusian Exarchate,³¹ it was held in a spirit of mutual understanding. Lukashenko reiterated his thesis that the Orthodox Church was the ideological basis of the Belarusian state, that it should work closely with the state, and that the state, in turn, should provide assistance to it. He called the exarch a “statesman.” The issue of protests was also touched upon in the conversation. Mr. Lukashenko called them non-peaceful and said the protesters were violating the public order. At the same time, he threatened that if the activities of any organization, including a religious one, were aimed at destroying the state, he would be

²⁷ “Митрополит Минский и Заславский, Патриарший Экзарх всея Беларуси Вениамин дал первое большое интервью portalу МЛЫН.BU после возведения в сан.” *Борисовская епархия*. <http://borisoverparhia.by/intervyu/mitropolit-minskiy-i-zaslavskiy-patr.html>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

²⁸ “Позиция церкви должна быть нейтральной”: митрополит Минский и Заславский Вениамин, Патриарший экзарх всея Беларуси.” *Борисовская епархия*. <http://borisoverparhia.by/video-novosti/poziciya-cerkvi-dolzha-byt-neytral.html>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

²⁹ Н. Бутович. “Лукашенко встретился с новым митрополитом Беларуси Вениамином.” *Комсомольская правда. Беларусь*. <https://www.kp.by/online/news/4034413/>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

³⁰ “Встреча с митрополитом Минским и Заславским Вениамином, Патриаршим экзархом всея Беларуси.” *Президент Республики Беларусь. Официальный Интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь*. http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-mitropolitom-minskim-i-zaslavskim-veniaminom-patriarshim-ekzarhom-vseja-belarusi-24796/. Accessed 15/11/2020.

³¹ “Состоялась встреча митрополита Вениamina с Александром Лукашенко.” *Официальный портал Белорусской Православной Церкви*. <http://www.church.by/news/sostojalas-vstrecha-mitropolita-veniamina-s-aleksandrom-lukashenko>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

forced to react. In the context of these considerations, he hinted that Catholics (in particular their leader in Belarus, Metropolitan of Minsk and Mogilev, Tadevush Kandrusевич,³²) are engaged in such activities. In general, during the conversation with Benjamin, Lukashenko allowed himself to discuss the attitude of various denominations in Belarus to the protests. It looked as if he had gotten a like-minded person. Commenting on his meeting with Lukashenko, Benjamin later said: “Every person, a citizen of our country, has the right to his/her position, and this is provided by the relevant norms and church laws. But at the same time, we must understand when and how to express our position.” The Exarch of Belarus specifically stressed that the priest should not take actions that would divide “our society.”³³ In fact, he made it clear that he was positive about Lukashenko and disapproved of the clergy’s support for the protests.

At the very least, it can be concluded that Lukashenko has succeeded in bringing the leadership of the Belarusian Orthodox Church to the forefront of his policy. However, he failed to do so with the leadership of the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church in Belarus: Against Government Violence

The Catholic Church is relatively influential in the country. As of January 1, 2020, there were 498 Roman Catholic communities in Belarus, which are united in four dioceses. There are six theological schools, 11 missions, and nine monasteries. Roman Catholic communities had 514 places of worship, and additionally, 31 churches were built. Moreover, the Catholic Church in Belarus includes Greek Catholics with 16 communities.³⁴ Although the number of registered Catholic communities was inferior to Protestants, and even to such a Protestant denomination as Christians of the Evangelical faith (which had 524 registered communities), Catholics still have more believers than

³² “Встреча с митрополитом Минским и Заславским Вениамином, Патриаршим экзархом всея Беларуси.” *Президент Республики Беларусь. Официальный Интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь.* http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-mitropolitom-minskim-i-zaslavskim-veniaminom-patriarshim-ekzarhom-vseja-belarusi-24796/ . Accessed 15/11/2020.

³³ “Митрополит Вениамин рассказал о беседе с Лукашенко.” *Reformation.* <https://reform.by/176726-mitropolit-veniamin-rasskazal-o-besede-s-lukashenko>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

³⁴ “Информация о конфессиональной ситуации в Республике Беларусь.” *Уполномоченный по делам религии и национальностей Республики Беларусь.* <https://belarus21.by/Articles/1439296790>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

Protestants. The Catholic leadership in Belarus estimates that there are more than 1,400,000 Catholics in the country or equate to about 15% of the population.³⁵

The largest concentration of Roman Catholic communities is in the Grodno region where there are 176 communities, i.e., slightly more than a third of the total.³⁶ As previously mentioned, this western Belarusian region belongs to the most pro-Western regions and is “most oppositional” to Lukashenko’s regime. The Catholic Church in Belarus, with its close ties to the Catholic centers of the West, is therefore pro-Western. In addition, some of the priests of this church are foreign citizens, in particular, they are Polish citizens. Concerning ethnic matters, one can notice a certain pro-Belarusian position of this church. In contrast to the Belarusian Orthodox Church, the Belarusian language is used relatively widely. In particular, services are conducted in Belarusian and Polish.

All this together distances this church and its believers from the pro-Russian Lukashenko’s regime. As a result, a significant portion of the Belarusian Catholic clergy supported the protesters. The head of the Roman Catholics in Belarus, Metropolitan of Minsk and Mogilev Tadevush Kandrusевич, did not congratulate Lukashenko on his victory after the 2020 presidential election. Instead, he called on the authorities and protesters to sit down at the negotiating table and appealed to the parties regarding the conflict to stop the violence. In his address to the state authorities of the Republic of Belarus on August 14, he wrote: “Blood was shed on the streets of our cities, beatings of people who went to peaceful demonstrations because they want to know the truth; cruel treatment and inhumane conditions in places of imprisonment is a grave sin of conscience of those who give criminal orders and commit violence.”³⁷ As it was impossible for Lukashenko to reach an agreement with Metropolitan Kandrusевич and to remove him from the position of head of the Roman Catholic Church in the Republic of Belarus, it was decided to use harsher methods. On August 31, Kandrusевич was not allowed to re-enter Belarus from Poland. Lukashenko began saying that the metropolitan was going to Warsaw for consultations, and that the Catholic Church was “conducting

³⁵ “Рыма-каталіцкі Касцёл у Беларусі: статыстычныя даныя на 1 сакавіка 2009 г.” *Catholic.by*. <http://old.catholic.by/2/belarus/dioceses.html>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

³⁶ “Религиозные общины в Республике Беларусь (на 1 января 2020 г.)” *Уполномоченный по делам религии и национальностей Республики Беларусь*. <https://belarus21.by/Articles/kolichestvo-religioznyh-obshhin-v-respublike-belarus-na-1-yanvara-2019-g>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

³⁷ “Зварот арцыбіскупа Тадэвуша Кандрусевича да дзяржаўных уладаў Рэспублікі Беларусь.” *Catholic.by*. <https://catholic.by/3/news/belarus/12014-zvarot-artsyb-skupa-tadevusha-kandrushev-cha-da-dzyarzha-nykh-ulada-respubl-k-belarus>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

anti-Lukashenko and anti-state propaganda.”³⁸ At the same time, the authorities began to exert various pressures on Catholics, and the security forces even blocked some Catholic places of worship.

Such actions provoked a negative reaction from Catholics. Reacting to the discrediting of Metropolitan Kondruchevych by the authorities, *Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Minsk and Mogilev* and *Bishop Yuri Kosobutsky* declared before the solemn Mass on October 28, in the Minsk Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary that the current head of the Belarusian Catholics was a symbol of religious pressure and persecution in the country. The video of this speech was posted on the official portal of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus.³⁹ Instead, during the aforementioned meeting between Lukashenko and Exarch Benjamin on November 2, the Belarusian leader said that Kondruchevych “went to Poland and received advice on how to destroy the country.”⁴⁰

Following this statement, the Belarusian Catholics began collecting signatures in an open appeal to the authorities demanding an end to the political persecution of Metropolitan Kondruchevych.⁴¹ However, the authorities did not pay much attention to such things, resorting to intimidation and repressive actions.

Protestants, Jews, Old Believers, Muslims, and Other Denominations in Belarus: Between Loyalty and Protests

In addition to Orthodox and Catholics, Belarus has a relatively large number of other religious communities: 1,038 of Protestants, 53 of Jews, 34 of Old Believers, and

³⁸ “Посещение Барановичского государственного профессионально-технического колледжа сферы обслуживания.” *Президент Республики Беларусь. Официальный Интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь.* http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/poseschenie-baranovichskogo-gosudarstvennogo-professionalno-texnicheskogo-kolledzha-sfery-obs-luzhivaniya-24442/. Accessed 15/11/2020.

³⁹ “Епископ Кособуцкий: митрополит Кондрусевич является символом давления и преследования человека в Беларуси.” *Naviny.bu.* <https://naviny.media/new/20201029/1603966054-episkop-kosobuckiy-mitropolit-kondrusevich-yavlyaetsya-simvolom-davleniya-i>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

⁴⁰ “Встреча с митрополитом Минским и Заславским Вениамином, Патриаршим экзархом всея Беларуси.” *Президент Республики Беларусь. Официальный Интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь.* http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-mitropolitom-minskim-i-zaslavskim-veniaminom-patriarshim-ekzarhom-vseja-belarusi-24796/. Accessed 15/11/2020.

⁴¹ “Митрополит Тадеуш — бесспорный моральный авторитет для верующих.” *Католики требуют прекратить преследование архипастыря.* *Naviny.bu.* <https://naviny.media/new/20201103/1604410341-mitropolit-tadeush-besspornyy-moralnyy-avtoritet-dlya-veruyushchih-katoliki>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

34 of Muslims. There are also a number of other small religious organizations.⁴² However, they do not have a large number of believers and do not enjoy a significant influence in the Belarusian society. Under the authoritarian regime of Lukashenko, these organizations usually try to take a position that would suit the government so as not to run into trouble. In the current situation, when mass protests are taking place in the country, they often take a neutral position.

Thus, the Mufti of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Belarus published an appeal about these events, which was generally neutral. It said: “Muslim men and women oppose violence in all its forms, regardless of who the violence comes from, and ask the Almighty to stop all violence in our country.”⁴³ This position generally suits Lukashenko. Therefore, at the mentioned meeting with Exarch Benjamin on November 2, he stated: “Muslims have never created problems for us. I often say that Muslims supported the government and me as president almost 100% in all elections.”⁴⁴

As for Protestants, in particular their leaders, they also usually try to take a neutral position and are not marked by public activism. In this regard, the Orthodox priest *Alexander Shramko*, who actually became one of the organizers of prayers and processions in Minsk in support of the protesters, notes the following: “In general, Protestants are a diverse community, there are many different directions, and each community is, in fact, autonomous. There are appeals from evangelical Christians, and Pentecostals; the Baptists have no common position because there is no agreement. In our country, Protestants try to stay away from political issues in order to maintain the status quo.” Although Shramko also stated that some Protestants, pastors and ordinary believers, one way or another support the protests in Belarus.⁴⁵

There is no consensus among the Protestant organizations in Belarus on the assessment of the current political situation in the country. Some of them support

⁴² “Информация о конфессиональной ситуации в Республике Беларусь.” *Уполномоченный по делам религии и национальностей Республики Беларусь*. <https://belarus21.by/Articles/1439296790>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

⁴³ “Заявление муфтията Духовного управления Республики Беларусь.” *Islam.by*. <https://islam.by/post/zayavlenie-muftiyata-dukhovnogo-upravleniya-musulman-v-respublike-belarus>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

⁴⁴ “Встреча с митрополитом Минским и Заславским Вениамином, Патриаршим экзархом всея Беларуси.” *Президент Республики Беларусь. Официальный Интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь*. http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-mitropolitom-minskim-i-zaslavskim-veniaminom-patriarshim-ekzarhom-vseja-belarusi-24796/. Accessed 15/11/2020.

⁴⁵ О. Вагнер. “‘Власть показала сатанинское лицо.’ Церковь и белорусские протесты.” *Радио Свобода*. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30792357.html>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

Lukashenko's regime, arguing that all power is from God. They claim that under Lukashenko, Belarus developed as a peaceful country and there was no moral decline as in the West (same-sex marriage, gender equality, juvenile justice). That is why Lukashenko is seen as a "lesser evil" than the liberal democracies of the West. Yet some Protestants and some of their pastors oppose the violence perpetrated by the authorities. Thus, on August 20, several dozen pastors of Protestant communities addressed the people of Belarus, which gave a negative assessment of the actions of the authorities and declared support for the protesters.⁴⁶

Despite the often-neutral position of the leadership of various religious organizations, their believers take an active part in the protests. Thus, the detention of the Old Believers, Herman and Natalia Snezhkov in Gomel for participating in protests and "opposing the authorities" became resonant. A statement was made by the World Union of Old Believers on October 1, 2020,⁴⁷ and only after that the detainees were released.

Representatives of various denominations both large (Orthodox, Catholic) and small (Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Old Believers, etc.), take part in joint prayers, where calls are made to the authorities to stop the violence. In particular, such actions became widespread in Minsk and Grodno.

Conclusions

The events that took place in Belarus from August to November 2020 that were related to the presidential election, in one way or another, affected the religious organizations of Belarus. The leaders of these organizations had to determine whether they supported the current government, Lukashenko's regime, or the protesters. The leadership of the largest religious organization in Belarus, the Belarusian Orthodox Church, initially expressed some dissatisfaction with the authorities' violence. However, after the change of the head of this church, which took place on August 25, 2020, the

⁴⁶ "Открытое Обращение Евангельских Протестантских Церквей К Народу Беларуси." *Baznica.info*. <http://baznica.info/2020/08/otkrytoe-obrashhenie-evangelskix-protstantskix-cerkvej-k-narodu-belarusi/>. Accessed 15/11/2020.

⁴⁷ Заявление Всемирного союза староверов по поводу преследования семьи старообрядческих верующих Снежковых. *Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі*. <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/zayavlenie-vsimirnogo-soyuza-staroverov-po-povodu-prsledovaniya-semi-starobryadcheskix-veruyushhix-snezhkovyx/>.

situation changed. The new Exarch of Belarus, Benjamin, generally showed a positive attitude towards Lukashenko's regime, although many Orthodox and clerics supported the protesters. Instead, the leadership of the Catholic Church condemned the acts of violence of the Belarusian authorities, which is why the authorities are putting pressure on this church. As for the religious organizations that do not have much influence in the Belarusian society (Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Old Believers, etc.), their leaders often try to distance themselves from political issues without explicitly supporting either side.

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