

The Orthodox Church and Education in Belarus as a Reflection of the Specific Pattern of Church-State Relations

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Abstract

This paper¹ discusses the development of cooperation between the Orthodox Church and educational establishments in Belarus. The first Agreement on Cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) was signed in 1994, several years before the adoption of a new Law on the Freedom of Conscience and the signing of the Agreement on Cooperation between the Church and the State. Although many objectives, stated in the first Agreement, were not met on time, there was a continuing and mutually beneficial cooperation between the Ministry and the BOC since then, with a series of Programmes of Cooperation, signed every 2-4 years. The Orthodox Church is the only religious denomination in Belarus which concludes Programmes of Cooperation with the Ministry of Education; however, one cannot claim that the general legislative framework is particularly favourable for this Church. Indeed, there are some restrictions, limiting the presence of the BOC and its representatives in educational establishments. Also, the Church has not managed to get the inclusion of the “Foundations of Orthodox Culture” and related courses in the curriculum. At the same time, these courses can be taught as optional subjects, at the request of parents. In addition, the BOC is able to organise various cooperation with educational establishments (seminars, lectures, regular talks, etc.); however, the scope and intensity of this cooperation largely depend on the will of the schools’ administration to interact with the Orthodox Church.

Keywords: Orthodox Church, Belarus, education, school, the teaching of religion.

Introduction

Currently, around 60% of the population of Belarus state they are believers. The Belarusian Orthodox (BOC) and Roman Catholic Churches constitute the vast majority (respectively, 73% and 12% of all believers), with Protestant Churches representing a minority of believers.² The number of BOC

¹ This study was supported by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (Östersjöstiftelsen), research project “Religion in post-Soviet nation-building: Official mediations and grassroots’ accounts in Belarus” (61/2017).

² Pew Research Center, “Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues”, 2018, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://>

communities is more than half of all religious communities in the country (1709 out of 3389). As of 2022, fifteen dioceses form the established administrative structure of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. The Church is governed by the Holy Synod, which is composed of the ruling bishops of all the dioceses in Belarus. The most important decisions of the Belarusian Synod (such as the election of new hierarchs or the establishment of new seminaries or dioceses) should be approved by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, of which the Metropolitan of Minsk is a permanent member. The ecclesiastical ties between Moscow and Minsk have been strong and friendly, due to the unity in faith and tradition, the intensive cooperation and the low level of nationalistic feelings in Belarus.

The current model of Church-State relations in Belarus is close in its essence and scope to the 'cooperationist model', which lies somewhere between the strict separation and the state (official) Church models. The cooperationist model denotes formal separation between Church and state, but normally with agreements, regulating the status of Churches. This model became a popular development in the post-Communist world, equipping Churches with new functions and opportunities, not known in the Communist regimes.³ An example of this model could be seen in Germany, where, according to Soper and Fetzer, the Basic Law "establishes a formal separation between Church and state, but at the same time the constitution secures cooperation between the two institutions in such areas as education and social welfare provision".⁴

The Constitution of Belarus stipulates that the relations between the state and religious organisations "shall be regulated by law with regard to their influence on formation of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people."⁵ This provision recognizes that Churches can be meaningful and influential in the public domain and that the state will apply different approaches when building relationships with religious organisations. In the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, adopted

www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/.

³ Mikhail Antonov, "Church-state symphonia: its historical development and its applications by the Russian Orthodox Church," *Journal of Law and Religion* 35, no. 3 (2020): 474-493; Liudmyla Fylypovych and Anatolii Kolodnyi, "The Culture of State-Church and Church-State Relations: The Ukrainian Case," *Roczniki Kulturoznawcze* 12, no.2 (2021): 9-30.

⁴ Christopher Soper and Joel S. Fetzer, "Religious Institutions, Church-State History and Muslim Mobilisation in Britain, France and Germany," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33, no.6 (2007): 933-944.

⁵ Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, accessed September 15, 2022, <http://law.by/databank-business/constitution-of-the-republic-of-belarus/>.



in 2002, specific mention is given to the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, as well as Lutheranism, Islam, and Judaism. The Orthodox Church is placed at a preferential position in this law, since it recognizes the “determining role of the Orthodox Church in the historic formation and development of the spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people.”⁶ This has been similar to developments in some neighbouring countries (i.e. Russia, or Poland) where there is also a sort of preferred religion/religions.⁷ The important role of the Orthodox Church has been further reinforced by the Agreement on Cooperation, signed between the State and the Belarusian Orthodox Church in June 2003. In this agreement, the state recognises the Orthodox Church as “one of the most important social institutions” in the country and provides guarantees for the “freedom of [its] internal organization”. The agreement gives priority to the cooperation between the Church and state in the spheres of education, culture, charitable work, family and family values, morality, etc.⁸ The Belarusian Orthodox Church is the only religious institution in Belarus which has signed such an agreement, which is reflective of its role, significance and dominance in the religious domain. Obviously, the provisions of the 2002 Law on the Freedom of Conscience and the 2003 Agreement on Cooperation have created favourable conditions for the development of cooperation and common work between state institutions and the Orthodox Church. Indeed, in 2003 and 2004 the Church signed the Programmes of Cooperation with a substantial number of governmental agencies, including ministries and state committees.⁹ The assessment of this cooperation varies,¹⁰ but it would be wrong to disregard

⁶ Natsionalnoye sobraniye Respubliki Belarus (2002). *Zakon Respubliki Belarus o svobode sovesti i religioznikh organizatsiyakh* [National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus. The Law of the Republic of Belarus on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations], Minsk.

⁷ Pew Research Center, “Many Countries Favor Specific Religions, Officially or Unofficially”, 2017, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/10/03/many-countries-favor-specific-religions-officially-or-unofficially/>.

⁸ Soglasheniye (2003) *Соглашение о сотрудничестве между Республикой Беларусь и Белорусской Православной Церковью* [The Agreement on cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church], accessed May 25, 2022, <http://www.church.by/resource/Dir0009/Dir0015/index.html>.

⁹ The Belarusian Orthodox Church signed the programmes of cooperation with the National Academy of Sciences, Committee on the prevention of the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and with the Ministries of Interior; Health; Information; Culture; Defence; Education; Emergencies; Natural Resources; Sport and Tourism; and Labour and Social protection.

¹⁰ Nelly Bekus, “On the political mission of Orthodoxy in Belarus and its consequences for the church and state”, in *Orthodoxy Versus Post-Communism?: Belarus, Serbia, Ukraine and*

the important presence of the Belarusian Orthodox Church in various spheres, including key ones for the state and society.

In this article, I shall discuss one of these spheres, the educational. The main research question I address is to what extent Church has been able to get and use the new opportunities in the educational field. The article is divided according to the following questions: (1) how the BOC has developed the programmes of cooperation with the Ministry of Education, especially in terms of their content; (2) What were the main outcomes of this cooperation, in terms of access by Church representatives to educational establishments, and the ability to introduce at schools courses with the religious/religion-related content.

Overall, the cooperation between the BOC and the Ministry of Education/ educational establishments has been one of the most intensive and has been given some priority by the Church and state structures. At the same time, this issue has been barely given appropriate attention in academic literature, with few exceptions. In 2009, Nikolay Sukhotski, then a specialist at the Ministry of Education, admitted that it is not possible to speak about the “harmonious and efficient joint work of the educational system and the Orthodox Church in the Republic of Belarus”.¹¹ He recognised that for many education specialists, the issue of interaction between educational establishments and the BOC seemed ‘non-substantial’, or seemed to be ‘explosive’ even “for discussion in a pedagogical collective”.¹² Seven years later, in 2016, priest Dmitriy Vorsa, who analysed the BOC’s cooperation with educational establishments, admitted that in the last 20 years “there has been a transition from the principles of separation of state and school from the Church, to the principle of building constructive

the Russkiy Mir, edited by Michal Wawrzonek, Nelly Bekus and Mirella Korzeniewska-Wiszniewska (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 71–158; Natallia Vasilevich, “Unequal by default: Church and state in Belarus in the period of consolidated authoritarianism”, in *Civil society in Belarus 2000–2015. Collection of texts* (Warsaw: East European Democratic Centre, 2015), 97–128; Sergei Mudrov, “Belarusian Orthodox Church”, in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Lucian Leustean (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 334–356; Sergei Mudrov, “Church-State relations in the post-Communist world: the cases of Belarus and Estonia,” *Journal of Church and State* 59, Issue 4 (2017): 649–671; Sergei Mudrov and Nikolay Zakharov, “The Internal Discussions in the Belarusian Orthodox Church on Identity and Policy Issues: A Contemporary Perspective,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 15, Issue 1-4 (2022): 81–104.

¹¹ Nikolay Sukhotski, “Социально- педагогические аспекты взаимодействия учреждений образования и православной церкви в Республике Беларусь” [Social and pedagogical aspects of the interaction of educational establishments and Orthodox Church in the Republic of Belarus], *Problemy upravleniya*, no. 4 (2009): 218.

¹² Sukhotski, “Социально- педагогические аспекты”: 219.



relationships”.¹³ Although he does not provide an exact assessment of these relationships, he claims that there are ‘certain successes’ in the realization of joint programmes of the BOC and governmental institutions.

This article is based on the analysis of official documents, syllabuses, textbooks, unpublished reports and expert interviews with representatives both of the Church and governmental institutions. It is organised around the following key points: an analysis of changes in the Programmes of Cooperation between the Church and the Ministry, the finalizing of the principal legislative framework of cooperation, and the analysis of some practical aspects of this cooperation, including the teaching of different courses on religion, such as the “Foundations of Orthodox Culture”.

The Programmes of Cooperation: Key Developments

The desire of the Orthodox Church to be involved in the area of education is understandable: the Church regards this area, especially in the sphere of secondary education, as very important for promoting its values and views (and this would be similar for most religious denominations). Indeed, the influence of the school on the minds of schoolchildren is important; therefore, the desire of the Church to see schoolchildren as having at least neutral, or better positive attitudes towards Christian values and ideals is reflective of the Church’s missionary purposes. Besides, it is reflective of the desire to establish more objective attitudes towards religion in Belarusian society, which is still influenced by the remnants of atheist ideology. Finally, the Church might aim at promoting family values and helping schoolchildren, disoriented by various ideologies, to find their place in changeable and at times hostile surroundings.

It is important to note that the first formal agreement between the BOC and MofE was signed as early as 1994: almost nine years before signing of the Agreement on Cooperation between the BOC and State. To some extent, it became possible due to personal negotiations between Metropolitan Philaret¹⁴ and then the Minister of Education Vasilii Strazhev¹⁵, who was in general

¹³ Dmitriy Vorsa, “Ретроспективный анализ нормативной правовой базы Республики Беларусь по вопросам взаимодействия государственных органов с Белорусской Православной Церковью в сфере образования” [Retrospective analysis of the legal basis of the Republic of Belarus on the issues of interaction of governmental institutions with the Belarusian Orthodox Church in the sphere of education], *Vysheishay shkola*, no. 4 (2016): 51

¹⁴ Head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church in 1978-2013.

¹⁵ Vasilii Strazhev was educated as physicist (PhD in Physics), and worked in academia and governmental institutions. He was appointed Minister of Education in August, 1994, soon after A.Lukashenko was elected for the first time President of Belarus (July, 1994). Strazhev run the ministry for more than 7 years, until October, 2001.

quite positive towards the cooperation with the Church. The Agreement on Cooperation, signed in September 1994, became a unique document for Church-State relations of the early 1990s, since it provided some new and unique opportunities for the BOC, not even imaginable several years earlier. In this Agreement, the emphasis was made on the necessity of the “revival of spirituality and morality of Belarusian people, restoration of cultural traditions and confirmation of the historical role of Orthodoxy in Byelorussia”. It was not just a declarative document; in fact, it was the first document in independent Belarus where the principles of the post-Communist model of Church-State relations became visible and were clearly formulated. The following key points of the document are worth mentioning, reflecting its significance as a building block in the construction of the cooperationist model of Church-State relations in Belarus.

First, the document speaks about the necessity to realise in Belarus “the traditional European principle of the differentiated status of religions, confessions”. It defines the necessity to develop the principles of participation of traditional for Belarus confessions in the teaching, research and administrative processes of educational establishments. In addition, the document makes a very important step in relation to the presence of the Orthodox Church in educational establishments and its influence on the syllabus. The Ministry recognises drawbacks in the teaching of a number of disciplines (philosophy, ethics, cultural studies, history, etc.) and admits that the teaching of “secular courses” should be improved; moreover, this improvement needs to be done in consultation with the Orthodox Church and other traditional confessions.¹⁶ This was done in order to overcome the legacies of the Communist era, when philosophical, historical and other disciplines were taught in the atheist and harshly anti-religious character. Thus, the document was aiming at diminishing these negative aspects, at bringing more diversity into the educational sphere, with the noting of interests and position of the main Belarusian confessions, including the Orthodox Church.

The 1994 Agreement between the BOC and MofE turned into a somewhat revolutionary document, since it made provisions for the Orthodox Church to get access (non-existent before) to educational establishments, with the right to influence the content of various courses and disciplines—namely the disciplines, where the religious issues have been present or where the ideational

¹⁶ Soglasheniye (1994) Соглашение о сотрудничестве между Министерством образования и науки Республики Беларусь и Белорусским Экзархатом [Agreement on Cooperation between the Ministry of education and science of the Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Exarchate], Minsk.



factors have been interpreted. On top of this, the document contained provisions for the development of adequate mechanisms for the recognition of degrees in theology (awarded by theological schools); it was stated that it would be necessary to develop this by September, 1996.¹⁷ At the same time, the revolutionary theoretical provisions performed poorly in practice, mainly remaining mere declarations. This could be explained by the strong opposition at that time to the Church's involvement in education: a logical consequence of the long domination of atheist ideology. In addition, the general legislative framework in the 1990s was not that favourable to the Orthodox Church; the changes occurred only in the early 2000s. There was some difference in comparison with neighbouring states; for instance, in Russia, the principal legislative document – the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Communities— was adopted in 1997.

After the Agreement between the Orthodox Church and State was signed in 2003,¹⁸ opportunities appeared for the formal conclusion of agreements between the BOC and governmental agencies. Therefore, the new Programme of Cooperation between the BOC and MofE was signed in 2004, for two years only. In the declaratory part of the Programme the following points should be noted. First, there was indicated the necessity to use the potential of Orthodox traditions and values¹⁹ in the "formation of personality of a human being" as well as the "correction of behavior and social support of children and teenagers with deviant behavior, who got into socially dangerous situations". Second, the Programme was aimed at helping the "development of humanities, including theological and religious studies education" in Belarus.²⁰ These two points reflected, in my view, the important goals of the Orthodox Church: to use the positive potential of its values and to create adequate conditions for the development of theological education in Belarus, which had been extinct in the years of the Communist regime. The practical points, elaborated in the 13-page

¹⁷ Soglasheniye (1994).

¹⁸ The signing of such an agreement became possible only after a new Law 'On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations' was adopted in 2002.

¹⁹ These are normally understood as the traditions and values aimed at the support of strong and stable family, respect towards each other, support of chastity, honesty, the ability to do good deeds, and the presence of religious elements, inspired by the Orthodox Christianity, in the everyday life.

²⁰ Программа (2004) Программа сотрудничества между Министерством образования Республики Беларусь и Белорусской Православной Церковью на 2004-2006 гг. [Programme of Cooperation between the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church for the years 2004-2006], Minsk.

long table, included a number of concrete measures/events. For instance, the document envisioned the elaboration of statutes of the Orthodox gymnasium, the liberal arts-religious studies classes and the conception of the development of religious education in secular higher education establishments. Again (as 10 years earlier), the statement was included about the necessity to work for the recognition of diplomas, issued by educational establishments of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Some other points were also quite ambitious: the opening of classes (at the request of parents), realizing spiritual upbringing based on the Orthodox traditions, the consideration of opening theology departments, and the introduction of an elective course on theology at higher educational establishments.²¹

The next Programme of Cooperation, from 2007 to 2010, was less ambitious and omitted a number of important points, which were included in 2004. For instance, there was no declaration to use “the potential of Orthodox traditions and values”. It was stated instead, in line with other legislative acts, that the Orthodoxy “made a crucial influence on the historical growth and the development of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of Belarusian people”; therefore, it can currently be regarded as “an important basis of spiritual and moral upbringing of growing generations”. Unlike previous Programmes, the 2007 document did not specify separately the development of theological education; it was replaced by the “development of humanities (including theological and religious studies) education”. In the concrete measures, listed in the table, a number of conferences, music festivals and discussion forums was again mentioned, but the point for the recognition of diplomas was omitted. No mention was given to the organisation of celebrations of religious feasts, such as the Nativity and Easter (mentioned in the previous Programme); it was replaced by such events as ‘Christmas meetings’, ‘Easter evenings’, ‘Family day’, etc.²² Most likely, it reflected the officials’ perspectives from the ministry at that time. The proposal to establish departments of theology also disappeared, although the document contained a proposal to elaborate a syllabus for the elective course “Foundations of Theology”, for the humanities students in higher education establishments. However, one needs to note an important point: it was specified that the Ministry and BOC would aim at

²¹ Программа (2004).

²² Программа (2007) Программа сотрудничества Министерства образования Республики Беларусь и Белорусской Православной Церкви на 2007-2010 гг. [Programme of Cooperation of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church for the years 2007-2010], Minsk.



the “elaboration, expertise and approval” of the syllabuses of elective courses, special courses, and experimental disciplines which describe “the basis of the Christian worldview, morality and culture, traditions and role of Orthodoxy in the formation of culture and statehood of Belarusian people”.²³

Overall, it is plausible to claim that the 2007 Programme was less favourable towards the Orthodox Church, especially bearing in mind that the key points of the 2004 programme were not fulfilled. To an extent, it reflected changing relations between the Church and state; it is therefore not surprising that the next Programme, signed in April 2011 (for almost four years, until the end of 2014) did not show substantial improvement. On the one hand, in the Preamble of this 2011 Programme the statement from the 2004 Programme was returned, with the use of “the potential of Orthodox traditions and values” in the “formation of personality of a human being”. On the other hand, in the section on practical actions, some aspects again were excluded: for instance, no mention of the common celebrations of religious feasts. Instead, there were the ‘events’, dedicated to “state holidays, memorable dates and traditional international days”. Otherwise, the list of events was quite similar to the previous ones: conferences, round tables, common seminars, and drafting methodical material for various elective courses. Probably the most prominent direction of work was the development of the State standard and syllabus on theology.²⁴

Finally, the Programme for 2015-2020 had a preamble, almost identical to the previous Programme. By way of concrete steps, a few points were innovative and quite notable, making some specific aspects of this programme. P.4.5 envisioned the organisation of medical brotherhoods in medical educational establishments. The concrete plan in the table was divided into the thematic blocs, which included “the common research and innovation activities”, “the forming of love for motherland”, “the development of folk arts”, “the organisation of work with the family, strengthening the spiritual and moral basis of the family, revival and propagation of family values”, and “organising events for memorable dates”, “volunteer activities”, “Orthodox education”, “the information activities in the educational establishments to prevent dependencies (drug use and other habit forming substances) and negative influence of totalitarian sects and destructive cults”. Notably, it was decided to

²³ Programma (2007).

²⁴ Programma (2011) Програма супраадуаства Манастрства абразаваня Республалкы Беларусь и Белорусскай Праваславнай Царквы на 2011-2014 г. [Programme of Cooperation of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church for the years 2011-2014], Minsk.

organise celebrations of anniversaries related to some Orthodox saints, such as St Serafim of Sarov and St Alexander of Neva.²⁵

Overall, assessing the development of the Programmes of Cooperation between the BOC and the MofE in 1994-2020 (starting from the 1994 Agreement), one can claim that the content of these programmes was gradually changing, with the omission of crucial points of the first programmes. Indeed, the sections on the recognition of diplomas of theological schools, the establishment of the departments of theology, and the introduction of optional courses on theology at higher education establishments have vanished from the subsequent Programmes, which was disadvantageous for the Church. The Programmes became more 'events-oriented', listing a number of common seminars, lectures, visits, round-tables, discussions, etc. At the same time, the Programmes were making important provisions for the presence of the Orthodox Church at secondary schools: via the common events, lectures/talks of the priests and teaching of optional courses. Eventually, the content of these Programmes reached a balance, acceptable to both sides, at least in the area of secondary education. In tertiary education, it remained more disadvantageous for the Orthodox Church (in comparison with secondary education), although the Programmes provided opportunities for the BOC to interact with higher education establishments.

The Government's Resolution

The Programmes of Cooperation between the BOC and MofE cannot be regarded as the key legislative documents, since they are not legally binding for participating sides. The most important and detailed (as well as legally binding) provisions on cooperation with religious organisations were formulated in the Resolution of the Council of Ministers, adopted in June 2011. This document leaves a dubious impression. On the one hand, it repeats a number of provisions, which could be found in the earlier adopted legislative acts, such as the necessity to take into account "the historical role and influence" of religious organisations. The Resolution also stipulates that only the Orthodox Church is permitted to sign an Agreement with the Ministry of Education (since the BOC is the only religious organisation in Belarus which signed the agreement with the state).

²⁵ Программа (2015) Программа сотрудничества между Министерством образования Республики Беларусь и Белорусской Православной Церковью на 2015-2020 гг. [Programme of Cooperation between the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church for the years 2015-2020], Minsk.



On the other hand, this Resolution introduces a number of restrictions, found also in other legislative acts, such as the Code on Education, adopted in December 2010. For instance, educational establishments are allowed to interact with religious organisations only during the extracurricular time. To make things more complicated, the initiative to interact with the religious organisation should be approved by the founders of the educational establishment; besides, schoolchildren can participate in the common activities only having the written consent of their parents (or guardians). Also, this Resolution prohibits missionary activities of religious organisations, the distribution of religious books, video- and audio-material with religious content (excluding earlier stated for tutorial work), the religious services and ceremonies, as well as placing at educational establishments of religious symbols and religious objects.²⁶

It is worth noting that there is no single opinion among the clergy of the Orthodox Church in the assessments of legislative acts, related to Church-State cooperation. In total, I interviewed around 25 clergymen, representing all regions of Belarus. The interviewees included the representatives of the intellectual elite of the Orthodox Church, i.e. people working in theological seminaries/academy, doing some research, and holding responsibility for the educational work in their dioceses. The opinions of priests about the interaction with state institutions and the practical significance of the agreements between the BOC and the state, including the Ministry of Education, reflect mainly their experience and the peculiarities of their concrete practical work in this field. Normally the Orthodox clergy are far from unilaterally praising this cooperation, although, as father Pavel Bubnov claimed, the state “did everything it could do”: it established an appropriate legal model which “could be used, in the first instance, by the state institutions, civil servants, so that they could use all these documents and agreements in their work”.²⁷ At the same time, he mentions the “inertia of the Soviet era”, when the people, who were brought up in that era, may now not be convinced “even by state directives or agreements with the Church”, and, as a result, they do not allow Church representatives to

²⁶ Postanovleniye (2011) Постановление Совета министров Республики Беларусь от 24 июня 2011 г. № 838 “Об утверждении Положения о порядке, условиях, содержании и формах взаимодействия учреждений образования с религиозными организациями в вопросах воспитания обучающихся”. [Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus from 24 June, 2011, #838 ‘About approval of Regulations on the order, conditions, content and kinds of the interaction of educational establishments with religious organisations on the issues of upbringing of those who study’], Minsk.

²⁷ Interview with Fr Pavel Bubnov, lecturer at Minsk Theological Seminary. August 24, 2019.

appear in, say, educational establishments.²⁸ Fr Sergiy, sharing his experience of cooperation with local institutions in a small provincial Belarusian town in the Minsk region admits the inability to cooperate, since there are no concrete points in the agreements and the local authorities are “with the Communist inertia in their heads”.²⁹ Fr Sergiy M. is not very optimistic; he says that he is deeply dissatisfied with the agreements, since “much effort is directed at the creation of some bulky structures, meetings. Then we need to report all this, and much effort and time is consumed by such activities”.³⁰ He describes some situations where a lack of concrete points may lead to uncertainties:

‘Let us discuss some practical issues. Can we place an icon of St Ephrosinia of Polotsk at school? No. But if we say that she is an educator of the 10th century? Then yes. Can we place an icon at kindergarten? No. But I can put it on a chest of drawers of my child, since it is his private space. And these issues have not been solved, since there is an illusion that if we get together with state officials, sign something, then the state and society will become closer to the Church’.³¹

In December 2011 in line with the Resolution of the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Education issued its recommendations on the organizing of cooperation of educational establishments with the Belarusian Orthodox Church. This document did not contain anything revolutionary in comparison with the earlier adopted Resolution, although it certainly elaborated more concrete points which were regarded as important from the Ministry’s perspective. The document develops the Resolution’s principles in the following way. In order to allow “advanced study of the spiritual, moral and cultural heritage of Orthodoxy”, as well as the study of its role in the formation of Belarusian statehood and patriotic upbringing of children and youth, it should be possible for students (pupils) to attend optional subjects. In the area of family work, it is recommended that the young generation should accept such notions as “chastity, strong family, responsible parenthood and respect to parents” (this is called “gender and family education of the youth on the basis of Christian values”). Also, it is important, in the process of joint activities, to form in children and studying youth “the active life position, based on the moral and ethical basis of Christianity”. It is recommended to provide at schools some information about the Orthodox saints, who, according to the

²⁸ Interview with Fr Pavel Bubnov.

²⁹ Interview with Fr Sergiy. May 10, 2019.

³⁰ Interview with Fr Sergiy M. June 11, 2019. By telephone.

³¹ Interview with Fr Sergiy M.



authors of the document, contributed to the formation of the Belarusian state, such as St Ephrosinia of Polotsk, St Kirill of Turov, St Sofia of Slutsk and others. The other aspects include some work to prevent deviant behavior, to organise common seminars, to explore local Orthodox sites and similar activities.³²

In principle, it appears that the authors of the Ministry's recommendations were trying not to promote the most unfavorable (for the Church) parts of the Council of Minister's Resolution. Certainly, the Government's Resolution imposes some restrictions on the presence of religious organisations, including the Orthodox Church, in educational establishments, but it still leaves some space for maneuvering, allowing the participating sides to find ways for mutually beneficial cooperation.³³

Teaching of Religion

As earlier noted, the current legislation in Belarus does not allow the teaching of Religion at schools as part of the curriculum. In that respect, it makes a stark difference with Russia, where pupils can choose (as a compulsory module) one of the four main religions: Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism, or 'secular ethics', if no preference for one of these four religions has been made. Belarusian laws allow only 'optional courses' on Religions at schools; at present, there are the following subjects approved by the Ministry of Education:

Foundations of Orthodox Culture (for primary school, 1-4 forms).

Foundations of Orthodox Culture (for secondary school, 5-9 forms).

The Bible as a monument of history and literature (6 form).

Churches, castles and palaces of Belarus (7 form).

Ringling of Bells skills (9 form).

³² Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus. Методические рекомендации по организации сотрудничества учреждений образования с Белорусской Православной Церковью [Methodical recommendations on the organizing of cooperation of the educational establishments with the Belarusian Orthodox Church]. Minsk, 20.12.2011.

³³ There were some negative comments after the Resolution had been adopted. For instance, Yulia Chirva said that the authorities, after they prohibited the presence of icons and prayers at schools, continue to allow 'demons and witches' in the form of Halloween celebrations. However, Fr Alexander Shimbalev, then the Head of the Department of Education and Catechism of Minsk Diocese, pointed out that 'The guidance published on the website of the Ministry of Education (on the implementation of the Resolution) seems to be convincing enough to counterbalance possible negative consequences of this governmental act. In fact, many things, as previously, depend on the will of the head of educational establishments.' Mudrov, "Church-State relations".

Culture and religion (10-11 forms).

Foundations of Religious Studies (11 form).

Foundations of Orthodox culture. Orthodox sacred objects of Eastern Slavs (1-11 forms).

Some of these courses are of a general character; others are more Orthodox-oriented, since they provide knowledge about Orthodoxy and reflect Orthodox values and principles. These include the “Foundations of Orthodox Culture” and, to an extent, “The Bible as a monument of history and literature”. However, less than half of Belarusian schools have introduced these courses; there is a clear regional difference (with the domination of western regions). This domination can be explained by a higher level of religiosity in western Belarus, which did not experience the persecution of religion for as long as the eastern part of the country.

The practical arrangements for opening optional courses have been standardized throughout Belarus; it normally looks as follows. If there are enough pupils who are willing to study one of the Orthodox-related subjects (as confirmed by written applications of their parents), then the school allows these subjects to appear in the timetable (not as a part of the compulsory curriculum), normally once a week. Each lesson lasts (as all other school lessons) for 45 minutes; however, it is not equal to regular, obligatory classes, since marks are not awarded to pupils, and there is normally no requirement to attend all the classes. In some cases, pupils cease attending these courses; it may lead even to their discontinuing. The initiative to introduce optional courses can also be taken by teachers or the school’s administration; of course, if the administration will be against it, it would be almost impossible to introduce these courses, even if the pupils and their parents are in favour. Partially, this underlines the presence of a subjective approach in this area, reflecting the drawbacks in the current legislation.

As was explained by Elena Oleshko, who was for nine years a teacher of the “Foundations of Orthodox Culture” at school #10³⁴ of Baranovichi, in her case the initiative was taken by the school administration. Oleshko³⁵ was asked by the deputy director to teach this subject, not least because she had earlier attended educational classes at the local Orthodox Church. After getting this request, Elena Oleshko had to explain this initiative to parents,

³⁴ Normally the ‘Foundations of Orthodox Culture’ will be taught at school #10 once a week, on Saturdays, under the notion of ‘Associations of mutual interests’.

³⁵ Elena Oleshko was a full-time teacher of Belarusian language and Arts.



who had to make a decision for their children. In the talks with parents, she normally draws attention to the “Programme of Cooperation” between the BOC and MofE (thus explaining the legislative basis), and then offers more detailed explanation of the optional course. As Oleshko emphasised, there has never been a negative perception of this course from the parents; although the proportion of pupils, who attend it, is normally low, no more than 15-20%.³⁶ Sometimes pupils stop attending these classes; although at times the interest is great and the pupils themselves propose the themes they wish to discuss. The main textbooks include “Foundations of Orthodox Culture”, written by authors from the Russian Federation—Andrei Kuraev and Alla Borodina. However, in many cases, the Belarusian textbooks have been used, prepared under the guidance of Alexander Broiko, chairman of the NGO “Centre of Orthodox Education”. These textbooks have been approved in Belarus by the Ministry of Education and have been distributed more widely to the schools’ libraries. In addition, these textbooks might be regarded as more adaptable to Belarusian circumstances than the ones from the Russian Federation.

As earlier noted, in eastern Belarusian regions this optional course is not present as widely as in the western regions. Priest Alexiy Naumenko, who is in charge of the Department of Religious Education and Catechism of Mogilev Diocese of the Orthodox Church, explains that the attitudes of school authorities have been in general favourable, but this is not very helpful. There are two main problems which prevent organizing more classes: a lack of qualified teachers and a lack of pupils willing to study these subjects. As father Alexiy explains:

‘When we come to meetings with the parents, many are in favour, but later on only few of them (if any) agree to submit the necessary written applications. In principle, this is understandable: most parents wish to provide for their children practical-oriented subjects, which would be necessary for admission to higher education establishments (say, mathematics, physics or languages). In addition, we still feel the influence of the atheist era: eastern Belarus was more subject to this influence than western Belarus. We therefore used some alternative methods of working: for instance, in the 2018-2019 school year we were giving several lectures on morality for higher school pupils; we gave these lectures in almost half of all schools in the city of Mogilev’.³⁷

It is worth noting that the positive assessment of cooperation at the regional level is also confirmed in western Belarus. The practicalities and favourable

³⁶ Interview with Elena Oleshko, teacher of the ‘Foundations of Orthodox Culture’ at school #10, city of Baranovichi, Belarus. By telephone. July 22, 2020.

³⁷ Interview with Fr Alexiy Naumenko, Mogilev Diocese. By telephone. July 21, 2020.

arrangements of this cooperation have been reflected in the report of the Department on Religious Education and Catechism of Grodno diocese, where the following statements are of particular significance:

‘One can see an interest in common work with Grodno diocese from the representatives of the administration of educational establishments, teachers, students and their parents. The administration of educational establishments willingly invites Church representatives, especially when it concerns spiritual and moral problems in society. According to the administration of educational establishments, which cooperate with Orthodox parishes and where the optional course ‘The foundations of Christian morality and culture’ is taught, the number of offences among students is decreasing, the number of cases when the rules are violated is diminishing, and the emotional atmosphere in children’s and adults’ groups have been stabilized’.³⁸

In Grodno diocese, there are 23 schools (as of 2019) where ‘Foundations of Orthodox Culture’ are taught. The number of students attending this optional course ranges from 3 to 26 (here I take into account separate classes, not combined classes, as present at some schools). In almost all cases, this subject is taught by school teachers, representing different disciplines—history, geography, Russian and English languages. Only in one case—a gymnasium in the town of Schuchin—is this subject taught by a local priest, although, as noted by father Igor, in many cases schools would have preferred to have clergy teaching the “Foundations of Orthodox Culture”, but it is difficult to realize in practice, since priests often lack required pedagogical qualification.³⁹ In order to understand the scope of cooperation in Grodno diocese, one can mention that in 2019 there were 164 events in the educational area, mainly talks at different educational establishments—with students, their parents and staff.

Overall, it is plausible to claim that currently there are adequate opportunities for the teaching of religion, including Orthodox-related subjects, at schools, but only as optional courses. All attempts to introduce these courses as part of the curriculum have failed, not least due to the influence and resistance of atheist and anti-Church forces. Nonetheless, if there are attempts

³⁸ Grodno Diocese (2018) Религиозное образование и катехизация [Religious education and catechism], Grodno.

³⁹ Grodno Diocese (2019) Информация о преподавании факультативного курса «Основы православной культуры» в государственных учреждениях образования, находящихся на территории Гродненской епархии Белорусской Православной Церкви, в 2017/2018 учебном году [Information about teaching of optional course ‘Foundations of Orthodox Culture’ in the state educational establishments, located on the territory of Grodno Diocese of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, in 2017/2018 school year], Grodno; Interview with Fr Igor, Grodno Diocese. By telephone. July 30, 2020.



to introduce optional classes, these are normally welcomed by parents, although only a fraction of them choose “Foundations of Orthodox Culture”. This is explained by higher demand for more practically-oriented courses, such as languages or mathematics. As a rule, the school administration does not make obstacles, although if it takes a negative stance, there are no realistic legal ways to overcome this. Indeed, almost everything in this issue has been put into the hands of the administration of educational establishments.

Conclusion

The developments of cooperation between the Belarusian Orthodox Church and Ministry of Education were not progressing evenly, with the changing legislative framework, which allowed certain fluctuations from one side to another. The key points could be confined to the following. The first Agreement on Cooperation, signed in 1994 – well before the adoption of a new Law on the Freedom of Conscience (2002) and the Agreement on Cooperation between the BOC and the State (2003) – contained a number of provisions, which looked quite revolutionary for that time and opened great prospects for the development of mutual work between the Church and educational establishments. However, the development of relevant legislation has been controversial. On the one hand, there were legislative acts, which provided better conditions for the activities of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. On the other hand, the legislative acts in the area of education introduced several restrictions, as could be seen in the Code on Education, adopted in December, 2010 (a new edition of this Code was adopted in January 2022, with the same provisions on religion) and the Council of Ministers’ Resolution, adopted in June 2011. However, the interpretations of the principal provisions of these documents were not directed against the Orthodox Church, allowing it to continue its work in education, with the signing of new Programmes of Cooperation with the Ministry of Education.

Unlike neighbouring countries (Russia, Lithuania, Poland), Belarus does not allow the teaching of religion at schools as part of the curriculum. Instead, this can be taught as optional courses, where the most prominent role is given to the “Foundations of Orthodox Culture”. This course was not introduced widely at schools: this is explained by low demand and by a lack of qualified teachers, although the teaching of this course varies from region to region, with more substantial figures in western Belarus. At the same time, even in the conditions of not the most favourable legislative framework, the BOC managed to establish, in many cases, quite successful cooperation with

educational establishments, often in the form of common seminars, lectures, and talks on various subjects of religion, morality, family, values, etc. However, one needs to note that the scope of intensity of this cooperation depends on the will of the administration of educational establishments. If rectors/directors of schools, colleges and Universities are not willing to cooperate, the doors of their institutions will be closed to the Church and its representatives. This, of course, presupposes that there are better opportunities for cooperation in the regions with a higher level of religiosity and better perception of religion in general and the Orthodox Church in particular.

Rezumat

Această lucrare analizează dezvoltarea cooperării dintre Biserica Ortodoxă și instituțiile de învățământ din Belarus. Primul acord de cooperare între Ministerul Educației și Biserica Ortodoxă din Belarus (BOB) a fost semnat în 1994, cu câțiva ani înainte de adoptarea unei noi legi privind libertatea de conștiință și de semnarea Acordului de cooperare între Biserică și stat. Deși multe dintre obiectivele stabilite în primul acord nu au fost îndeplinite la timp, de atunci a existat o cooperare continuă și reciproc avantajoasă între minister și BOB, printr-o serie de programe de cooperare, semnate la fiecare 2-4 ani. Biserica Ortodoxă este singura confesiune religioasă din Belarus care încheie programe de cooperare cu Ministerul Educației; cu toate acestea, nu se poate afirma că cadrul legislativ general este deosebit de favorabil pentru această Biserică. Într-adevăr, există unele restricții, care limitează prezența BOB și a reprezentanților săi în instituțiile de învățământ. De asemenea, Biserica nu a reușit să obțină includerea în programa școlară a cursului „Fundamentele culturii ortodoxe” și a cursurilor aferente. În același timp, aceste cursuri pot fi predate ca materii opționale, la cererea părinților. În plus, BOB este în măsură să organizeze diverse cooperări cu unitățile de învățământ (seminarii, prelegeri, discuții periodice etc.); cu toate acestea, amploarea și intensitatea acestei cooperări depind în mare măsură de voința administrației școlilor de a interacționa cu Biserica Ortodoxă.

Cuvinte-cheie: Biserica Ortodoxă, Belarus, educație, școală, predarea religiei.

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