

Research Article

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The Evolution of Religious Policy in Contemporary Belarus

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Abstract: Belarus is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country, with Orthodoxy and Catholicism as its main religious denominations. There are also smaller communities of Protestant, Jewish and Muslim adherents. The religious policy in contemporary Belarus has undergone a trajectory from gradual liberalization to standardized management, followed by strengthened regulation. Over three decades of iterative revisions and refinements, Belarus has developed a distinctive system and framework for religious governance. Religious affairs are regulated through the establishment of legal mechanisms, the conclusion of cooperation agreements and the provision of organizational guarantees to ensure the citizens' freedom of belief and the orderly conduct of religious activities. Reasonable religious policies not only guarantee citizens' religious freedom, but also foster social harmony, cultural diversity and national stability, laying a solid foundation for the nation-building of Belarus. This article focuses on analyzing the characteristics of religious policies during different historical periods in Belarus and their impact on socio-political life, thereby elucidating the intrinsic connections between religious policy and national development, social stability, as well as the implications of religious policy shifts for state governance.

Keywords: Belarus; Orthodoxy; Catholicism; religious policy; state-confessional relations; national identity

1 The Current Religious Landscape in Contemporary Belarus

Belarus, located in Eastern Europe with a territory of 207,600 square kilometers, is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state. The country has experienced a significant

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population decline in recent decades. According to data from the Belarusian National Statistics Committee, the total population decreased from 10.24 million in 1993 to 9.156 million as of January 1, 2024 (Belstat 2024). The sharp decline in population has always been one of the major challenges confronting the Belarusian government.

In terms of ethnic composition, Belarus is home to 140 ethnic groups, predominantly Belarusians and Russians, with smaller Ukrainian, Polish, and Jewish communities. Contemporary Belarus conducts a national census every decade (in 1999, 2009 and 2019). According to the latest national census statistics, the Belarusian ethnic majority has steadily consolidated, increasing from 81.2 % in 1999 to 84.9 % in 2019. Conversely, the Russian population declined from 11.4 % to 7.5 % during the same period. Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish populations also decreased, dropping from 3.9 % to 3.1 %, 2.4 % to 1.7 %, and 0.3 % to 0.1 %, respectively. The Armenian population remained relatively stable with a share of 0.1 % (Belstat 2020).

As for religious denominations, Orthodoxy and Catholicism dominate Belarus, with smaller number of Protestant, Jewish and Muslim communities. A sociological survey conducted by the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus in 2021 revealed that the largest religious sect in Belarus is Orthodox, with 77.5 % of the population identifies as Orthodox, followed by Catholics, who account for 9.9 %, 1.1 % as Protestant, 0.2 % as Jewish, 0.1 % as Muslim and 0.1 % as adherents of other faiths. Additionally, 0.8 % reported uncertain religious affiliation, while 9.6 % identified as atheists (Bezniuk 2021).

According to the statistics of the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, as of January 1, 2024, 25 religious denominations and 3,592 religious organizations are officially registered in the country, including 173 religious institutions of general confessional significance (religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, spiritual educational institutions) and 3,419 religious communities (CREA 2019). The statistical breakdown of registered religious organizations in Belarus is presented in Table 1.

After gaining independence on August 25, 1991, the Belarusian government recognized the critical role of religion in preserving national cultural heritage and maintaining social stability. It gradually eased restrictions on religious activities, leading to a steady increase in the number of adherents and religious organizations. The growing dynamism of religious engagement is evidenced by official statistics from the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs of the Republic of Belarus (CREA 2024b) (Table 2).

The total number of active religious buildings in the Republic of Belarus is 2,871 and 184 are under construction. The total number of clergymen stands at 3,725, including 127 foreign clergymen. Among these, 56 were invited by the Roman Catholic Church of Belarus and 59 by the Belarusian Orthodox Church to conduct religious activities (CREA 2024a).

Table 1: Registered religious organizations in the Republic of Belarus (as of January 1, 2024).

Religious denomination	Religious associations	Missions	Monasteries	Brotherhoods	Sisterhoods	Ecclesiastical educational institutions
Orthodox	16	1	36	15	9	6
Old Believers	1					
Roman Catholic	5	11	9			6
Lutheran	2					
Evangelical Baptist Christians	8	13				1
New Apostolic Church	1					
Evangelical Christian Church	7	4				2
Full Gospel Christian Church	1	2				1
Seventh-day Adventists	1	2				1
Jehovah's Witnesses	1					
Judaism	2	1				1
Progressive Judaism	1					
Islam	2	1				
Bahai Faith	1					
Interfaith Organizations		1		1		
Total	49	36	45	16	9	18
Grand Total						173

Table 2: Growth in the number of religious communities in the Republic of Belarus (1991–2024).

Religious confession	Religious communities (as of January 1, 2024)												
	1991	1996	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Orthodoxy	603	938	1,615	1,643	1,659	1,670	1,687	1,698	1709	1714	1726	1733	1737
Old Believers	23	32	33	33	34	34	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
Roman Catholic	222	372	488	491	493	495	497	499	498	499	500	500	500
Latin Rite Catholic			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Greek Catholic	11	11	15	15	15	15	15	15	16	16	16	16	16
Reformed Church	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Lutheran	5	5	27	27	27	27	27	26	25	25	25	25	24
Evangelical Baptist Christians	108	192	287	288	289	280	281	281	281	281	281	282	282
Ioannites		1	1	1									
New Apostolic Church		17	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	20	19	19	19
Presbyterian Church			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Evangelical Christian Church	119	311	520	522	524	521	521	524	524	524	526	525	526
Full Gospel Christian Church		21	59	59	59	59	59	60	62	64	64	64	62
Apostolic Christian Church		8	10	10	10	10	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
Disciples of Christ		6	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Messianic Communities		2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Seventh-day Adventists	12	34	73	73	73	73	73	73	73	73	73	73	73
Jehovah's Witnesses		11	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27
Mormonism		3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Judaism	3	10	38	38	39	38	38	39	38	36	36	36	36
Progressive Judaism		5	14	14	14	14	14	14	15	15	14	15	15
Islam	2	20	25	25	25	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	24

Table 2: (continued)

Religious confession	Religious communities (as of January 1, 2024)												
	1991	1996	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Bahai Faith		3	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Krishnaism		6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
Armenian Apostolic Church			2	2	2	2	2	2	4	5	6	6	6
Buddhism					1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total	1,092	2009	3,280	3,314	3,337	3,337	3,358	3,375	3,389	3,395	3,409	3,417	3,419

Data source: Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs of the Republic of Belarus and historical references.

As the largest and most influential religious organization in the country, the Belarusian Orthodox Church is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. It currently operates 15 dioceses, 1,737 religious communities, 6 religious schools, 36 monasteries, 15 brotherhoods, 9 sisterhoods, and 1 mission. The Church maintains 1,878 Orthodox churches, with 147 additional churches under construction (CREA 2024a).

The Roman Catholic Church in Belarus has 4 dioceses, 500 religious communities, 451 clergy members, 6 religious schools, 11 missions and 9 monasteries. There are 523 Roman Catholic churches nationwide, with 27 currently under construction (CREA 2024a).

Protestant religious organizations in Belarus are represented by 1,038 religious communities, 21 religious associations, 21 missions and 5 religious educational institutions. The largest Protestant groups are the Evangelical Christian Church (526 religious communities) and the Evangelical Baptist Christians Church (282 religious communities) (CREA 2024a).

The Greek Catholic Church in Belarus has 16 religious communities and 4 religious buildings. In addition, there are 34 registered Old Believers communities, with 28 religious buildings available for worship (CREA 2024a).

The three largest Jewish religious associations in Belarus have registered a total of 51 religious communities, of which 7 have autonomous status and 10 religious buildings. In addition, there are 24 Muslim religious communities, 6 mosques and 3 prayer halls in Belarus, notably the Minsk Grand Mosque officially opened on November 11, 2016 (CREA 2024a).

2 Adjustments to Religious Policy in Contemporary Belarus

Since independence, Belarus' religious policy has evolved through phases of gradual liberalization, normative regulation, and intensified control. The atheist policies during the Soviet period suppressed religious development, while the post-independence religious framework created conditions for its revival. Since the 21st century, through a number of iterative refinements and adjustments, Belarus has established a distinctive religious policy that fosters constructive interaction between religion and society. Reasonable religious policy not only guarantees citizens' freedom of belief, but also promotes social harmony, cultural diversity and national stability, laying a solid foundation for effective state governance.

2.1 Religious Policy of Belarus in the First Years After Independence

In the initial post-independence period, the Belarusian authorities prioritized establishing a religious policy framework suited to the new state system. On December 17, 1992, the Supreme Soviet of Belarus enacted the *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations*, granting citizens the freedom to express their religious attitudes, freely practice faith and conduct religious rituals, while ensuring equality of all citizens of Belarus before the law regardless of their religious beliefs. The 1992 version of the law was characterized by liberality with respect to the registration requirements for religious organizations: In particular, religious doctrines and internal charters did not require registration with state authorities; the registration threshold was set at 10 individuals aged 18 or older; and religious education was permitted through the establishment of study groups, Sunday schools, and other educational formats. The law also allowed the free publication and distribution of religious literature and information materials without prior expert review of their content. In addition, it abolished all unreasonable restrictions on religious activities, recognized the legal entity status and property rights of religious organizations, and extended labor regulations, social security and insurance coverage to all citizens including clergymen. In these conditions, despite the preservation of the traditional dominant position of the Orthodox Church, Protestant, Catholic and Muslim communities also experienced rapid revival. The Catholic Church actively restored its diocesan network in the western districts of the Grodno region through cultural ties with Poland.

In the first years of Belarus' independence, the relatively liberal religious policy and environment promoted the active development of various religious communities, which led to a significant increase in the number of believers and religious organizations. However, this also exposed issues such as the disruptive influence of emerging religious movements, the politicization of religious organizations and their activities, as well as the clericalization of state institutions. In response to these challenges, the Belarusian authorities revised and supplemented the *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations* in 1995. Amendments included explicit prohibitions on religious organizations engaging in activities harmful to Belarusian sovereignty, constitutional order, social harmony, or violation of citizens' rights and freedoms; the introduction of "evangelical assemblies" (Bezniuk 2021, 209) as a recognized form of religious activity; specification of conditions for terminating religious organizations and responsibilities of state agencies on religious affairs. In July 1995, the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus approved the Regulation, "On the Procedures for Inviting Foreign Clergy and Conducting Their Activities on

the Territory of the Republic of Belarus” (Bezniuk 2021, 210), which strengthened control over the influence of foreign missionaries on the state ideology and religious life of the country.

On November 24, 1996, a constitutional referendum was held in Belarus, which resulted in the adoption of a revised Constitution of the Republic of Belarus. It provided constitutional guarantees for religious freedom, while explicitly defining prohibited religious activities. According to the Constitution, Belarus is a unitary, democratic and social law-governed State. The ideology of political parties, religious or other public associations, and social groups may not be made mandatory for citizens. Religions and faiths are equal before the law. Relations between the State and religious organizations are regulated by the law with regard to their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural and State traditions of the Belarusian people. The Constitution prohibits confessional organizations, institutions, and their representatives from engaging in activities that are directed against state sovereignty, constitutional system and social harmony, or violate citizens’ rights and freedoms, hinder the fulfillment of civic duties, and harm public health and morality. Everyone has the right to determine independently his attitude towards religion, to profess any religion individually or jointly with others, or to profess none at all, to express and to spread beliefs connected with one’s attitude towards religion, and to participate in the performance of acts of worship and religious rituals, which are not prohibited by the law.

The adoption and implementation of these legal acts marked Belarus’ exploratory efforts in the religious sphere at the early stage of independence, reflecting responses to emerging realities and challenges in religious life. Despite some shortcomings, they established the foundational framework for a national religious policy, becoming a cornerstone for managing state-religion relations, regulating religious organizations and activities of clergy, while ensuring the freedom of worship and participation of citizens in religious life.

2.2 Regulation of Religious Organizations by the Belarusian Authority at the Beginning of the 21st Century

The socio-economic turmoil of the 1990s profoundly impacted the system of moral and spiritual values of Belarusian society, manifesting in population decline, disproportion of gender and age demographics, mental disorders, suicides, alcoholism, substance abuse, and drug addiction. With the transition to the 21st century – particularly following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 – the Belarusian government increasingly recognized the strategic importance of religious factors in governance, adopting stricter and more systematic regulation of religious

organizations and their activities. On July 17, 2001, Alexander Lukashenko signed Presidential Decree No. 390, enacting the National Security Concept of the Republic of Belarus. This document identified threats to Belarus' informational and humanitarian spheres, including the dissemination of false or deliberately distorted information aimed at undermining social harmony, spiritual values, morality as well as incitement of religious hostility and social hatred (Lukashenko 2001).

Against this backdrop, Belarus sought to construct a state-religion model integrating religion into modern statehood and culture. Through organizational support, legal regulation, administrative interventions and ideological alignment, the state strengthened religious governance while preserving religious freedom, gradually establishing a control system centered on Orthodoxy with stringent restrictions on non-traditional religions movements. Such policy served both domestic stability and reflected Belarus' geostrategic choice of balancing between Russia and the West, while addressing the practical challenges of combating religious extremism.

2.2.1 Organizational Mechanisms for Regulating and Supervising Religious Activities

The origin of the state religious governance body in Belarus dates back to the establishment of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic on August 26, 1991. In 1997, it was reorganized into the State Committee on Religious and Ethnic Affairs of the Republic of Belarus. From 2001 onward, the Committee has operated under the Council of Ministers to address new challenges in state governance, coordinating national and societal efforts in ethnic and religious matters. In 2006, the Committee was restructured into the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, tasked with implementing Belarus' religious policies. Its primary functions include: formulating and executing state policies on ethnicity and religion; guaranteeing the citizens' right of freedom of belief; monitoring religious organizations; resolving issues arising from state-religion collaboration; protecting citizens' rights in cultural, educational, linguistic, and informational domains; and addressing the cultural needs of citizens and expatriates to strengthen national ties. Additionally, the Commissioner annually publishes statistical data showcasing Belarus' achievements in the religious sphere.

In 2008, the Interfaith Advisory Council was established under the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in order to promote dialogue among denominations, preserve traditions of tolerance, and enhance cooperation between government bodies and religious organizations in addressing major societal issues.

2.2.2 Legal Foundations for Regulating State-Church Relations

In order to ensure the citizens' right to religious freedoms, establish legal grounds for regulating religious organizations, and formalize state-church collaboration, Belarus enacted amendments to the *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations* on October 31, 2002, addressing the following key:

2.2.2.1 Emphasis on Interfaith Harmony

The Belarusian government actively upholds peace and harmony among different religious confessions, regarding this as one of the state's major achievements, reflecting the nation's principles of religious tolerance and multiculturalism. However, given the significant confessional diversity and historical and social differences in religious traditions, the role of different religions in Belarusian society varies significantly. In this regard, the state's approach to religion has shifted from equal treatment during the early post-independence period to differentiated engagement. The revised religious law enshrines the different position of religious organizations in the history and development of the Belarusian society. In particular, the document recognizes the decisive role of Orthodoxy in the formation of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people. At the same time, the Catholic Church is considered as having a significant spiritual, cultural and historical influence. It is also emphasized that the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Judaism and Islam are an integral part of the common history of the Belarusian people.

2.2.2.2 Strict Regulation of State Registration for Religious Organizations

Religious organizations acquire legal entity status upon completing state registration. They must register formally with region executive committees or the Minsk Municipal Executive Committee. The establishment of religious associations, monasteries, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, missions, and religious educational institutions requires approval from the state religious affairs authorities. The registration threshold for religious organizations is adjusted to 20 individuals aged 18 or older, while a religious community must consist of at least 10 organizations of the same denomination, with at least one denomination having operated within Belarus for no fewer than 20 years.

2.2.2.3 Legal Protection of Religious Property Rights

Religious organizations have the right to the property obtained or produced at their own expense, donated by individuals or legal entities or submitted to religious organizations as their property by the state, or obtained by another way that doesn't conflict with the legislation of the Republic of Belarus. State institutions may legally transfer religious buildings and constructions with land belonging to them and other

property of religious purpose to the ownership of religious organizations in order to use them for a religious purpose. Religious organizations can use buildings and other property for their needs, which are transferred to them by legal entities and individuals on contractual terms.

2.2.2.4 Determination of the Goals and Fundamental Principles of State Religious Policy

The religious policy of Belarus seeks to maintain and enhance peaceful coexistence of various confessions, foster cooperation with traditional religious organizations and ensure compliance with the internal doctrines, teachings, and administrative regulations. The amendments to the *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations* adopted in 2002 further defined the state's core principles for religious governance in response to evolving dynamics.

2.2.2.5 Equality and Freedom of Belief

Citizens have the right to free choice of atheistic or religious convictions; the right to freely choose, hold, change, express, and disseminate religious convictions; coercion to declare religious affiliation is prohibited; the state guarantees citizens' freedom of belief, and all religious organizations and creeds are equal before the law; and finally, citizens are equal before the law irrespective of their attitude towards religion.

2.2.2.6 Separation of Religion and State

The state neither assigns any state functions to religious organizations nor interferes in their activities; religious organizations neither participate in activities of political parties and other public associations pursuing political ends nor render financial or other support to them; places of public worship are prohibited from displaying state symbols, hosting political meetings, election campaigns, or making statements insulting state representatives, officials, or citizens; religious organizations are entitled to participate in social life as well as use mass media in accordance with legal procedures; and finally, the state promotes establishment of tolerant and respectful relations between religious and non-religious citizens.

2.2.2.7 Separation of Religion and Education

Belarus' national education system is secular in nature; the establishment of religious organizations within state institutions, public entities, the military, or educational facilities is prohibited; minors may not join religious organizations or receive religious instruction against their will or without parental/guardian consent; educational institutions may collaborate with registered religious organizations during non-academic hours based on written parental requests, considering their

impact on Belarusian spiritual, cultural, and traditional development. The procedures, conditions, forms and content of such cooperation are determined by the Council of Ministers in consultation with the President. Officially registered religious organizations may conduct religious education for both children and adults through legal procedures.

These legislative acts not only extended the principles and approaches of earlier state religious policy, but also made several amendments and supplements to address contemporary realities. The state recognizes the autonomy of religious organizations and their significant role in society. However, the law fails to establish effective mechanisms to counteract the spread of totalitarian sects or destructive cults within the country.

2.2.3 Establishing Long-Term Cooperative Relationships of Mutually Trusting and Non-Interference With Church Through Agreements

On June 12, 2003, the Belarusian government signed a cooperation agreement with the Belarusian Orthodox Church, initiating joint projects based on its provisions. The agreement stipulates that the state recognizes the Belarusian Orthodox Church as one of the most significant social organizations, whose historical experience, spiritual potential, and centuries-old cultural heritage have profoundly shaped and continue to influence the spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people. The Belarusian Orthodox Church acknowledges the state as the guarantor of these traditions, adhering to principles of respect for the state's role in maintaining public order, safeguarding national interests, and preserving moral traditions. Key areas of cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and the Orthodox Church under this agreement include social ethics, education, cultural and creative activities, preservation and restoration of historical heritage, healthcare, social security, charity, support for families and maternal/child institutions, care for incarcerated individuals, educational, social and psychological support for military personnel, and environmental protection.

Furthermore, based on this agreement the Belarusian Orthodox Church signed separate cooperation frameworks with 10 state ministries, including the Ministry of Education, the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. For instance, the Ministry of Culture oversees the protection of religious cultural heritage, while educational institutions collaborate with the Orthodox Church to teach school-children about Belarusian moral values and historical traditions, developing the spiritual potential of Orthodox tradition and values.

2.3 Recent Shifts in Religious Policy of Belarus Since 2020

Thanks to the peculiarities of the national character of Belarusians, longstanding traditions of peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups, as well as consistent state policies on ethnicity and religion, Belarus has experienced minimal ethnic or confessional conflicts since independence. However, the presidential election held in August 2020 triggered political and social upheaval, which increased in turn the level of political activity in the religious sphere. Senior clergy and ordinary priests notably shifted their stances: Metropolitan Pavel held prayer services for gathered protesters in front of the Minsk Cathedral, visited injured demonstrators in hospitals, and reportedly apologized for his congratulatory letter to the president. Clergy from other denominations joined Christian prayer rallies, aided hospitalized protesters, provided food and called for an end to violence. Opposition groups exploited these religious tensions to incite national divisions. From the point of view of the authorities headed by Alexander Lukashenko, the Church turned into one of the significant factors threatening national stability and security (Faustova 2020).

Regarding the reasons for the shift in the attitudes of religious figures toward the state, Alexander Shchipkov, Deputy Chairman of the World Russian People's Council and Doctor of Political Sciences, argues that the Lukashenko administration has historically managed religious processes in the same way it manages political processes, yet these two are fundamentally distinct. While political processes may still contain elements of rationality, the motivations behind religious processes and the actions of religious figures are non-rational. Attempting to manipulate this non-rational aspect typically fails to yield desired outcomes. Moreover, Belarusian political traditions span a few decades, whereas religious traditions stretch back centuries. Underestimation of the religious factor often becomes the cause of serious political mistakes (RIA Novosti 2020a, 2020b).

The evolving relationship between church and state has compelled Lukashenko to recalibrate his approach to religious policy. During a public speech in Grodno, he criticized the main Belarusian confessions, stating: "Dear clergy, please calm down and tend to your own business. People come to churches to pray! Churches are not for politics. People should bring their souls to churches, as they once did. Do not follow those who are detached from the masses. Some of you will feel ashamed of the positions you now take, and the state will not remain indifferent" (BELTA 2020). This marked the first time in the history of modern Belarus that the head of state had made such critical and threatening statements to the largest confession in Belarus. Since the onset of protests, over twenty clergy members have faced prosecution,

finances, or arrests. A priest from the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate was added to an extremist list for supporting a political prisoner, while the leaders of the country's two largest religious denominations were both replaced. On August 25, 2020, the Russian Orthodox Holy Synod unanimously approved Belarusian-born Metropolitan Veniamin as Metropolitan of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Unlike his predecessor, Benjamin has refrained from making political statements, declined to visit the injured, removed clergy active in aiding protests, and urged against using the church to divide society. He also instructed congregants not to sing the opposition song "Magutny Bozha" (a hymn of Belarusian nationalists composed in 1943) in churches (Lunkin 2021). Archbishop of the Catholic Church, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, was temporarily banned from entering Belarus and resigned from his pastoral duties in January 2021.

Against the background of these events, Belarusian authorities have grown acutely aware that religion is not only a stabilizer for harmonious social development but also a formidable ideological force. Failure to properly manage church-state relations and guide religious organizations to operate within legal frameworks risks destabilizing political stability, social harmony and economic development. The state's religious policy has consequently undergone new adjustments and changes from its original foundation.

2.3.1 Actively Engaging in Dialogue With the Orthodox Church to Leverage Its Role in National Ideology

During a meeting with Metropolitan of Minsk and Zaslavl Veniamin, President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko stated that the Church (particularly the Orthodox Church) serves as the core pillar of the state, especially in today's insane and dysfunctional world. He questioned, "How can the Church stand apart from the state? It is the backbone of the nation" (RIA Novosti 2020a, 2020b). Lukashenko emphasized that before a cohesive national ideology took shape (with patriotism now prioritized), the Church had been and would remain the spiritual foundation of the country, as well as the basis of its ideology. "I cannot imagine our Church, including the Orthodox Church, existing outside the state. You are not somewhere out there – you are our own, people of the state, just like everyone else. The state is always ready to extend its hand to you " (RIA Novosti 2020a, 2020b). In 2021, the Belarusian government allocated 120 million Belarusian rubles to support church renovations, and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church was awarded a Belarusian state medal.

2.3.2 Implementing Stricter Regulation of Religious Activities Through Legislative Amendments

In order to strengthen government control of religious activities, the Parliament of Belarus adopted a revised draft of the *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations* on November 29, 2023 (National Assembly 2023). The law was developed in accordance with the amendments made to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus during the referendum of 2022 and is aimed at protecting national interests and ensuring state security in the religious sphere. Officially enacted on July 6, 2024, the new version of the law regulating religion now serves as a critical framework for defining church-state relations in modern Belarus. The main changes are as follows.

- (1) Clarification and expansion of the conceptual apparatus. The law introduces such terms as “Sunday religious schools”, “church schools”, “religious enlightenment”, “religious clergy”, and “religious worship buildings” for the first time. It also defines “missionary activities” at the legislative level and clarifies the goals and objectives of the liturgical activities of religious organizations (National Assembly 2023).
- (2) Additional Emphasis on the Principle of Separation of Church and State. Religious organizations are prohibited from engaging in political activities, participating in the activities of political parties, as well as providing them with financial or other support. Religious organizations are prohibited from using any symbols other than religious symbols. It is prohibited from holding meetings, demonstrations, picketing, election agitation and other events of a political nature. War propaganda, incitement of social, national, religious or racial enmity, as well as any other extremist activities are prohibited. In addition, there is a ban on insults against representatives of state bodies, officials and citizens, as well as on attacks against other religions and their followers.
- (3) Introduction of provisions for religious enlightenment. According to the law, religious enlightenment does not belong to educational activities. Religious organizations shall have the right, in accordance with their charters, to establish Sunday religious schools for children and religious study groups for adults in their own or authorized buildings (excluding state educational institutions or privately owned facilities with educational licenses). The content of religious enlightenment curricula must not contradict “the recognized traditional values of the Belarusian people and the state ideology of the Republic of Belarus” (National Assembly 2023).
- (4) Strengthening control over the registration of religious organizations. The law specified in detail the requirements for the establishment, registration and founders of religious organizations. It also introduced mandatory re-registration of all existing religious organizations. Besides that, only citizens

of Belarus permanently residing in the territory of the country can be promoted as heads of religious organizations. Organizations failing re-registration are subject to liquidation by court decision. Information about religious organizations will be included to the Unified State Register of Legal Entities and Individual Entrepreneurs.

- (5) Expanded scope of situation for liquidation and dissolution of religious organizations. Religious organizations committing the following actions are subject to liquidation: threatening the sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus, the main directions of domestic and foreign policy, constitutional order and social harmony; activities aimed at discrediting the Republic of Belarus, propaganda of war, incitement of social, interethnic, religious or racial enmity, humiliation of national dignity and honor; preventing citizens from exercising their rights and performing state, public and family duties, as well as those that harm the physical and mental health of citizens. In addition, a religious organization may be forcibly liquidated if within six months after receiving a written warning it has not eliminated the identified violations or if it has repeatedly committed a similar violation within a year after the warning.
- (6) Expanded social service roles of religious organizations. In order to encourage religious organizations' active participation in social initiatives, the law allows them to establish legal entities or branches to provide social services to certain categories of citizens, such as the disabled, elderly, and individuals with addictions. Monasteries may also host orphanages for children without parental guardians.
- (7) Tightened control over the foreign affairs of religious organizations. To prevent external interference under the guise of religion, the government of Belarus has strengthened control over the domestic activities of international religious organizations. The authorities carry out strict checks on the cooperation between religious organizations with foreign institutions, as well as monitoring of financial flows, to ensure that religious activities are in line with national interests and legal requirements.

The new version of religious law imposes harsher restrictions on registration of religious organizations and their activities. Western countries continue to criticize Belarus on human rights and religious freedom concerns in connection with these changes. However, the adjustment of religious policy after the 2020 presidential election generally reflects Belarus' evolving realities. While ensuring religious freedom, the authorities strengthen ties between religion, social stability, and national interests. These changes demonstrate the government's efforts to strike a new balance in the religious sphere, reshaping the Church's social role, service functions,

and political engagement. This trajectory is poised to further harness religion's potential in advancing national development under contemporary conditions.

3 Impact of Changes In Religious Policy on the Socio-Political Life of Belarus

Religion is a universal social phenomenon that has accompanied the entire course of human development. As a complex social phenomenon, religion unites believers into organized structures with an extensive system of governance. It regulates followers' behavior through rituals, doctrines and theological teachings. Thus, as a component of society, religion not only influences the conduct and ethics of believers but also affects non-believers connected to them, shaping shared values. This makes religion a vital component of regional, national, and even global civilizations.

Modern changes in the religious policy of Belarus are intertwined with its political transformation, economic restructuring, and social changes. For more than 30 years Belarus has developed a unique model of church-state relations, summarized by President Lukashenko as “respect-understanding-harmony” (Konoga 2025). At the same time, each shift in religious policy has exerted varying degrees of influence on the socio-political life of Belarus.

First, religious revival has reshaped modern Belarusian society, fostering integration of religion into people's daily life.

In the early Soviet era, when atheism was the state ideology, all religions – including Orthodoxy – were suppressed, leaving minimal social influence. Following Belarus' independence on August 25, 1991, the country initially retained the USSR's *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations* enacted on October 1, 1990. This law emphasized the principle of equality of all religions and faiths before the law and reaffirmed the secular nature of education (Gorbachev 1990). In contrast to previous legislation, the new law allowed officially registered religious organizations to establish religious schools, study groups and other type of educational activities for children and adults (Gorbachev 1990). It also granted religious organizations legal entity status upon registration and allowed state-owned religious properties to be transferred to them for ownership or private use. Aligning with ideological shifts, Belarus enacted its first post-independence religious law on December 17, 1992.

Changes in the political system altered the status of religion and religious organizations in national and social life, triggering unprecedented structural transformations in the religious sphere. Key manifestations of these changes are as follows: (1) A significant increase in the number of adherents. Between 1994 and 1998,

the proportion of believers increased from 33 % to 47–49 % (42–48 % in urban, 56 % in rural areas), compared to just 16 % (urban areas) and 39.6 % (rural areas) in the 1960s (Novikova 2001). (2) A surge in the number of religious organizations. According to the statistics data of the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, the number of registered religious organizations grew from 1,092 in 1991 to 2,009 by 1996, stabilizing after 2000. Overall, religion has become a defining feature of Belarusian societal life.

Second, the institutionalization of religious policy and harmonious church-state relations bolster state authority and social stability.

The enduring close ties between the secular state and officially separated religious institutions have fostered tolerance, harmony, and mutual understanding among followers of different faiths, while reinforcing the stability of Belarusian governance and ethno-religious cohesion. When church-state relations are harmonious, religious groups can align with state policies under government guidance, offering spiritual support to secular authority and ensuring its stable, sustained operation. Entering the new century, the Belarusian government granted religious organizations certain privileges and freedoms to unify societal spiritual spaces and shape new ideologies. For instance, the 2002 revised *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations* guaranteed citizens' religious freedoms while ensuring regulated activities within legal frameworks. Belarusian leaders regularly attend religious ceremonies, address church leaders and congregants, and provide material and financial support for restoring, constructing, and renovating churches and monasteries. Annually on January 7, President Lukashenko and the Patriarch jointly present the Belarusian Spiritual Revival Award to cultural figures and clergy.

For decades, the Orthodox Church, alongside other denominations, has actively engaged in social welfare, playing pivotal roles in charity, education, healthcare, and other critical areas to promote stability and national unity. The amicable relations among religious groups and their shared value systems have provided fertile ground for political stability and prosperity, underpinning Lukashenko's seven consecutive presidential victories. For example, during the 2020 political crisis, four major religious confessions in Belarus (Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish) jointly issued a statement calling for peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and rebuilding a shared homeland (Sputnik 2020). Furthermore, the successful integration of diverse religious and cultural traditions has enriched Belarusian national identity and underscored the spiritual importance of dialogue and cooperation. On February 10, 2025, President Lukashenko remarked during a meeting with religious representatives: "In modern Belarusian history, there has never been discord or persecution based on religion, ethnicity, or race. All religious confessions coexist in mutual respect, peace, and harmony. The coexistence of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and other faiths – whose principles align

with Belarusian societal values – has united and strengthened our nation ” (Kononovich 2025).

At the same time, the role of the Orthodox Church in strengthening the national cohesion and state identity of Belarus continues to grow. Historically, Orthodoxy has held pivotal significance in shaping Belarusian culture, state formation, national ethos, and political and economic development. Official records indicate that Orthodoxy spread through trade relations and military contacts with Byzantium and Scandinavia even before the Baptism of Rus. Officially introduced to the Principality of Polotsk in 992 right after the Baptism of Rus, Orthodoxy endured centuries of Catholic challenges, fluctuating between prosperity and decline, yet emerged as Belarus’ spiritual anchor. The 1596 Union of Brest established the Uniate Church, converting some Belarusians to Uniates (also known as Eastern Catholicism), while others embraced Roman Catholicism. However, the overwhelming majority of Belarusians retained the traditional Orthodox faith. Belarusian spiritual values, shaped by the influence of East Slavic thought, combine Slavic collectivism, Orthodox *sobornost*, Catholic heroism, Protestant personal restraint, and the compromise of Uniatism. The Orthodox Church views the maintenance of national stability and moral integrity as its mission, securing its role in the ethical sphere. As a branch of Christianity, Orthodoxy inherits the mission of universal salvation and moral stewardship (Ma 2002). Thus, during crises the Orthodox Church consistently advocates peace and stability, showcasing its unique socio-moral function. President Lukashenko, commemorating the 1025th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus stated: “In choosing its path, the Belarusian people rely on the humanistic values of Christianity” (Yelizarov 2016, 24). Consequently, the Belarusian Orthodox Church will continue to amplify its role in fostering national identity and unity.

Third, adjustments to religious policy have driven shifts in church-state relations.

On one hand, President Lukashenko emphasizes the Orthodox Church as the nation’s core pillar and regarded it as an important force in the ideology of the country. Religious organizations are permitted to establish legal entities or branches to provide social services for vulnerable groups, reflecting the government’s effort to redefine religion’s societal role by encouraging greater participation in public initiatives and expanding support systems. This shift may strengthen ties among religious organizations and society while improving service quality. On the other hand, the revised *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations* explicitly bans religious organizations from political or partisan activities, reinforcing the separation of church and state. This amendment aims to curb religious influence over political decision-making and national direction. However, stricter oversight risks limiting religious freedom, fueling discontent among faith communities and drawing Western criticism of Belarus’ human rights record. The ban on political

engagement may also alienate religious leaders, creating tensions between some groups and the state. Balancing state-church dynamics through innovative governance and harnessing religion's role in shaping national identity while preventing its politicization remains one of the critical challenges for Lukashenko's administration.

Fourth, the revival of Orthodoxy advances process of Russia-Belarus integration. Russia-Belarus integration is rooted in deep historical ties and contemporary imperatives. The two nations signed the Treaty on the Creation of the Union State on December 8, 1999, establishing a confederation while retaining sovereignty. Integration accelerated after the 2020 political crisis and 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict. On January 29, 2024, the Union State's Supreme State Council convened in St. Petersburg, adopting a new three-year decree to deepen cooperation in industry, agriculture, energy, logistics, and information technology, alongside agreements on science, infrastructure, culture, and media. On December 6, 2024, they signed the Union State Security Treaty and adopted the Security Concept, formalizing mutual defense obligations. Practice shows that the "fraternal" friendship of the two countries has withstood serious tests. One of the most effective ways for Russia and Belarus to overcome the current challenges is comprehensive integration and deepening cooperation.

From the perspective of religious and cultural exchange, Russia and Belarus share a profound Orthodox traditional heritage, Orthodoxy occupies an important place in the religious life of both countries. Metropolitan of Minsk and Zaslavl, Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus Veniamin believes that while economic and cultural ties unify the peoples, solidarity grounded in shared faith is "stronger and more enduring" (BELTA 2023). Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, in his letter to President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko, emphasized that centuries of friendship between the peoples of Russia and Belarus rest on shared spiritual and cultural values, with traditional morality underpinning societal vitality and mutual understanding (Sputnik 2023). As the Belarusian Orthodox Church remains subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate – with its leaders appointed by the Russian Orthodox Church – it increasingly serves as a spiritual anchor for national unity, and will play its spiritual leading role in the further integration of Russia and Belarus. Lukashenko has described the Moscow Patriarchate as a stronghold of centuries-old Christian traditions, universal human values and the invaluable cultural heritage of the Slavic people (RIA Novosti 2023).

4 Conclusions

The contemporary religious landscape in Belarus is a product of historical and current forces. Over three decades of evolution, Belarusian religious policy has matured from post-independence liberalization to orderly regulation in the early 21st century, followed by post-2020 presidential election adjustments and tightened

oversight. These policy shifts reflect sociopolitical recalibration, a rebalancing of state-church dynamics, and, fundamentally, the mutual adaptation of nation-building and ideology. History demonstrates that policy evolution consistently serves political stability and national interests.

In the future, the religious policy of Belarus will probably oscillate between two models: religion as a guardian of traditional values and as a participant of modern governance. However, its key goal – to maintain the stability of power – will remain unchanged. The transformative measures enacted in Belarus' religious sphere will profoundly shape the nation's social fabric, influencing its political, cultural, and religious life – and even its cultural positioning within Eurasia's geopolitical landscape – with enduring consequences.

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