



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Registration number, Östersjöstiftelsen: 61/2017

Project manager: Nikolay Zakharov

Project title: Religion in post-Soviet nation-building: Official mediations and grassroots' accounts in Belarus

1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

First, the project has shown that there is a noticeable correlation between the extent of civil engagement by believers and their specific denominational choice, their choice of a congregation or parish, and even their geographic area. The first and the most important reason for the unexpected role of the churches is that the forms of protest that they could suggest neatly fit into the nondemocratic setting of Belarus, providing it with an opportunity structure for otherwise forbidden types of mobilization. Amid the post-Soviet distrust of both the rulers and those who actively protest against them, as well as generally weak interest or disillusionment in politics, religious denominations enjoying high societal prestige provided an institutional frame for supposedly depoliticized forms of protest, featuring nonviolence and nonideological slogans. Guilt for state atheism and repressions against believers, the high status of the clergy, and the churches' strong ties with Russia (BOC) and Europe (Catholics and Protestants) make the religious frame very convenient, minimizing the risks compared with other forms of protests. The greater degree of freedom that religious organizations enjoyed in Belarus can also be explained by relatively harmonious relations between the church and the state before the protests. The conclusion can be drawn that being partly co-opted civil society institutions, which can enjoy some degree of freedom, under certain circumstances religious organizations can become a decisive factor in fostering protest activities.

Second, our study emphasizes the primary role of such threats as erosion of rights and state repression in generating sustained mobilization. Individuals' self-conception as Christian was intertwined in the Belarusian case with a broader collective identity expressed through collective action. The drop in Lukashenka's popularity rating on the eve of the elections and the mobilization of believers and clergy is undoubtedly a new sociopolitical situation for Belarus, to which the church was forced to react. In this context, the response of churches was reactive rather than proactive. The public reaction to violent actions was much stronger than in 2010 when protests were also dispersed—the vast distribution of videos and photographs through social networks and Telegram channels created an effect of direct perception of violence. While the existing literature suggests that religious belief is strongly connected to values that promote the conservation of social order, our research has shown that believers' proactive stance partly originates from their Christian morals. The conclusion can be drawn that religious organizations in competitive religious markets may tend to mobilize communities for political causes, but the self-reported desire to stand against injustices and violence plays the most crucial role.



Third, although the internal discussions in Christian churches are largely reflective of the main opinions prevalent in Belarusian society, our study has shown that there is a noticeable correlation between the extent of civil engagement by believers and their specific denominational choice, their choice of a congregation or parish, and even their geographic area. The splitting strategy used by the authorities appears to have led an alienation of the mass of Catholic believers from the state and the transformation of the Catholic Church into an important institution for mobilizing protest. The conclusion can be drawn that Lukashenka partly succeeded in representing the protests not as civil resistance but as a political conflict along ideological lines and geopolitical choices.

2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

The project has shown that in societies with the illiberal, or authoritarian political regime religion can be seen as a privileged arena of protest within existing legal frameworks of the “contract” between the state and the church. Being partly co-opted civil society institutions, which can enjoy some degree of freedom, under certain circumstances religious organizations can become a decisive factor in fostering protest activities. The project further developed a notion of *civilisation* of a ‘given’ religious identity, whereby believers choose their religious affiliation rather than treat it as something predetermined.

3. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

Recent literature on religion and nation-building in Eastern Europe overlooks Belarus, while publications focusing on modern Belarus neither consider the role that religion might be playing in nation-building nor pays heed to religious institutions as having influence on actors contributing to the social change. In post-communist Europe, the church still retains its role of a support of the state’s project of national identity, or otherwise it contributes to the preservation of ethnic identity of minorities, but it no longer works as a locus of civil resistance. However, in Belarusian setting the situation is complicated by the repressive political regime and the relative weakness of Belarusian civil society and nationalism. The literature often presents religious organizations in the post-Soviet states as inflexible and conservative, opposing any change and progress, and servile to the state. However recent developments in Belarus call into question the idea of the churches’ servility and the tendency to represent Christian believers and the leaders of the dominant denominations as a homogeneous mass. The project explored how the establishment-driven nation-building in multi-confessional Belarus affects the identification practices of believers at the grassroots level. Treatment of religious institutes – whereby the denominational choice is constrained, and different churches have different legal status – make Belarus both unique and clearly ‘more than just a case’ in Eastern Europe. This interdisciplinary project enriched the scholarship on nation-building and the role of religion in this process in post-Soviet Belarus. Several findings were extrapolated to other post-Soviet states and the conclusions are cross-references to other relevant sources dealing with neighbouring (Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania) states. Where our contribution to civil society studies is concerned, we have indicated potential directions whereby initiatives of the religious groups can foster civic society enactment.



4. New research questions that the project has led to

The recent events in the region open new venues, making data collected during this project an invaluable asset. The year 2020 was unique for Belarus, with mass protests of a scope and intensity not seen before. People were initially protesting electoral fraud; then they came to the streets to raise their voices against the violence and torture used by riot police and employees of detention centers on 9 August and later, in the first days after the contested elections. Since the Russian invasion in Ukraine 2022 both the Belarusian state and Belarusian civil society have been involved in one of the most serious international crises in post-war Europe. The position of the Christian churches as the largest nongovernment organizations in Belarus poses a particular challenge for sociological analysis given their unique position (given a special status of churches in post-Soviet Belarus as well as acknowledging their connection with “headquarters” in the Vatican and in Moscow) as non-state actors that are neither government-organized nor fully co-opted into cooperation with the state. This project has led to the new research questions: what is the logics behind the engagement of various religious confessions in protests against electoral fraud and war and in promoting alternative visions of desirable political development?

5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Peer-reviewed articles:

*open access publications marked with **

1. Lastouski, A., Mudrov, S., & Zakharov, N. (2024) Churches in the 2020 Elections and Political Protests in Belarus: Raising Voices in the Time of Repression and Turmoil, accepted by *Journal of Contemporary Religion*.
2. Zakharov, N., Lastouski, A., Mudrov S. (2023) Religion and the Protest Movement: Christian Churches in 2020 Belarus, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 56 (3): 22-46. <https://doi.org/10.1525/cpcs.2023.1823993>
3. Mudrov, S. (2023) ‘Church and State in a Time of Crisis: The Belarusian Orthodox Church’s Response to the 2020 Elections and Political Protests’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 75 (3): 925-946
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09668136.2023.2213420>
4. * Lastouski, A. & Zakharov, N. (2022) Sacred Language in the Borderlands: Discussions on the Language of Belarusian Catholicism. *Nationalities Papers*, pp.1-15. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/nationalities-papers/article/sacred-language-in-the-borderlands-discussions-on-the-language-of-belarusian-catholicism/7817EA19F7D67E8FC7680008D131ED89>



5. * Mudrov, S. (2022) ‘The Orthodox Church and Education in Belarus as a Reflection of the Specific Pattern of Church-State Relations’ / *Plural. History, Culture, Society*, Issue 2, pp. 152-169 https://plural.upsc.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/07_MUDROV.pdf
6. * Mudrov, S. & Zakharov, N. (2022) The Internal Discussions in the Belarusian Orthodox Church on Identity and Policy Issues: A Contemporary Perspective. *Journal of Religion in Europe*, (15):81–104 <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1670568/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
7. * Lastouski, A. (2022) “Death Parade” on Victory Day (Minsk, 2020) // *Institute of National Remembrance Review*, 3, 2021-2022, Pp. 211-242. https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.ojs-doi-10_48261_INRR210308
8. * Mudrov, S. (2021) ПРАВОСЛАВНАЯ ЦЕРКОВЬ, ВЫБОРЫ И ПРОТЕСТЫ В БЕЛОРУССИИ ‘Orthodox Church, elections and protests in Belarus’, *Sovremennaya Evropa [Contemporary Europe]*. Issue 4 (2021), pp.161-171 <http://www.sov-europe.ru/images/pdf/2021/4-2021/Mudrov-4-21.pdf>
9. Mudrov, S. (2021) ‘Doomed to fail? Why success was almost not an option in the 2020 protests in Belarus’, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*. 29(1): 109-120. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25739638.2021.1928880?scroll=top&needAccess=true>
10. * Lastouski, A. От молитвы к протесту: католическая церковь в Беларуси. *Неприкосновенный запас*. 2021. №3. С. 233-252. <https://magazines.gorky.media/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/nz-138-Lastovskij.pdf>
11. * Mudrov, S., and Zakharov, N. (2021) The Belarusian Orthodox Church at grassroots’ level: the organisation, functioning and role of Orthodox brotherhoods and sisterhoods. *Journal of the Belarusian State University. Sociology*. 2021, pp. 70–78 <https://elib.bsu.by/bitstream/123456789/258452/3/70-78.pdf>

Debates, interviews, and popular science presentations:

Nikolay Zakharov:



Svensk Kyrkotidning <https://svenskkyrkotidning.se/artikel/kyrkor-i-belarus-grogrund-for-folkliga-protester/>

Baltic Worlds <https://balticworlds.com/an-historical-background-to-the-demonstrations-in-belarus/>

Aliaksei Lastouski:

<https://catholicnews.by/njama-sjensu-rjezac-sacyjolag-pra-ljos-polskaj-movy-kascjole-belarusi/>

<https://www.dw.com/ru/soziolog-perspektiv-uderzhatsja-v-belarusi-netni-u-lukashenko-ni-u-rossii/a-61758083>

<https://www.delfi.lt/ru/news/live/kak-i-pochemu-beloruskiy-rezhim-obrashchaetsya-k-istorii-velikogo-knyazhestva-litovskogo-92836385>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuOIqwyqlNY>

<https://radiounet.fm/alyaksej-lastouski-u-belarusau-yoscz-patreba-razabraczcza-sa-svayoj-gistoryyaj/>

<https://euroradio.fm/ru/lastovskiy-rabotat-na-bлаго-belarusi-ne-stroit-illyuzornye-dvorcy-iz-idey>

Five most important conferences:

1. 27th World Congress of Political Science [IPSA – International Political Science Association]. Buenos Aires, Argentina, 15-19 July 2023. Paper presented by Sergei Mudrov ‘The Protests, Symbols and Religion: An Uneasy Encounter in the Post-election Belarus’
2. ISA (International Sociological Association), June 25-July 1, 2023, Melbourne, Australia
Paper presented by Nikolay Zakharov: Religion in Authoritarian Belarus: Protest Mobilisations Against Election Fraud and Against War in Ukraine



3. BASEES (British Association for Slavonic & Eastern European Studies) 2023 Glasgow, UK. 31.03—02.04.2023 Christian Churches and identity-building in contemporary Belarus, organized by Nikolay Zakharov

Nikolay Zakharov - Churches in the 2020 Elections and Anti-War Protests in Belarus: Raising Voices in the Time of Repression and Turmoil

Aliaksei Lastouski - Failure of the "National Church": the Fate of Greek Catholics in independent Belarus

Sergei Mudrov - Identity and Policy Issues in the Context of the Internal Discussions in the Belarusian Orthodox Church

4. 53th Annual ASEES (Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies) Convention (Chicago, November 10 – 13, 2022). "Transformations of Belarusian Identity: Anxiety about Russia or Rebellion against the Poles and the Lithuanians?", panel organized by Nikolay Zakharov.

Presentation by Aliaksei Lastouski “Historical Politics of the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches in Belarus”

5. 51th Annual ASEES Convention (San Francisco, November 23-26, 2019) “Religion in post-Soviet Belarus: Official mediations and grassroots’ accounts”, panel organized by Nikolay Zakharov

Sergei Mudrov: The Orthodox Church in the Context of Post-Soviet Nation-Building and Identity Politics in Belarus.

Aliaksei Lastouski: Sacred Language in the Border Area: Discussions on the Language of Belarusian Catholicism