Is There a Christian Right in Belarus?

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Belarus seemed to fall off the analytical agenda for quite a long time, with everything that happened there being attributed to its status as the *last European dictatorship*. Only a few studies address social developments within the country in a more nuanced way; however, they primarily refer to either historical developments or the socio-political upheavals around falsified elections since independence. This is especially true in the case of social and religious currents on both the spectrum from liberal to illiberal ideas and the spectrum from conservative to progressive ideas. While the surrounding post-socialist countries such as Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states all went through different stages of national revival with the appearance of nationalistic groups and parties often coupled with a particular religious component, Belarus remained a seemingly homogenous country with no strong ideological or policy-oriented actors beyond the dictatorship of Lukashenka and his political elite (Bekus 2010). What is more, from the perspective of religious international conservative movements such as the World Congress of Families, Agenda Europe, Ordo Iuris, and the Interparliamentary Orthodox Assembly, Belarusian actors are either missing or take a back seat to Russia.

However, conservative issues such as traditional family values, abortion, and reproductive and LGBTIQA+ rights are prominent topics in Belarusian public discourse, and religious actors actively participate in these social and legal debates. Although the agenda of Catholic and Orthodox actors in Belarus seems to be the same as in neighboring Russia, Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine or in Hungary and Slovakia, there is a lack of a systematic policy agenda and organized structures in Belarus. In this article, I examine the background to and reasons for these differences.

The political and religious landscape

According to official documents, Belarus is a presidential republic. Elected in the first and so far only free elections since Belarus gained independence in 1994, President Aliaksandr Lukashenka has eroded the political system, established an autocratic rule completely dependent on his person, and fostered a revival of Soviet symbols and ideas. He has changed the constitution in order to secure his—by now 29-year—autocratic presidency via falsified elections and the repression of all oppositional parties and actors. Civil protest against electoral fraud has been met with severe state violence as well as mass detentions and torture of political opponents and civil protesters, especially around the presidential elections of 2010 and 2020.

Since 1990, Belarus has had a multi-party system representing the whole spectrum of political ideologies from left to right. However, the parties have no real influence since all political decisions depend directly on the president, who is not tied to any party. Parties are thus unable to conduct an effective political campaign and are usually divided into the so-called *systemic opposition*, which is tolerated by Lukashenka and legitimizes his elections, and other opposition parties, most of which are not officially registered.

Most of the latter opposition parties lack a clear ideological program. Yet, two of them are of particular interest for the purposes of this article. The Belarusian Christian Democracy Party (BCD) was founded in 2005 and is still not officially registered. It has a conservative–centralist focus, with a strong orientation to Europe, and it is critical of Russian influence in Belarus. According to the party's leadership, the BCD aims for a Belarus built on biblical teachings in politics and public morals (Radyyo Svoboda 2007; Dyn'ko 2016). Another movement connected to this party is the Youth Front founded by the Christian activist Paval Sieviaryniec and known for its conservative Christian agenda.

The Conservative Christian Party–Belarusian People's Front (CChP-BPF) was founded in 1999 after a split in the Belarusian People's Front, one of the major opposition parties, and officially registered in 2000. The party has a right-wing and nationalistic orientation, and it is openly critical of Lukashenka's rule. Apart from a general reference to traditional family values and the defense of Belarusian culture, the party's program lacks more thoroughgoing positions on the Christian component (BNF 1999). The party leader, Zianon Pazniak, fled Belarus in 1996 and has since been leading the party from the USA. However, the party has boycotted all parliamentary elections since 2000.

Belarus is a multi-religious state with a constitutional separation of church and state. Following the atheistic repression of religion during Soviet times, religious freedom was declared, and religious communities were able to establish new structures. President Lukashenka follows a pragmatic and utilitarian religious policy, granting religious freedom in exchange for loyalty to the state leadership (Vasilevich 2019).

The major religious community in Belarus is the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), which is a dependent sub-structure—a so-called exarchate—outside of the national territory of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and subordinated to the Patriarchate of Moscow. According to recent surveys, about 70% of the Belarusian population identify as Orthodox, while public trust in the Orthodox Church is at about 36%, having dramatically fallen as a result of the official loyalty of the Church leadership to Lukashenka following the protests in 2020 (Astapenia 2021). Like Orthodoxy in Russia and Ukraine, the BOC has its historical roots in the Baptism of Rus' in 988, and it shares its dogmatic and social teaching with the ROC. In this common social teaching, it is assumed that decisions on societal matters can only be influenced via direct communication between the Church hierarchs and the political elite, with a conceptual ignorance of civil society as an autonomous public actor (Elsner 2020).

The second-largest religious community is the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), with about 10% of the population identifying as Roman Catholic. Historically, the RCC is closely linked to the Polish Catholic Church, and, as a result of different historical border shifts, it has more parishes in the west of the country. Especially during the first decades after the end of the Soviet Union, the RCC was shaped by bishops, priests, nuns, monks, and social workers of Polish origin. As a consequence, the Church was latently perceived as a Polish church and had to contend with some political pressure in the form of entry visa refusals and bureaucratic persecution. Since Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusievicz, a Belarusian citizen born near Hrodno, was appointed Metropolitan Archbishop of Minsk–Mohilev in 2007, this pressure has eased. Thus, while the rootedness of Belarusian Catholics in Polish spirituality remains strong, the Church also supports a Belarusian civil consciousness and the Belarusian language as the main language of the liturgy (on the language policy, see Lastouski and Zakharov 2022).

Various protestant churches represent the third-largest religious group, with around 5% of the population identifying as members of a protestant community. Yet even though the protestant churches conduct visible public chari-

table activities, public trust in them is rather low due to their widespread perception as *sects* as a result of Soviet and Orthodox propaganda. The Jewish and Islamic communities are very small and of minor public relevance.

Christian conservative actors: Partners of the state

Given the strong affiliation of the two major religious groups in Belarus—the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church—with two of the most important conservative actors in the Christian world—the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Roman Catholic Church—a basic conservative orientation of the churches in Belarus is only to be expected. Liberal or progressive Christian ideas in the field of values or policy have no visible lobby in either church. However, there are also no ultra-conservative or radical right-wing actors with a measureable impact on public debates.

The politicization of non-political actors such as religious groups is almost impossible in the context of the authoritarian rule of long-term dictator Lukashenka. While it has existed since the very start of his rule, the pressure to keep out of politics has increased, particularly since the protests following the 2020 presidential elections, when Lukashenka told the churches to "remain in the temples and pray" (Lukashenka 2020). This pressure has resulted in an increasing degree of control within the religious communities. Thus, the BOC and the RCC only allow their names to be associated with activities that have been approved in advance by the respective hierarchies, and they restrict the public activism of their flocks.

At the same time, the politics of Lukashenka himself follow a conservative paradigm, occupying the discourse associated with typical conservative questions such as family values, migration, and nationalism, as well as taking a critical stance in relation to scientific knowledge. Thus, the religious communities are, by default, partners of the state. As the only sphere in which the churches are allowed to take public action, the discourse on conservative and patriarchal values provides fertile ground for conservative alliances across all the religious communities and leaves no place for more progressive voices.

The conservative agenda: Public action with limited outreach

The general context of authoritarian rule significantly limits the scope for religious activities. Activism and lobbying are only possible on certain issues and through the channels that the state provides. Three topics on the Christian-Right agenda fit into this narrow political framework: anti-abortion discourse, anti- LGBTIQA+ discourse, and anti-migration discourse. A more recent topic would be the anti-vaccination debate. However, Christians face significant problems when their participation in these discourses is tied to aspirations for political relevance in Belarus.

Natallia Vasilevich has studied the anti-abortion movement in depth (Vasilevich 2021a). Similar to the situation in Russia and Ukraine, reproductive rights in Belarus are shaped by the Soviet legacy. There is thus a very liberal legal approach to abortion and medical reproductive measures, as well as a very critical attitude among the population regarding any restrictions in this sphere. Therefore, until the early 2000s, the churches and religious actors tended to treat pro-life questions as pastoral issues in the individual relationship between a woman and her spiritual leader. With the emergence of the concept of *demographic security* in 2005, the churches, with their pro-life agenda, became strategic partners of the state (Vasilevich 2021a, 205–213) and politicized their own pro-life discourse in accordance with the state's demands. Since then, the mainstream religious discourse has merged with arguments about national values and demographic survival, while activists interested in the spiritual, psychological, and structural support of women in need remain at the margins (see the case of Elena Zenkevich [Zenkevich 2020]). Remarkably, as Vasilevich underlines, in spite of this strategic partnership, the churches distance themselves from the campaigns of Christian conservative parties for anti-abortion legislation in order to avoid any accusation of political interference (Vasilevich 2021a, 215–216).

Belarus is still a country with one of the highest abortion rates worldwide; however, abortion numbers have decreased significantly since the end of the Soviet Union. Due to the non-transparent political processes, the reasons for the decrease may include not only anti-abortion lobbying by religious and conservative actors but also better access to contraceptives. Restrictive adaptations of the law on abortion were agreed in 2013 and 2014 after major public statements by the leaders of the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in October 2012 (Belarusian Orthodox Church 2012) as well as a public debate on social indicators for abortion (e.g., a pregnancy as

a result of sexual abuse) and the right to conscientious objection. Thus, the social indicators for abortion until the 22nd week have been limited to a few, women are obliged to undergo special consultations before abortion, and medical staff are given the right to refuse abortion for moral or religious reasons. The churches have access to schools and women's consultations in order to provide anti-abortion information.

The Belarusian anti-abortion lobby has two platforms, pro-life.by and Pro-Life Belarus (prolife-belarus.org), as well as the Open Hearts Foundation, where information on events, analyses, resources, and news are collected. The actors behind these platforms, their religious affiliations, and the financial sources of the initiatives are not mentioned explicitly. The movement thus poses as a civil initiative that is not affiliated with any church or party. As the former editor-in-chief of pro-life.by Tatiana Tarasevich coined it, it represents a "certain life strategy" (Tarasevich 2013). However, the contributions of pro-life.by mostly refer to the positions of the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church, while Pro-Life Belarus and the Open Hearts Foundation are linked to the Catholic Church in Belarus. Conferences organized by the Open Hearts Foundation and Pro-Life Belarus feature specialists and clerics from Russia and Belarus as well as speakers from the European movement for so-called traditional family values (e.g., Gabriele Kuby, René Ecochard, Francesco Giordano, and Levan Vasadze), thus pointing to possible financial support from international organizations such as the World Congress of Families and Church in Need. The anti-abortion actors also organize various public actions, such as the International Prayer Congress for Life (organized by the Catholic Church in 2022), the Ladoshka Festival (organized every year since 2013 by the Belarusian Orthodox Church with support from the Russian Agency for Culture), and the annual Week without Abortion in cooperation with hospitals and clinics.

The anti-abortion discourse makes strong links to issues of gender, homosexuality, sexual education, juvenile justice, and euthanasia. This mix of issues is fostered by the above-mentioned national platforms, which mark these topics as *threats to the family*, as well as by major religious public actors such as Tatiana Tarasevich, Archbishop Tadeuzs Kondrusievicz, and the Christian politician Pavel Sieviaryniec. The analyses of and material on questions of so-called traditional family values are very much shaped by two discourses: the teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church in this area (mainly published by the Patriarchal Commission on Questions of Family and the Defence of Motherhood and Childhood) and the anti-genderist movement in Poland and Western Eu-

rope. While a strong Belarusian rationale or ideology is lacking in these documents, Belarusian demographics and the Christian roots of Belarusian civilization play a key role in, for example, the arguments of Tatiana Tarasevich. In an interview from 2012, Tarasevich directly linked the need for pro-life policies with the need to save Belarus as a Belarusian nation: "The existence of Belarus and the Belarusian nation is the preservation of children, the maintenance of the birth rate and large families. This is our path of development—the path of demographic dynamics as an increase in the population, but by no means the path of contraception, abortion, sterilization—which international programs impose on us" (Tarasevich 2013).

Tarasevich also referred to the threat of migration, stating that it endangered the survival of the Belarusian people and their traditions and faith. Given the rather weak nationalistic currents in Belarus in general, these Christian arguments against migration are remarkable. The same applies for the Christian lobbying against LGBTIQA+ inclusion, which is a taboo issue in public discourse. In 2019, the Christian activist and politician Pavel Sieviaryniec, known as a radical opponent of LGBTIQA+ rights, was excluded from the Belarusian PEN after he refused to pay the annual fee because of the LGBTIQA+-affirmative position of the PEN. In reaction, Sieviaryniec accused "Marxist and leftist actors" of persecution of Christians (Dyn'ko 2016).

In general, the pro-choice and gender equality agendas are portrayed as both a threat to Belarus from Western liberal Europe and a (leftist) threat to European Christian values. Christian actors from both the churches and civic groups frame their conservative agenda accordingly, linking it to Belarusian national survival and a special mission to defend European Christian values. In both directions, the outreach of these Christian activists deeply depends on whether the political strategy of the dictatorship is taking on a pro-European or nationalistic key, which makes them less reliable for international networks.

Ambivalences in the conservative position

However, and rather surprisingly, the arguments of the global right-wing movement on two major recent issues—migration and vaccination—have not taken hold in Belarus. Until recently, both issues were of minor relevance in the country. The country has never been an attractive destination for migrants and refugees due to its political system and poor performance in terms of human security and social welfare (Alshanskaya 2020). Xenophobic ideas are

integral to Lukashenka's political program, so right-wing populism could have been expected to fall on fertile ground. Yet nationalism in Belarus is, first and foremost, a movement for emancipation from Russia and the Soviet heritage, which promotes the Belarusian language and culture and often opposes the politics of Lukashenka (Bekus 2010). Lukashenka's alignment with Russia's war against Ukraine particularly strengthened these currents of a liberating national conscience in contrast to the autocratic one. Accordingly, the accusation of nationalism is often used to denounce opposition activists and politicians or Catholic activists who support the Belarusian language and the national spiritual history, as the case of a cartoon about catholic priests with Nazi symbols in a newspaper from September 2021 illustrates (Christian Vision Group 2021). At the same time, Christian currents are unlikely to join in or be part of the nationalistic discourse due to the historically complex and ambivalent position of the major religious communities in relation to Belarusian national identity (Alshanskaya 2020; Ioffe 2020). As for vaccination, Belarusian society is still shaped by the Soviet legacy with its strong trust in the natural sciences and medical surgery. Thus, a critical attitude to vaccination is less likely and remains the domain of fundamentalist minority groups within the churches, whose arguments are based on a spiritual understanding of illness. In this situation, radical anti-migrant and anti-vaccination positions have not been able to take root.

Both issues became more relevant in 2021. The arrival of the first COVID-19 vaccines prompted a global outcry among anti-vaccination actors, many of them right-wing populists, which was partly fueled by Christian arguments. However, the discussion in Belarus did not fit this pattern. Here, the social contract had already been massively undermined by the political failure to take measures against the pandemic in 2020. The electoral fraud and the violent crackdown on the ensuing protests and on civil society in general since the summer of 2020 have only widened the gap between society and the political elite. However, surveys show that the low vaccine acceptance rate in society is more linked to mistrust in the government's health policies (Krawatzek and Sasse 2021) than to conspiracy theories or anti-vax paradigms. In 2021, Lukashenka himself agitated against vaccination against COVID-19, thus occupying the space that might otherwise have been filled by an anti-vax campaign by civil actors. Although some ultra-conservative Christian groups, mainly from Orthodox monasteries, opposed vaccination with reference to the spiritual benefits of illness, they did so only in the context of giving spiritual advice to their flock and never criticized the state or the wider population.

The situation with regard to the question of migration is similar. When Lukashenka cynically used migrants from the Middle East to blackmail and divide Europe in 2021, the obvious violation of basic human rights and Christian values led to a wave of solidarity with the migrants among Belarusian Christian actors. However, in most of their statements, they called on European countries to help the refugees, thus avoiding any confrontation with Lukashenka's regime and any engagement with the topic of migration in general (Vasilevich 2021b).

Apart from the state-owned media channels, there has been almost no public support in Belarus for the positions and activities of Lukashenka in the context of COVID-19 and the refugee crisis at the EU borders, even though these were consistent with certain sentiments expressed in the conservative discourse of Christian groups. While Belarusian religious actors do not risk confrontation with the authoritarian leadership on other core issues from the conservative script—abortion, gender, and LGBTIQA+ rights—on the questions of vaccination and refugees, Christian actors have acted contrary to the political line and sometimes even voiced protest. Without a doubt, this situation has to be understood in the context of the serious political crisis after 2020, where open compliance with the inhumane activities of the dictator is no longer an acceptable option for Christian groups.

Conclusion: Limited space for populism in a dictatorship

The case of Belarus illustrates that in a dictatorship, there is almost no space for independent civil actors, even if they support the conservative and patriarchal agenda of the state. In Belarus, the political elite simultaneously occupies the conservative agenda and limits the activity of conservative actors. The Christian churches serve as a moral cushion for the conservative policies of the state and, at the same time, have no scope to voice dissent or demand concrete legal measures. This situation was enforced when the political leadership in 2022 decided to support Russia's war against Ukraine and again intensified the pressure on all social spheres. Accordingly, the political parties, which are part of the Christian conservative block, lack any visible support from the churches even when they advocate the Christian conservative agenda. Under these circumstances, it would appear to be impossible to form any visible ideological coalition. The conservative agenda of the Christian churches thus remains within the church walls, with any public expressions of it limited to the

subject of traditional family roles and statements by more radical groups, especially in Orthodox monasteries. However, such statements have no significant effects in political terms.

This explains why Belarusian conservative groups are not attractive to the international Christian right-wing movement, as they have no prospect of gaining a real, sustainable influence on political decisions. The Belarusian political leadership, which advocates conservative values, is also no ally for the international Christian right-wing coalition, as Lukashenka is not a reliable or respected partner in international politics and only substantiates his conservative agenda with Christian values by default. This constellation is the reason why Belarus is not part of the general European Christian right-wing mobilization. Nevertheless, the existing pro-life actors and Christian conservative parties, with their connections to both the European Catholic alliance for the traditional family and the Russian Orthodox conservative ideology, are potential allies for the global Christian Right once the dictatorship has ceased to exist. They therefore deserve further attention from scholars of the Christian Right.

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