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## Between Heaven and Earth: A Political and Ideological Dilemma of the Belarusian Orthodox Church before and since the Belarusian Crisis

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This article discusses the evolution of the Belarusian Orthodox Church's (BOC) role and influence in the society, its relationship with the state, and the internal schisms within the Church leadership. Belarusian politics and society has traditionally been Russian-oriented. Close linguistic and cultural relations with Russia were embedded in the official ideology of Belarusian state and national building policies, which from the onset singled out the ideas of Slavic unity and Belarus's special role in the Eastern Slavic civilization. In this regard, the BOC was an element of two machineries, the objectives of which growingly drifted apart. Aliaksandr Lukashenka's regime viewed the BOC as an important partner of the state and a control mechanism over the society. Russia, which lacked a well-defined policy of attraction towards Belarusian society, in turn mostly relied on the regime and domestic social institutions, specifically the BOC, in maintaining its influence. The two crises, regional (2014) and domestic (2020), significantly upended the "in-between" position of the BOC and raise questions about its ideational and institutional cohesion. Moreover, officially as an autonomous Exarchate functioning under the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), the BOC has had to balance its position within the ROC that during this time has sought stronger status abroad. The relationship between BOC and ROC leadership grew more complex after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and after Russia's invasion to Ukraine in 2022, when the ROC leadership chose to support the political regime. The open conflict between the national, now autocephalic Ukrainian Orthodox Church and Moscow Patriarchate have revealed the intra-Orthodox (post-)colonialism in the region but also further complicated the ways the BOC can position itself within the Belarusian society.

**Keywords:** Belarus, Orthodox Church, Russia, nation-building, identity

On January 7, 2023, Belarusian ruler Aliaksandar Lukashenka, a staunch supporter of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, visited the St. Elisabeth Convent in Minsk in the company of the metropolitan Veniamin and the State Commissioner for Religious and National

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Affairs to thank them for supporting the Russian soldiers on the front.<sup>1</sup> There is unlikely another more pro-war place in the country. Since February 2022, the Convent's volunteering refocused on supplying Russian frontline soldiers, whom Andrey Lemeshonok, its head, has called "new saints . . . for the Saint Russian Orthodox Church."<sup>2</sup> This position contrasts sharply not only with both the state's and the Church's response to the Russian war in 2014, but also with the strong anti-war sentiments in Belarusian society that have been vehemently prosecuted.<sup>3</sup>

This article sheds light on how a series of crises—the Russian invasion in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Belarusian popular mobilization in 2020, and the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022—have affected the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) as an institution and actor. Traditionally, BOC has had an important but ambivalent role in the Belarusian foreign and domestic policies. On the one hand, it played a central role in post-Soviet re-integration projects, which highlighted the ideas of Eastern Slavic unity (and often automatically defined Slavs as Orthodox). At the onset of Lukashenka's rule, his regime deemed the Church as the state-building partner in which churchmen were, first of all, "people of the state" (*gosudarstvenniki*)<sup>4</sup> and underlined the centrality of Orthodoxy in the nation-building project.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, BOC was an integral element of Belarus-Russia relations and a part of Russia's soft power. The BOC is a non-autonomous branch—the Belarusian Exarchate (*Ekzarkhat*)—of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and thus has subordinate status to the Moscow Patriarchate. In this way, the BOC's active partnership with the Belarusian state is coupled with Russia's growing ambition to utilize the Church in advancing its foreign policy agenda.

In the following pages, we discuss the evolution of the Belarusian Orthodox Church's role and influence in Belarusian society, and its entangled relationship with the state and the ROC, which deepened the internal schisms within the Church leadership. From its origin, the BOC was endowed with contradictory ideological and political functions. Such complexity originally allowed the BOC to play a special role in spreading Russia-oriented ideas in Belarus, simultaneously advancing the Belarusian state- and nation-building projects. However, after the Russia-Ukraine war began in 2014, the idea of a tripartite nation of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, a central element of Eastern Orthodox thought, became heavily contested. The BOC found itself facing the double challenge of navigating between the Belarusian regime's new nation-building policies, which aimed to distance Minsk ideologically from Russia, and ROC efforts to promote East Slavic unity. Consequently, after 2014, the BOC has been acting cautiously with respect to potentially divisive lines within society, in particular lowering its public pronouncements of the Pan-Slavic narratives. This double allegiance led to the gradual political and ideological factionalization within the BOC. The Belarusian Revolution in 2020 and the Russian invasion to Ukraine deepened divisions within the BOC and between church and state.

We start with the debates on national identity and "Otherness" in Belarus. Combining post-colonial theory and critical geopolitics, we unfold how Belarus's competing identity projects relate to each other and to Russia's own attempts at nation-building and its eventual imperial resentment. Conceptually, we draw from studies on identity, state- and

<sup>1</sup> "Poseshchenie monastyrskogo kompleksa Sviato-Elisavetinskogo zhenskogo monastyria," *President.gov.by*, last modified January 7, 2023, at <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/poseshchenie-minskogo-hrama-vo-imya-svyatitylya-ioanna-shanhayskogo-i-san-francisskogo> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Andrey Lemeshonok, "Tserkov' vsegda sozidalas' na krovi," last modified February 13, 2023, at <https://obitel-minsk.ru/lutschije/2023/02/cerkov-sozidalas> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> "Belarus: Zone of Repression," *Human Rights Watch*, last modified January 12, 2023, at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/12/belarus-zone-repression> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> "Lukashenka: Tserkov'-opora i odin iz osnovnyh sterzhnei gosudarstva," *BelTA*, last modified November 2, 2020, at <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-tserkov-opora-i-odin-iz-osnovnyh-sterzhnej-gosudarstva-413706-2020/> (accessed June 14, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Anastasia V. Mitrofanova, *The Politicization of Russian Orthodoxy: Actors and Ideas* (Stuttgart, 2005), 49–50.

nation-building that point at the persistence of competing/alternative projects reflecting geopolitical (supranational) identities.<sup>6</sup> The “Russian world” (*russkii mir*), or Eurasianism, has been juxtaposed to various visions of “Europeanness,” while post-Soviet nation-building has been under the heavy influence of both EU and Russia political integration pressures. In our reading, this tension makes post-colonial theory useful in studying the region.<sup>7</sup> The colonial war that Russia is waging currently on Ukraine as a response to the erosion of its political and ideational hold, only further underlines the centrality of identity politics to domestic and regional processes.<sup>8</sup> Russia’s denial of Ukraine’s political sovereignty and its insistence on the inseparability of Ukrainian identity from the Russian means that it implicitly rejects any post-Soviet country’s right to exist outside Russia’s embrace.

Furthermore, in the field of post-colonial studies, Belarus has always been a stand-out case, where a part of the colonized exhibited pride in belonging to the colonizer, or even *being* a colonizer. According to Serguei Oushakine, one of the key functions of self-proclaimed postcoloniality in Belarus was a self-deprivation of any historical agency.<sup>9</sup> Overall, the post-Soviet subalternity between the externally imposed hegemonic regimes “seemingly does not fit in with what we know about ‘subalterns’ from contemporary postcolonial theory.”<sup>10</sup> The Belarusian uprising of 2020, however, as the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, turned into a “postcolonial revolution” of forming and claiming collective subjectivity without a need for the Other.<sup>11</sup>

Against this background, we view the BOC’s dual or *in-between* role as an illustration of the complexity of state- and nation-building in Belarus, blurring the boundaries of belonging and othering. It can be seen as a (futile) attempt to balance between a Russia-driven “post-Sovietism,” which de-facto tries to restore dominance in the territories that it considers a part of the *russkii mir*. Simultaneously, it demonstrates an uneasy process of pursuing independent state- and nation-building projects as an often reluctant de-colonization attempt in response to Moscow’s geopolitical pressure. The resulting ambiguity towards Russia has made “in-betweenness” a defining feature of identity politics in Belarus, which is well exemplified by the BOC’s evolving role. We argue that the BOC’s double belonging, connecting Russia-centricity with new nationalist discourse, was instrumental in re-shaping Belarusian nation-building. As a result of this process, a “hybrid identity” emerged: it underlines

<sup>6</sup> See Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese, eds., *Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space: New Tools and Approaches* (London, 2015). In this regard, post-1991 Russia is not an exclusion, yet the Church became one of the focal points for national cohesion and identity in its nation-building. Helge Blakkisrud, “Russkii as the New Rossiiskii? Nation-Building in Russia After 1991,” *Nationalities Papers*, 51, no. 1 (January 2023): 64–79, here 73.

<sup>7</sup> Yet, we acknowledge the long-standing critique and limitations of post-colonial theory to the study of the post-Soviet region (see David Chioni Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *PMLA*, 116, no. 1 (2001): 111–28). Post-colonial theories overlap with post-imperial analyses or pan-nationalist approaches. Both focus on Russian/Soviet discourses and trace how Belarusian identity developed in this context. However, postcolonialism takes a broader view through connections with global contexts and the interpretation of Russian history and culture: see Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, Eng., 2011), while post-imperialism concentrates instead on Russia’s specific condition after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Moscow’s policy of denying nationhood to Ukraine or Belarus goes beyond desire for imperial control of territories.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Mälksoo, “The Postcolonial Moment in Russia’s War Against Ukraine,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 25, nos. 3–4 (2022): 471–81; see also Vasilios N. Makrides, “Orthodox Christianity in the Context of Postcolonial Studies,” in Hans-Peter Grosshans and Pantelis Kalaitzidis, eds., *Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age* (Leiden, 2023), 338–67, here 357.

<sup>9</sup> Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “Postcolonial Estrangements: Claiming a Space Between Stalin and Hitler,” in Julie A. Buckler and Emily D. Johnson, eds., *Rites of Place: Public Commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Evanston, 2013), 285–314.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*; on Belarusian post-colonial thought, see also Oushakine, “How to Grow out of Nothing: The Afterlife of National Rebirth in Postcolonial Belarus,” *Qui Parle* 26, no. 2 (2017): 423–90.

<sup>11</sup> Ilya Gerasimov, “The Belarusian Postcolonial Revolution: Field Reports,” *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space*, 3 (2020): 259–72.

belonging to Russia, yet tries to differ from it. As we show, this peculiar molding of subaltern and imperial perspectives has proved its cohesion during the ongoing Belarusian crisis and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Since the 2000s, postcolonial critique as well as new imperial histories have brought crucial insights to the research of the “post-Soviet” region. However, both traditions have paid little attention to religion.<sup>12</sup> In his recent study, Vasilios N. Makrides unpacks the multi-faceted colonial relations around and within the Orthodox world, inviting scholars to examine, among other things, the processes of “intra-Orthodox colonization.”<sup>13</sup> Postcolonial theory enables us to view the evolution of the BOC as an ambivalent actor in a time of the re-configuration of the post-Soviet region. Furthermore, we add critical geopolitics to analyze the spatial dimensions of postcolonial identities and strategies. Geography has always been a part of colonial and neo-imperial projects. Critical geopolitics, which stresses the role of various geopolitical discourses in shaping identity and policies, including legitimizing foreign policy,<sup>14</sup> can help to better assess the colonial past and present.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, the Church is a public institution that actively participates in formulating a national idea, legitimizing the incumbent regime, and building the state. In this process it produces, shapes, and maintains the geopolitical discourses inherent to the state's nation-building and/or state-building projects. We focus on how the Church responded to Belarusian official nation-building, against a backdrop of shifting political contexts, structural constraints, and popular attitudes, and the Kremlin's gradual revision of its understanding of the Russian nation.

Conceptually, we suggest diluting the boundaries of these research traditions by acknowledging the “in-betweenness” of our case both theoretically and empirically: first, public institutions—such as the Church—are rooted in society but also within the state. Nation-building processes are shaped and re-shaped by an array of actors, in which the Church can be an instrumental part of both “top-down” and “bottom-up” influences.<sup>16</sup> Second, postcolonial theories and intra-Orthodox colonialism in particular provide essential frameworks for studying “post-Sovietism,” but they rarely consider the agency of the colonized sufficiently. In our case, the Belarusian people should not be reduced to the “subaltern” in the colonial setting, but as actors—and believers—who have diverse loyalties, not always “imposed” on them from above.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Postcolonial studies focusing on former Soviet Union countries, including Belarus, have mainly been interested in history representation and memory politics: see Ilya Gerasimov, Serguei Glebov, and Marina Mogilner, “The Postimperial Meets the Postcolonial: Russian Historical Experience and the Postcolonial Moment,” *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space*, no. 2 (2013): 97–135; Simon Lewis, “The ‘Partisan Republic’: Colonial Myths and Memory Wars in Belarus,” in Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, eds., *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (Cham, Switzerland, 2017), 371–98.

<sup>13</sup> Makrides, “Orthodox Christianity in the Context of Postcolonial Studies,” 359.

<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Suslov, Marek Čejka, and Vladimir Đorđević, eds., *Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe: Origins, Manifestations and Functions* (Cham, Switzerland, 2023); John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Revisioning World Politics* (New York, 1998); see also Dmitrii Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes: Resurrections of a Russian Orthodox Geopolitical Metaphor,” *Geopolitics* 11, no. 2 (2006): 317–47, here 320.

<sup>15</sup> James D. Sidaway, “Postcolonial Geographies,” in Douglas Richardson, Noel Castree, Michael F. Goodchild, Audrey Lynn Kobayashi, Weidong Liu, and Richard A. Marston, eds., *The International Encyclopedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment, and Technology* (Chichester, Eng., 2017).

<sup>16</sup> For example, Orthodox Churches have become integral to state-building in Romania, Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine as a source of state legitimacy and a powerful social institution that can support the transfer or embeddedness of particular sets of norms and rules. See Andreas Wimmer, *Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart* (Princeton, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Irina Paert, Catherine Gibson, and Liliya Berezhnaya encourage scholars to study religion and confession in imperial and post-imperial contexts because “[r]eligion was not only an important category of difference, serving as shorthand descriptions to identify groups, but it can also counterbalance the often obsessive concern with nationality questions and provides us with examples of multiple alternative and coexisting loyalties, hybridities, ambiguities, and forms of ‘national indifference.’” In our reading, the idea of multiple loyalties hold very much true in the contemporary settings as well. See Paert, Gibson, and Berezhnaya, “Confession, Loyalty, and National

The Russian Orthodox Church is seen, in this context, as an institution that formulates and distributes a national idea as a part of a nation-building project within Russia and simultaneously applies colonial policies in its near abroad—both of which it perceives as embedded in its spiritual mission.<sup>18</sup> The Churches in Russia and Belarus traditionally act within the frames set by the secular political leadership, yet strive to maintain independent political goals. Moreover, both the Belarusian regime and the ROC hold a certain view of a desired course in international relations and of the Church's place in nation- and regime-building that they aim to advance with their own means. This makes the relationship between the BOC and the Belarusian state as well as the ROC more complex than just patronal or colonial, respectively: it is rather a co-dependent relationship, the terms of which are re-negotiated as the political context evolves. For Belarusian foreign policy, the relationship with Russia has been a central goal and main instrument for ensuring the survival and functioning of the state.<sup>19</sup> Commonality of interests, values, and worldviews of the Belarusian and Russian regimes explain the durability of the constantly deepening relationship.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the Russian state leadership and the ROC have had many common views, and the latter has successfully lobbied its interests in politics.<sup>21</sup> However, after 2022, it became clear that when their views contradict, eventually the Church would adopt the state position.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to studying the relevant research literature, we conducted five in-depth interviews in August–September 2021 with highly engaged representatives of the BOC, the ROC, and the research community. Churches are hierarchical and closed institutions, which makes the selection of and access to interviewees challenging. With our final combination of voices from within, representing not only the “liberal” camp but also the “official,” more conservative part, we could map the different views within and around the Churches. The roles and expertise of our interlocutors were diverse, so each interview was designed in advance individually, consisting of partially overlapping sets of open questions. One of the interviews was conducted via e-mail, others online or on the phone. We refer to the interviewees anonymously, as the topic is sensitive and using identifying data might affect the personal security of some of our discussants.

### **Holy Rus' and Orthodox Values as Geopolitical Frames in Russian and Belarusian politics**

The myth of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine together forming the Holy Rus' (*Sviataia Rus'*) in the eyes of God remains the key guiding line for the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church in its policy regarding the neighboring East Slavic states. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this principle was highlighted by the ROC leadership in the process of re-claiming the status and structures of the Church both at home and abroad. For example, Aleksii II (Ridiger), the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' (1990–2008), reminded his audience in 2001

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Indifference: Perspectives from Imperial and Postimperial Borderlands,” *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space*, no. 2 (2022): 91–116, here 93.

<sup>18</sup> Makrides, “Orthodox Christianity in the Context of Postcolonial Studies,” 361.

<sup>19</sup> “Kontsepsiia natsional'noi bezopasnosti Belarusi,” Ministry of Emergency Situations, last modified November 9, 2010, at <https://mchs.gov.by/kontsepsiya-natsionalnoy-bezopasnosti-respubliki-belarus/> (accessed June 11, 2024).

<sup>20</sup> See Ryhor Nizhnikau and Arkady Moshes, eds., *Russia's Policy towards Belarus: At a Turning Point?* (Lanham, MD 2023).

<sup>21</sup> Alicja Curanović, “Domestic Lobbyists and Conservatism in Russian Foreign Policy,” in Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, eds., *Russia's Foreign Policy: The Internal-International Link* (Milan, 2021), 37–64, here 50.

<sup>22</sup> The key to explaining the complex relationship is the ROC having an “eschatological” approach to international politics: if a Russian foreign policy priority is to guard the national interest, “the avowed priority of the ROC is the salvation of mankind.” Nicolai N. Petro, “The Russian Orthodox Church,” in Andrei P. Tsygankov, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* (Abingdon, Eng., 2018), 217–32, here 221.



that the three countries “cannot live without each other” and together constitute “a single spiritual community.”<sup>23</sup>

The origins of the myth arise from the baptism of Prince Vladimir in present-day Crimea in the year 988, after which Kievan Rus’ was consequently baptized into Christianity. For this reason, nurturing the “spiritual connections” in between the Holy Rus’ nations have been of utmost importance for the ROC. Since his enthronement in 2009, Patriarch Kirill (Gundyaev) has been one of the most visible advocates of the “civilizational” approach to Russian foreign policy,<sup>24</sup> which many see as a catalyst of the conservative turn in Russian politics in general.<sup>25</sup> Patriarch Kirill referred to the “historical choice” of Prince Vladimir that continues to define the common civilizational space of the Russian World “even though there are no common political institutions today [in this space].”<sup>26</sup>

In contemporary Russian politics, Orthodoxy-related geopolitics serves as a tool in explaining and justifying “messianic” foreign policy.<sup>27</sup> Studies of religious ideas and their (geo-)politicization examined their resonance and impact on society and the state. For instance, Anastasia Mitrofanova identifies political Orthodoxy as a complex of ideologies, which despite their differences make a single ideology that defines Russia’s place in the world.<sup>28</sup> Dmitrii Sidorov finds a variety of geopolitical ideologies that use Orthodoxy as their integral element and embrace the trope—central to the Orthodox view of history since the sixteenth century—of Russia as the “Third Rome,”<sup>29</sup> or having “a unique religious and political mission.”<sup>30</sup> Alicja Curanović views this mission as a role/identity in relation to the state’s perception of ontological security. She divides the concept into three key components: the mission comes embedded with particular destiny, moral superiority, and universalism.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, like Jardar Østbø points out, the idea of Russia as the new Third Rome has diverted from its roots and has become popular among contemporary Russian nationalist intellectuals who employ the myth to define, among other things, “who the Russians are,” or justify Russia’s uniqueness to their respective audiences.<sup>32</sup> In this way, the various uses of the geopolitical Orthodoxy cuts across the whole spectrum of present-day Russian politics.

The “geopolitization” of the ROC and the “Orthodoxication” of Russian foreign policy was accompanied by institutional changes in the region. Whereas Moscow increasingly saw itself in a geopolitical struggle with the west for influence in the region, the ROC faced consistent pressure of fragmentation of its canonical territory. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, as part of their nation-building process, many Orthodox Churches in the post-Soviet space had sought to become independent from the Moscow Patriarchate, which resulted in the fragmentation of the Eastern Orthodox world. This had created inbuilt tensions where several Churches shared the same territory, but which the ROC considered as its canonical

<sup>23</sup> “Otkrylsia s<”>ezd slavianskikh narodov,” *Newsru.com*, last modified December 6, 2017, at <https://www.newsru.com/russia/01jun2001/slavyane.html> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>24</sup> See Andrei P. Tsygankov and Pavel A. Tsygankov, “Constructing National Values: The Nationally Distinctive Turn in Russian IR Theory and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 4 (October 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* (Leiden, 2019); Curanović, “Domestic Lobbyists and Conservatism in Russian Foreign Policy,” 49.

<sup>26</sup> “Vystuplenie Sviateishego Patriarkha Kirilla na torzhestvennom otkrytii III Assamblei Russkogo mira,” *Patriarchia.ru*, last modified November 3, 2009, at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/print/928446.html> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>27</sup> Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes”; Alicja Curanović, *The Sense of Mission in Russian Foreign Policy: Destined for Greatness!* (London, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Mitrofanova, *The Politicization of Russian Orthodoxy*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> See “Patriarkh Kirill nazval Rus’ naslednitsei Vizantii,” *Vesti.ru*, last modified May 24, 2021, at <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2566096> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>30</sup> Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 319, 321.

<sup>31</sup> Curanović, *The Sense of Mission*, 54, 65.

<sup>32</sup> Jardar Østbø, *The New Third Rome: Readings of a Russian Nationalist Myth* (Stuttgart, 2016), 224–28.

territory.<sup>33</sup> In many cases the Churches accepted it as a matter of fact that several institutions coexisted within a single canonical entity, choosing to organize their activities accordingly, but in other cases, disagreements prevailed. If we accept the definition for intra-Orthodox colonization as being a specific Orthodox culture imposing dominant narratives and dictating development of other, less powerful Orthodox institutions, the colonial attitude within the Russian Orthodox Church vis-à-vis the other Slavic Orthodox Churches was shaped during those years.<sup>34</sup>

Belarusian nation-building has not originally posed any challenges to the Kremlin or the ROC. Minsk was traditionally Russia-centered and considered the Russian vector as a geopolitical and “civilizational” choice. Relations with Moscow defined the course of Belarusian foreign policy, its relations with the west, and its domestic policies. Crucially, the Belarusian regime originally placed its state and nation-building within Russia’s geopolitical narrative. Minsk defined itself culturally, politically, and ideationally affiliated with Moscow and promoted political and economic integration with Russia. Belarus was an active participant of all Russian-led integration initiatives in the post-Soviet space; the regime fostered close cultural and ideational links with Russia. From the 1990s, Belarusian official nation-building has been based on Soviet symbols and ideas: common values, history, and language was a cornerstone of Belarusian official ideology. The Great Patriotic War, the unity of the Slavic peoples, and the Russian language, which was given the status of the first language in the country, as well as anti-westerness all became the key pillars of official state ideology.

During 1990s and 2000s, Minsk utilized its ideological primacy as a driving force behind integration processes in the post-Soviet space and a cornerstone of its Russia policy. While Russia officially integrated into western institutions, Belarus actively built an image as defender of Orthodox spiritual values, a successor of the Belarusian SSR, and as a spiritual cradle of Eastern Orthodox civilization. Belarus “geopoliticized” its conflict with the west as a civilizational battle to protect “Orthodox values” while Russia officially agreed to incorporate western values and engage with western institutions. Shifts in Russian identity and foreign policy and its new expansionist drive in the region, however, triggered incremental readjustments in Belarusian foreign policy and its new reflections on the past, sovereignty, and the relations with Russia. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was one of the critical moments. The more Belarus has been depicted as “the next Ukraine” and “Crimea 2.0,” the more it was inclined to reposition itself as a new “neutral” power, distancing itself from Moscow and revising its perspectives on sovereignty and the nation.<sup>35</sup>

### *The Geopolitical Discourses of the Russian Orthodox Church*

During its entire history, the Russian Orthodox Church has sought ways to stretch the limits posed by political power while preserving its spiritual interests. In practice, the Church has often found itself serving the objectives of the political leadership. Yet within the ROC, a narrative exists that the Church does not seek nor does it need political influence, because the “eternal task” of saving human souls prevails despite changes in world politics.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> The ROC considers practically the whole former Soviet Union as belonging to its canonical territory (Armenia and Georgia excluded). The term refers to the area where a Church operates: historically, it defined the territories between the Churches’ jurisdictions. As Mikhail Suslov points out, within the ROC, “canonical territory” may have several interpretations—those that encompass non-Slavic countries and groups, and those that view the territory primarily in “ethnic” terms. In Patriarch Kirill’s use, “Holy Rus” forms the geographical “core” of the canonical territory of the ROC, reinforced with the Russian-speaking Orthodox diaspora abroad. Mikhail D. Suslov, “Holy Rus’: The Geopolitical Imagination in the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church,” *Russian Politics & Law* 52, no. 3 (2014): 67–86, here 69–70.

<sup>34</sup> Makrides, “Orthodox Christianity in the Context of Postcolonial Studies,” 359–60.

<sup>35</sup> Arkady Moshes, “Crimea 2.0: Will Russia seek reunification with Belarus?,” *FIIA Comment* 21, last modified November 19, 2018, at <https://www.fia.fi/en/publication/crimea-2-0> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>36</sup> ROC representative, interview, September 22, 2021.

In the beginning of the 1990s, after being suppressed by the Soviet state for decades, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church was primarily interested in restoring its status in society as well as re-gaining properties and funds—and at least with the latter goal, Patriarch Aleksii II was largely successful.<sup>37</sup> The legislation enacted at the time was based on the principle that the state and the Church were to be kept separate. With the 1997 Law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, the role of the ROC as the most important religion became clear. However, it was not until the 2000s that state-Church relations began to intensify, allowing the Church to truly enter political agenda-setting.

By 2008, the ROC had grown multifold on all the levels of its organizational structure from the late perestroika years and established firm mechanisms of cooperation with the Russian state.<sup>38</sup> In 2007, speaking about *Russkii mir*, foreign minister Sergei Lavrov described how Orthodox values formed the basis of “Russian culture and statehood,” and how the Church and his ministry were working “hand in hand.”<sup>39</sup> The Russia-oriented integrative approach to the -Soviet region is indeed natural for the Church leadership, too, because it overlaps geographically with the one and undivided territory of the Holy Rus’, but it also reveals the intra-Orthodox colonialism within the Church when translated into actual policies. Compared to his predecessors, Patriarch Kirill was much more determined in centralizing the other countries of the Holy Rus’ under his rule.<sup>40</sup>

After the Orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Russian political leadership became increasingly cautious of “foreign influences” in the country, interpreting them as an attempt to destabilize Russia’s political order. The decisive policy changes to strengthen Russian national identity with Orthodox ideas began in 2009, when, for example, religion could be taught at schools, and the Church was granted some significant tax benefits and additional rights in claiming its former land properties.<sup>41</sup> After 2012 especially, the state leadership began to draw on “spiritual-moral” values as the basis of national identity and connected those to national security.<sup>42</sup> The Church had become a well-trusted institution in the country, and the state authorities saw it as a source of additional legitimacy.

Popular approval of the Church remains relatively high, but after the war in Ukraine began in 2014, the state-Church relationship has acquired bitter tones both in Russia and abroad. The war has amplified internal tensions within the ROC, albeit those are rarely publicly voiced.<sup>43</sup> Previously several scholars have argued against the interpretation that the ROC is merely a tool at the Kremlin’s disposal. The relationship is not only instrumental, but after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it has become clear that the ROC leadership has chosen to remain loyal to the political leadership. In his 2018 analysis, Boris Knorre warned that the ROC was facing the risk of being instrumentalized by the Russian state leadership.<sup>44</sup> In the current circumstances, this risk has been realized, consolidating the geopolitical status of the Church as a supportive instrument to the political regime aiming to re-colonize its “near abroad.”

<sup>37</sup> Svetlana Solodovnik, “Rossiia: Ofitsial’naia tserkov’ vybiraet vlast’,” *Pro et contra* (May-August 2013), 6–26, here 7–8.

<sup>38</sup> Solodovnik, “Rossiia,” 13.

<sup>39</sup> “Opening Remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at Press Conference After Tenth Meeting of Working Group on MFA-Russian Orthodox Church Interaction, Moscow,” *Mid.ru*, last modified November 20, 2007, at [https://mid.ru/en/press\\_service/video/vistupleniya\\_ministra/1630688/](https://mid.ru/en/press_service/video/vistupleniya_ministra/1630688/) (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>40</sup> Scholar, interview, August 25, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Solodovnik, “Rossiia.”

<sup>42</sup> Jardar Østbø, “Securitizing ‘Spiritual-Moral Values’ in Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2017): 200–16.

<sup>43</sup> The views of the ROC leadership might not represent the institution as a whole, its strictly hierarchical structure notwithstanding.

<sup>44</sup> Boris Knorre, “Religion and the Russian Orthodox Church,” in Irvin Studin, ed., *Russia: Strategy, Policy and Administration* (London, 2018), 105–12, here 111.



### *The Belarusian Orthodox Church: A Double Allegiance*

These developments directly concerned the Belarusian Orthodox Church as a key element of Belarusian state- and nation-building, subordinated to both the Belarusian state and the ROC. In 2009, Patriarch Kirill emphasized that the cooperation between church and state in Belarus is unique in the entire post-Soviet space both in its scale and depth.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, the BOC enjoys semi-autonomous status within the Russian Orthodox Church. The BOC's internal decisions ("journals of the BOC Synod") are approved and its head, the Metropolitan of Minsk and Slutsk, is appointed by the Holy Synod of the ROC. Besides formal subordination, the BOC is traditionally closely tied with the ROC on an ideational level, and the BOC clergy has close links to Russia. Metropolitan Filaret (Vakhromeyev), the first head of the BOC, was part and parcel of the ROC leadership and a close ally of Aleksii II. The set up of the BOC reflects the patterns of intra-Orthodox colonialism: the BOC episcopate in the 1990s and 2000s consisted almost entirely of former inhabitants of Moscow monasteries and graduates of Russian seminaries. Ever since, the conservative movement has had a strong following, which downplayed Belarusian identity as merely "western Russianism" (*zapadnorusizm*) and thus a part of a shared culture of all Eastern Slavs. As Mitrokhin notes, the narrative on the "Triune Rus" (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus) was actively disseminated within the BOC through exiled conservative priests during Soviet times.<sup>46</sup> For instance, Ioann (Maslov), the head of the Zhirovichi seminary, was the ideological father to a number of BOC top clergymen, including Guriy and Veniamin. From the beginning, Filaret tried to balance between conservative and liberal platforms within the BOC. He actively promoted the BOC's connections with the west, in particular enhancing the educational and ecumenical dialogue. At the same time, Filaret worked to include the BOC in early state- and nation-building projects.

However, the state applied close formal and informal control over the BOC's clergy that took part in state- and nation-building. During the 2000s, the BOC became a part of key state projects.<sup>47</sup> The BOC and the state signed an agreement of cooperation in 2003, which was followed by a dozen cooperation agreements with multiple state agencies. The Church became involved in the creation and implementation of the state's education, memory, and even public politics and became a key non-state partner of security structures and the military.<sup>48</sup> Lukashenka regularly meets with the Synod of the BOC to instruct the Church and outline the state's needs. In the 2000s, Lukashenka, self-described as an "Orthodox atheist," increasingly re-purposed the Church as a cradle of a national idea and a key ideological partner.<sup>49</sup> Belarusian state laws specified the BOC's "determining role" in the country's ideology and development. The state recognized the BOC's special role in the development and preservation of spiritual, cultural, and state traditions. Orthodoxy became a central pillar of nation-building.

The state had a strong interest in the BOC mainly for two reasons. First, it was among the most trusted public institutions in the country with a significant indirect impact over believers. Control over the BOC's agenda was important for the regime's control over society.

<sup>45</sup> "Gosudarstvennuu ideologiiu neobkhdimo stroit' na fundamente khristianskikh tsennostei," *President.by*, last modified September, 25, 2009, at <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/gosudarstvennuju-ideologiju-neobxodimo-stroit-na-fundamente-xristianskix-tsennostej-4877> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>46</sup> Nikolay Mitrokhin, "Zwischen allen Stühlen: Die Belarussische Orthodoxe Kirche," *Osteuropa*, nos. 10–11 (December 2020): 223–40.

<sup>47</sup> Activist, interview, August 31, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> "Opyt patrioticheskoi deiatel'nosti tserkvi v gody Velikoy Otechestvennoi Voiny i sovremennost'," *Church.by*, last modified December 3, 2019, <https://oroik.by/opyt-patrioticheskoy-deyatelnosti-pravoslavnoj-cerkvi-v-gody-velikoj-otechestvennoj-voiny-i-sovremennost/> (accessed June 11, 2024).

<sup>49</sup> Although there is no direct citation, there are multiple sources that confirm this. Apparently, Metropolitan Pavel commented on the topic: "He is a normal Orthodox. He misspoke. We discussed it with him." "Mitropolit o Lukashenko: On normal'nyi pravoslavnyi chelovek, a ne pravoslavnyi ateist," *Nasha Niva*, last modified May 14, 2014, at <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=128263&lang=ru> (accessed May 3, 2024).

The authorities actively deployed their resources to steer the Church agenda.<sup>50</sup> According to sociologist Oleg Manaev, state power does not use the Church for fostering spiritual development, but rather for applying social control.<sup>51</sup> Second, the regime found the BOC useful in legitimizing and supporting its nation-building policies in society.

### *Sitting on Two Chairs: The BOC in 1990–2000s*

The alignment of the early Belarusian state and nation-building with the geopolitical imaginations of the ROC permitted the BOC to successfully enjoy a double role for more than a decade. During the 1990s, after a short period of national renaissance in 1991–95,<sup>52</sup> the BOC, ROC, and Lukashenka's regime aligned in centering the role of Belarus as a part of a "Slavic-Orthodox" civilization that combined both Soviet and Russian imperial nation-building narratives on Belarus.<sup>53</sup> A Belarusian national idea was presented as Orthodox, derived from zapadnorusizm, as defined by the bishop Iosif Semashko.<sup>54</sup> Hence, any "sovereignization" would be equal to "provincial" nationalism and degradation.<sup>55</sup> This initial rejection of the idea of the Belarusian nation outside a hegemonic project ended the brief post-colonial moment of the early 1990s. The trend reverted with a new phase of integration in Belarus-Russia relations upon Vladimir Putin's taking power, re-orienting the Belarusian state to the formulation of a more "sovereign" state and nation-building agenda. The BOC was forced to adapt to the state's evolving views, and if there were any opposition, it was quickly withdrawn. In 2011, Lukashenka directly addressed the clergy at a meeting with the Synod: "BOC is called to live in the interests of the country, using, if necessary, all its connections and international authority to protect it. . . It is the duty of the Church to serve the people, the state in which this nation lives. . . Your civic position and pastoral words are designed to contribute to the strengthening of stability and tranquility in society." If not, the Church would lose the state funding.<sup>56</sup> Within the BOC, Lukashenka's allies rose in ranks: archpriest Fedor Povny was an illustration of a pro-regime turn (although reluctant) in the BOC. He set up the Department of External Relations of the Belarusian Exarchate, but his influence went beyond as he benefitted from his status as the "Lukashenka's priest." During the 2000s, he gradually became the Church's speaker on behalf of the regime and conductor of the regime's agenda within the Church.<sup>57</sup>

Consequently, the BOC's new position started to gradually drift apart from Moscow, although it attempted to integrate the ROC's emphasis on the centrality of civilizational and distinct Orthodox values into Lukashenka's nationalization of the BOC. In 2009, Patriarch

<sup>50</sup> Priest, interview, August 31, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> "Oleg Manaev: Religiozni renessans v Belarusi ne privel k smene tsennosti," *Deutsche Welle*, last modified January 7, 2010, at <https://www.dw.com/ru/олег-манаев-религиозный-ренессанс-в-беларуси-не-привел-к-смене-ценностей/a-5096412> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>52</sup> Oushakine, "How to Grow out of Nothing".

<sup>53</sup> Both the BOC and Lukashenka participated in the Pan-Slavic movements, such as Sobor of Slavic Peoples. Orthodoxy was seen as a defining feature of Pan-Slavism and the Church actively supported its re-unification ideas. Belarusian Pan-Slavic organizations such as the website *Zapadrus.su* regularly promoted Orthodox values and Orthodox traditions in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine underlying unity of this religion with the Russian national and imperial ideology. Yet, their marginalization sped up in 2000s. See Veera Laine, Aliaksei Lastouski, and Ryhor Nizhnikau, "Ideational Travels of Slavophilia in Belarus: From Tsars to Lukashenka," in Suslov, Čejka, and Đorđević, eds., *Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Mikhail Suslov, Marek Čejka, and Vladimir Đorđević (London, 2023), 101–22.

<sup>54</sup> Priest, interview, August 31, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Ia.I. Treshchenok, "Dve belorusskie national'nye idei (katolicheskii natsional-separatizm i pravoslavnaia national'naia ideia)," *Sobor.by*, undated, at <http://sobor.by/zametki.php> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>56</sup> "Monitoring SMI: Fal'shivye notki tserkovno-gosudarstvennoi simfonii," *ChurchBY*, May 19, 2011, <https://churchby.info/rus/702> (accessed June 6, 2024).

<sup>57</sup> "Ob ambitsiakh Fedora Povnogo vozglavit' BPTS," *Church.by*, last modified August 12, 2020, at <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/ob-ambiciyax-fedora-povnogo-vozglavit-bpc/> (accessed May 3, 2024).

Kirill had noted that loyalty to Orthodox traditions and civilizational unity strengthens the sovereignty and national identity of Belarus: “It is necessary to realize that together Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine constitute a single civilization, which is based on a common Orthodox faith, a common system of values.”<sup>58</sup> In Kirill’s words, the “spiritual and cultural community of peoples” will help Orthodox countries to “have a coordinated and strong position in dialogue with the outside world” and that way secure the real national sovereignty of the countries.<sup>59</sup>

Relations between the Belarusian regime and the ROC also declined such that Lukashenka accused the Church of losing touch with reality. In the summer of 2013, he symbolically refused to come to Kyiv to celebrate the 1012th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus’. Instead, on July 26, Lukashenka demonstratively visited the construction site of the water park, where he called on Patriarch Kirill to “perestroika”: “I believe that the church of any denomination should go side by side with society. [Patriarch Kirill] will now lose time and will not convince his entourage, his flock, that it is necessary to slowly reform, probably not soon we will return to this issue.”<sup>60</sup>

### *Claiming Subjectivity: The Growing Hybridity of BOC after 2014*

In the 2010s the growing politicization of Belarusian Orthodoxy and the rise of new ideologies in Russia created a visible tension between Belarusian nation-building and Moscow’s new geopolitical narratives. The official Minsk’s distancing from Russia-driven “Eurasianism” and the idea of the Russian world directly affected the role of the BOC. The regime re-considered the role of the Orthodox Church to endorse a new national idea of sovereignty.<sup>61</sup> The new problematization of independence rested on new re-interpretation of Belarusian history and Belarus-Russia relations to lower their dependence on Moscow’s narratives.

First, Slavic roots were revised as the foundation of Belarusian statehood, to break away from Moscow’s geopolitical narrative. Kyivan Rus’ became one of the stages of the country’s history, not its defining moment.<sup>62</sup> The Church was “nationalized.” According to Foreign Minister Uladzimer Makey, Belarusian Orthodoxy’s “Narodniks” (*narodniki*) were the first to formulate the Belarusian national idea as “the right of the Belarusian people to national statehood.”<sup>63</sup> Makey insisted that the first national Belarusian manifesto proclaimed Belarusians an independent Slavic people, and not a branch of any other project. Fedor Povny went even further by stressing that Slavs originated from Belarusian Polesie, a geographical region in the southern part of the country, that the Belarusian language was the closest to old Slavic, and that even though the Belarusian people were the same historical age as the Russian, these common roots and history with Russia did not mean the same identity.<sup>64</sup>

Second, the Belarusian state reformulated the role of Orthodoxy in nation-building. It abandoned the idea of exclusively belonging to Orthodox civilization in its official discourse,

<sup>58</sup> “Gosudarstvennuiu ideologiiu neobkhdimo stroit’ na fundamente khristianskikh tsennostei,” *President.by*, last modified September, 25, 2009, at <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/gosudarstvennuju-ideologiju-neobxodimo-stroit-na-fundamente-xristianskix-tsennoستهj-4877> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Moreover, he stressed that “Nation building in a country where the overwhelming majority of believers are Orthodox is unthinkable without active participation in the public life of the Orthodox Church. . . . The Orthodox faith is the basis of the fraternal unity of the peoples of Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. Concern for the preservation of national identity does not hinder the development of cooperation with fraternal countries.”

<sup>60</sup> “Monitoring SMI: Fal’shivyye notki,” *Credo Press*, May 19, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Sergei G. Musienko, ed., *Belarus: Independence as National Idea* (New York, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> “Chto takoe belorusskaia national’naia ideia? Kakoi smysl stoit za etim slovosochetaniem, v chem ee vazhnost’ dlia obshchestva i gosudarstva?,” *Belarus segodnia*, last modified June 20, 2014, at <https://www.sb.by/articles/a-khto-tam-idze-165992.html> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>63</sup> Musienko, *Belarus*.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

which transformed its geopolitical self-identification. Instead of “being a cradle of the Eastern Slavic civilization”—a central idea of Belarusian state ideology of the 1990s and 2000s, Belarus re-positioned itself as European and “the citadel of European traditional culture and morality.”<sup>65</sup> Minsk started to present itself as a part of (true) Europe, which combined key features of east European Orthodox and west European Catholic civilizations. For Ihar Marzalyuk, one of the key regime’s spokespersons on memory and identity, the Belarusian national objective was “to create in our country, based on our own tradition, an organic, healthy synthesis of European ‘East’ and ‘West.’”<sup>66</sup> In the process of forming the new “hybrid identity” of Belarus, religion continued to play a central role in self-identification, but the relevance of Orthodoxy was decreased. The role of the Orthodox Church was to preserve the ideas of Belarusian conservatism and traditional Christian values, which should become the alpha and omega of the Belarusian national idea.

Third, this shift explained the new geopolitical role of the country. Official Minsk underlined that a fusion of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant values in the country made it a “unique” geopolitical actor and a natural intermediary between the conflicting east and west.<sup>67</sup> Marzalyuk described the mission of the Belarusian people to be the “assembly center” of Eurasia. Russia’s role was re-assessed accordingly as one of the centers of power in the region—not the center of Pan-Slavic re-integration. Several Lukashenka’s propagandists stressed that Belarus is both more Slavic and more European and thus instead of uniting with Russia should become a bridge between Europe and Asia.<sup>68</sup>

Fourth, the crisis in Ukraine triggered a double crisis between the ROC and the Russian state as well the Orthodox world. The perspective of the ROC toward the desired foreign policy vis-à-vis the “Russian world” differed somewhat from that of the political regime in Russia, as the ROC leadership does not deny the sovereignty of the former Soviet Union states constituting the Holy Rus’. The reason is not a strong disagreement between the state and Church leadership on the matter, but rather a question of priorities: the political aspect is less important to the ROC than the unity of believers in these countries, which is also why the ROC leadership has continued advocating for the Russian world even after 2014, when the concept itself became tarnished with an irredentist connotation.<sup>69</sup> For the ROC, the Russian world is simply another way to refer to Holy Rus’, something that exists because God created it, and it does not depend on the interpretations or actions made in the political realm.<sup>70</sup>

The stance of the ROC, and Patriarch Kirill in particular, evolved as the deepening divide between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate began to widen. In 2018, the Archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I granted the Ukrainian Orthodox Church an autocephalic status with a *tomos* they had requested earlier that year. The decision was a shock for the Moscow Patriarchate, as it now risked losing a great part of its parishes in Ukraine and, from its perspective, the spiritual mission of the Church in the world.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the ROC did not

<sup>65</sup> “Chto takoe beloruskaia national’naia ideia?”

<sup>66</sup> Musienko, *Belarus*.

<sup>67</sup> “Chto takoe beloruskaia national’naia ideia?”

<sup>68</sup> Musienko, *Belarus*.

<sup>69</sup> “Nakaz XXV Vsemirnogo russkogo narodnogo sobora ‘Nastoiashchee i budushchee Russkogo mira,’” *Patriarchia.ru*, last modified March 27, 2024, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html> (last accessed June 7, 2024).

<sup>70</sup> From the beginning of the conflict in 2013, it was clear that the ROC interpretation differed from that of the state leadership in terms of desired outcome of the crisis. The ROC aimed—but failed—to keep the conflict from affecting the “spiritual connections” between the nations and the unity of the Holy Rus lands. On the day of “reunification” of Crimea in March 2014, the references to the peninsula’s “sacred” meaning to all Russians were made by President Vladimir Putin, and not publicly echoed by the ROC leadership. Patriarch Kirill did not attend the celebrations that year or later. In public, the state and ROC leadership did not contradict each others’ line.

<sup>71</sup> More than half of the parishes in Ukraine chose to stay under Moscow’s jurisdiction, but for the ROC, the shift meant remarkable symbolic and financial losses. See Regina Elsner, “The End of Unity: How the Russian Orthodox

recognize Bartholomew's right to decide on the matter, because it considers Ukraine to belong entirely to its canonical territory and denies the role of the Ecumenical Patriarch as superior to the Patriarch of Moscow in the Orthodox world. The relationship between the Churches in Moscow and Constantinople had been tense for a long time, and with autocephaly in Ukraine it developed into an open conflict. To signal this, the ROC applied retaliatory measures towards Constantinople. In December 2018, Kirill wrote a letter to Bartholomew I, threatening him to face the consequences of his decision at the Last Judgement and in August 2021, Kirill described Bartholomew I's visit to Ukraine as "sinful and hard-to-explain."<sup>72</sup> There is a long history of personal conflict between the two leaders, but Kirill's response further underlines the intra-Orthodox colonial thought that the Moscow Patriarchate had upheld vis-à-vis the "near abroad."<sup>73</sup>

In this new situation, the BOC clearly followed the Belarusian authorities in moving further away from the ROC. With this as background, a clash between the BOC and the regime with the Moscow Patriarchate was inevitable. In 2013, the ROC selected the former Riazan' Metropolitan Pavel (Ponomarev) to replace Metropolitan Filaret in spite of the Minsk regime's opposition. Lukashenka announced that a Belarusian should preside over the Belarusian Church, and that Belarusian sovereignty requires a sovereign church. This move was a response to Kirill's policy of centralization and caused significant dissatisfaction within the regime and the BOC. According to Nadezhda Belyakova, Patriarch Kirill's methods of governing the Church imposed strict limits on the Belarusian exarchate. Kirill's decision to remove the practice that all decisions of the Synod were automatically approved significantly impeded the work of BOC.<sup>74</sup> In this situation, the BOC even raised the issue of more autonomy and potentially even autocephaly.

The new Metropolitan immediately descended into a conflict with the regime and its hierarchs. Metropolitan Pavel even created a special commission and initiated checks at the parish of All Saints, directly threatening to bring Povny's case to a criminal court.<sup>75</sup> During 2014, Pavel realized the enhanced popularity of Belarusianess within the BOC, however, and, for instance, endorsed the wider use of Belarusian language in religious practices.<sup>76</sup> He also supported the idea of more autonomy from Moscow. On December 16, 2014, at a meeting of the clergy of the Minsk Metropolitanate, Metropolitan Pavel said that he would "raise the issue" of granting self-government for the exarchate, since its current status looks "offensive" for Belarusians.<sup>77</sup>

The BOC's embrace of the sovereignty narrative widened. BOC's Father Serhey Gordun, in his article written in the Belarusian language, discussed the role of Orthodoxy as the founding pillar of the Belarusian nation.<sup>78</sup> Gordun argued that that the formation of the Belarusian people at all historical stages took place under the direct influence of Orthodoxy.

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Church Lost Ukraine," *BYU Law blog series*, last modified March 3, 2022, at <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2022/03/03/the-end-of-unity/> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>72</sup> "Poslanie Predstoiatel'ia Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi Sviateishemu Patriarkhu Varfolomeiu v sviazi s antikanonicheskimi deistviiami, predprinimaemyi Konstantinopol'skim Patriarkhatom na Ukraine," *Patriarchia.ru*, last modified December 31, 2018, at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5333808.html> (accessed May 3, 2024); "New provocation from the Patriarch of Moscow: 'The Visit of Patriarch of Constantinople to Kyiv is Sinful,'" *Orthodox Times*, last modified August 29, 2021, at <https://orthodoxtimes.com/new-provocation-from-patriarch-of-moscow-the-visit-of-patriarch-of-constantinople-to-kyiv-is-sinful/> (accessed May 3, 2024).

<sup>73</sup> Scholar, interview, August 25, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> "Nedolgiy srok belorusskogo vладыki," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, October 21, 2015, [https://www.ng.ru/ng\\_religii/2015-10-21/4\\_belorussia.html](https://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2015-10-21/4_belorussia.html) (accessed June 11, 2024).

<sup>75</sup> Mitrokhin, "Zwischen allen Stühlen."

<sup>76</sup> Activist, interview, August 31, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Lev Perchin, "Nedolgiy srok belorusskogo vладыki," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, October 21, 2015, at [https://www.ng.ru/ng\\_religii/2015-10-21/4\\_belorussia.html](https://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2015-10-21/4_belorussia.html) (accessed June 11, 2024).

<sup>78</sup> Serhii Hardun, "Pravaslaue iak padmurak belaruskai natsyi," *Belarускаia dumka*, no. 1 (2016): 23–29 at [https://beldumka.belta.by/isfiles/000167\\_416780.pdf](https://beldumka.belta.by/isfiles/000167_416780.pdf) (accessed May 3, 2024).



Povny necessitated the turn, blaming the legacy of 1990s and the pre-Lukashenka “nationalist” rule, which he argued negatively affected Belarusian youth because they lost attachment to “the East Slavic community, on Russia, from which our three states emerged.”<sup>79</sup> In September 2016, at a meeting between the President and the Synod of the BOC, Lukashenka stressed the necessity for the Church to work on strengthening the statehood and independence of Belarus: “I would especially emphasize the constructive position of the clergy regarding current political developments in our country . . . I am convinced that our further work will continue to be only constructive and will allow us to coordinate efforts to strengthen society and its spiritual enrichment. In the end, the future of the Church largely depends on its awareness of the need to increase the spiritual input in the ongoing social processes taking place in Belarus.”<sup>80</sup>

### *Towards a New Divide*

In August 2020, massive protests across the country took place in the aftermath of the Belarusian presidential elections. The domestic political crisis, which on the one hand witnessed an uprising of society but on the other led to tens of thousands of people being jailed and subjected to torture and repression, has made a strong impact on the BOC, its ideology, and its relations with the state. First, the popular uprising divided the BOC and triggered the conflict between a part of the clergy and the regime. The division became evident during the presidential campaign. While some BOC hierarchs including Filaret and Fedor Povny campaigned on behalf of Lukashenka, several dozen priests and deacons signed the petition “Orthodox against falsification, intimidation and repression” for free elections. After the rigged election, a significant number of BOC representatives condemned the violence, took part in protests, and voiced their support for democracy.<sup>81</sup>

Second, ROC relations with Minsk were revisited. The initial reaction of the Church brought confusion. Patriarch Kirill congratulated Lukashenka for his victory the day after the election results were published. Pavel joined the “Orthodox” manifestations and visited the victims of the protest suppression in the Minsk emergency hospital, where he “expressed his hope for a fair investigation of the crimes committed during the recent protest actions.” The ROC adopted a similar statement, calling for an investigation of the police violence. In coordination with Moscow, the Synod of the BOC and Metropolitan Pavel condemned the violence and torture.<sup>82</sup>

However, the ROC endorsed the regime’s actions to reinstate “order” within the BOC. Following the counter-revolution in Belarus, the BOC underwent a cleansing. The KGB compiled a list of 100 priests who were publicly involved in pro-democratic activities.<sup>83</sup> Key speakers on behalf of the protests, such as Bishop of Hrodno Artemy, were removed. Pavel was also replaced with the conservative Bishop of the Borisov diocese, Veniamin (Tupeko). Ideological revanchism included the promotion of conservatives, including the ideational followers of Ionn Maslov (“*maslovcy*”), with their Russia-centric positions. The BOC has supported the regime’s further actions, including new repressive laws, and took part in re-drafting the constitution.<sup>84</sup> However, the BOC’s earlier actions were not so easily taken back. For instance,

<sup>79</sup> “Povny: natsional’naiia ideia rozhdetsia iznutri naroda,” Belta, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/povnyj-natsionalnaja-ideja-rozhdaetsja-iznutri-naroda-400698-2020/> (last accessed June 7, 2024).

<sup>80</sup> “President Lukashenko met with the Synod of the Belarusian Orthodox Church,” *Sobor*, September 23, 2016, at [http://www.sobor.by/videonews/Prezident\\_Aleksandr\\_Lukashenko\\_vstretilsya\\_s\\_Sinodom\\_Beloruskoy\\_Pravoslavnoy\\_Tserkvi](http://www.sobor.by/videonews/Prezident_Aleksandr_Lukashenko_vstretilsya_s_Sinodom_Beloruskoy_Pravoslavnoy_Tserkvi) (accessed June 11, 2024).

<sup>81</sup> Scholar, interview, August 31, 2021.

<sup>82</sup> Mitrokhin, “Zwischen allen Stühlen.”

<sup>83</sup> Activist, interview, August 31, 2021.

<sup>84</sup> “Interv’iu Mitropolita Minskogo i Zaslavskogo Veniamina belorusskim telekanalam ONT i STV,” *Patriarkhiia.ru*, last modified January 10, 2022, at <https://pravoslavie.ru/143863.html> (accessed May 3, 2024).

on organizational issues, the BOC showed the regime new boundaries by demoting Fedor Povny within its own ranks.<sup>85</sup>

While the ideas stressing Slavic unity returned to the position of the regime and the BOC, the church and the state viewed them differently. Belarusian official discourse returned to geopolitical contestation with the west. Lukashenka naturally re-activated the Slavophile narrative: “[But] the basis is a Slavic one, of us courageous Slavs—these three beautiful languages” and inter alia repeated Russian colonial narratives on Ukraine: “Lately, as you see, they have been shaking us, trying to tear, tear apart. They are trying to tear our native Ukraine away from this unity. As we have been, we will remain together.”<sup>86</sup>

The BOC created its own geopolitical narrative. While Minsk officially criticized the west, but still sought the opportunity to restore ties with the west and minimize growing dependence on Moscow, the BOC leadership took a non-conformist, pro-Moscow position.<sup>87</sup> The new Metropolitan, Veniamin, promoted narratives of spiritual unity with Russia to an extent that he was described as “a person with a Russian world in his head.”<sup>88</sup> Holy Rus’ and belonging to it became the central element of Metropolitan Veniamin’s narratives. The war also indicated marginal differences with both the ROC and Lukashenka. In 2022, Lukashenka’s participation in and endorsement of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ROC’s pro-war position contrasted to the BOC’s silence. In April 2022, Veniamin called “. . . to take steps towards each other. Let us remember the common font of Baptism, our common spiritual heritage, our saints”<sup>89</sup>—a statement that can be partially explained by a total rejection of the war by Belarusian society. Nevertheless, the bottom-up protest against the war was voiced by the BOC’s rank-and-file.<sup>90</sup>

Veniamin’s own wish to restore “colonial dependence” became even more clear when he categorically rejected to seek autocephaly for the BOC, voiced by Lukashenka in June 2021.<sup>91</sup> A few days before a promotion, Veniamin quoted in his speech the “elder” Lavrenty of Chernigov (Proskura).<sup>92</sup> The reference was a double referral to Moscow: on one hand,

<sup>85</sup> “Novy mitrapalit paniziū Fiodara Poūnaha da kľučara,” *Nasha Niva*, last modified July 31, 2021, at <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=296288> (last accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>86</sup> “Lukashenko: belorusy pryzivajut strany i natsii vozvodit’ mostly a ne steny,” *Belta*, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belorusy-pryzivajut-strany-i-natsii-vozvodit-mosty-a-ne-steny-450695-2021> (last accessed June 5, 2024).

<sup>87</sup> See for example, foreign minister Uladzimer Makei’s letter to the EU in April 2022. “MFA comments on Makei’s ‘secret’ letter to EU diplomats”, April 27, 2022, at <https://soyuz.by/politics/mfa-comments-on-makei-s-secret-letter-to-eu-diplomats> (accessed June 11, 2024)

<sup>88</sup> “Monitoring SMI: Protesty i religia,” *Credo Press*, September 4, 2020, <https://credo.press/232816/>. This link requires a login.

<sup>89</sup> *Malanka*, “Muzykal’nye festivali, vstrechi s OMOmNom: Chem zaniat glava BPC vo vremia voiny,” last modified April 14, 2022, at <https://malanka.media/news/6401> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>90</sup> Nataliia Vasilevich, “Belorusskie khristianskie reaktsii protiv rossiiskogo vtorzheniia v Ukrainu,” *Church.by*, last modified March 11, 2022, at <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/belorusskie-khristianskie-reaktsii-protiv-rossijskogo-vtorzheniya-v-ukrainu/> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>91</sup> In June 2021, on his visit to Zhyrovichy Monastery, Lukashenka brought up the idea and said that “letters had been sent” to Constantinople: “Lukashenka zayavil ob ugroze tserkovnogo raskola v Belorussii,” *Ria.ru*, last modified June 25, 2021, at <https://ria.ru/20210625/avtokefaliya-1738569427.html> (last accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>92</sup> Veniamin said: “In the current situation, the resumption of this topic (granting “autocephaly” to the BOC) cannot be interpreted otherwise than the desire of some forces to weaken the spiritual component of the Belarusian people, repeat the sad history of our brotherly Ukraine, and divide the fraternal peoples of Belarus and Russia along religious lines. The very subject of discussion of autocephaly for the BOC is unacceptable to us. This is a betrayal of our faith and the covenant of the holy fathers. ‘Just as it is impossible to separate the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—this is One God—so it is impossible to divide Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. This together is Holy Russia. Know, remember and do not forget,’—bequeathed the Monk Lawrence of Chernigov...” Episkop Borisovskii i Mar’inogorskii Veniamin, “Liubov’iu i uedineniem spasemsia,” *Sayt Borisovskoi eparkhii*, last modified August 16, 2020, at <https://borisoveparhia.by/poslaniya-slova-publikatsii/lyubovyu-i-edineniem-spasemsya.html> (last accessed May 6, 2024).

Patriarch Kirill has likewise referred to Lavrenty ever since 2009 when explaining the historical unity of the “Russian world.” On the other hand, it served to prove loyalty by disavowing any reason for pursuing autocephaly for the BOC. The threat of autocephaly was actively instrumentalized by the regime and the BOC even if there is neither demand nor interest for autocephaly within society.<sup>93</sup> Thus, with actual autocephaly being unrealistic, it seems that the topic is used to signal loyalty to and usefulness for Moscow. For the ROC, however, the entire topic is uneasy. The new schism, (*raskol*) in Ukraine has been interpreted as the price that the ROC must pay for its alignment with the Russian state in the foreign policy sphere.<sup>94</sup>

That did not, however, prevent Patriarch Kirill from expressing public support to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In his sermon ahead of Easter lent, Kirill stated that the ongoing “struggle” had “not a physical, but a metaphysical significance,” repeating the secular authorities’ arguments on harmful western influence.<sup>95</sup> The Patriarch’s approval of the war shocked many in the Orthodox and Christian worlds, and discontent was voiced even from within the ranks of the ROC.<sup>96</sup> On May, 27, the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate convened to adopt amendments to the Statute of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which pronounced “full self-sufficiency and independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church,” a decision that was described in the media as “another autocephaly.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, the ROC, pursuing its intra-Orthodox colonialism in the form of the “unification of Holy Rus’,” has found itself in a situation where the previously tense relationship with the Constantinople and the rather deep but stable regional disagreements with “national” Churches have transformed into an open conflict between the ROC and nearly all other Orthodox powers in the world.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, even if the idea would get support from Bartholomew I, there would be significant theoretical and practical obstacles. The experience from Ukraine shows that the actual creation of an “autonomous” Church from an existing one is not easy in practice. The situation in Belarus is in many respects not comparable to that of Ukraine in the spring of 2018, and not merely because the BOC enjoys much more limited autonomy with its status as Exarchate. In Ukraine, too, the initiative (and the preceding similar attempts) to create a “national” church came from the secular power. Interview with a scholar, August 25, 2021; Martin Solik, Ján Fil’akovský, and Vladimír Baar, “Belarusian and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Churches and National Identity: Comparison,” *Political Sciences/Politické Vedy*, no. 2 (2017): 116–63, here 155.

<sup>94</sup> Curanović, “Domestic Lobbyists and Conservatism in Russian Foreign Policy,” 55. Moreover, since 2022, politicians in Moldova, Latvia, and Lithuania have also initiated debates over local Orthodox Churches’ status, and in the latter case with support from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. The smaller share of Orthodox believers in these countries notwithstanding, the signal for the Moscow Patriarchate is clear. See Paul Goble, “Clash of Moldova’s Two Orthodox Churches Complicates Chisinau’s Turn to the West,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 20, no. 133, last modified August 17, 2023, at <https://jamestown.org/program/clash-of-moldovas-two-orthodox-churches-complicates-chisinaus-turn-to-the-west/> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>95</sup> “Moscow Patriarch Stokes Orthodox Tensions with War Remarks,” *Religion News Service*, last modified March 8, 2022, at <https://religionnews.com/2022/03/08/moscow-patriarch-stokes-orthodox-tensions-with-war-remarks/> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>96</sup> “Predstaviteli RPTs vystupili za prekrashchenie voyny v Ukraine,” *TRT na russkom*, last modified March 2, 2023, at <https://www.trtrussian.com/novosti/predstaviteli-rpc-vystupili-za-prekrashenie-vojny-v-ukraine-8108422> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>97</sup> Sergei Chapnin, “The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: War and ‘Another Autocephaly,’” *Public Orthodoxy*, last modified May 31, 2022, at <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/05/31/the-orthodox-church-in-ukraine-war-and-another-autocephaly/> (accessed May 6, 2024); Meduza, “‘My hotim chetko pokazat’, chto ne iavliaemsia chastiu RPTs, glava kotoroi blagoslovliaet voynu’ Ukrainkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov’ ob<”>iavila o nezavisimosti ot Moskovskogo patriarkhata. Vot chto eto znachit,” last modified May 30, 2022, at <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/30/my-hotim-chetko-pokazat-chto-ne-yavlyaemsya-chastyu-rpts-glava-kotoroy-blagoslovlyaet-voynu> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>98</sup> The schism over Ukraine has driven the ROC deeper into isolation globally. In 2019, the ROC cut ties with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa, after its Patriarch Theodore II had recognized the autocephaly of the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine. These signs were still moderate compared to the outrage towards the ROC after Russia’s invasion to Ukraine. In May 2022, EU ambassadors agreed upon including Patriarch Kirill on the sanctions package, but because of Hungary’s objection, the decision was not made. The

In this essay, we have argued that the Belarusian case of “in-betweenness,” or hybrid identity in the postcolonial setting helps to bring nuances to both postcolonial and post-Soviet studies. In this regard, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is a critical event, but also a continuation of longer trends in the region. Since the 2010s, Moscow’s growing assertiveness and new geopolitical imagination have increasingly contradicted the state- and nation-building processes in the region. In Belarus, both the regime and the BOC reacted to Moscow’s pressure with intensified attempts to find a new “Self.”

A sequence of regional and domestic crises in 2014–22 had a major impact on the BOC as an actor and institution. The “Orthodoxication” of Russian foreign policy and a weakening of Lukashenka’s regime launched a process of erosion of key elements of the BOC’s stability, based on its in-between role between Belarusian society, the regime, the ROC, and the Russian state, as well as a function of the management of state-society and Belarus-Russia relations. This process pushed the Church to seek a new niche strengthening and merging its nation-building and geopolitical presence in between the Lukashenka’s regime, the ROC, and the Russian state and Russia-oriented groups in society. The search for new ideas within both the regime and the BOC anchored the inward-oriented turn of the BOC and its endorsement of Minsk’s new geopolitical narrative, while remaining a part of the ROC, whose relations with the Russian political regime intensified, advocating for using Holy Rus’ and Russian world ideas as geopolitical tools.

The Belarusian Revolution and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has only further deepened the fault line. The weakening of the regime and its critical dependence on Russia, furthered by Lukashenka’s participation in the Russian invasion, accelerates the country’s de-sovereignization.<sup>99</sup> The political changes and repressions help to keep the BOC subordinated to the regime’s political agenda, yet the longer it continues, the more vulnerable the Church’s position becomes in the eyes of its flock.

In the near future, rising uncertainty, highly dependent on the outcome of the war in Ukraine, magnifies the question of the preparedness of both the BOC and ROC to consequences of regime collapse(s), and the looming successorship issues becomes more apparent. The ROC itself presents another point of instability, given the age of Kirill (born 1946), and the inability of the Holy Synod to elect a successor when a significant part of the decision-makers are in Ukraine. The uncertainties related to regime survival and successor issues in the Russian and Belarusian political and religious institutions feed into each other. Simultaneously, Patriarch Kirill’s public support for Putin’s war has indeed consolidated the state-Church relationship within Russia but ruined future possibilities for the unification of the lands of the Holy Rus’. Moreover, Kirill’s reproducing of Russia’s geopolitical discourse of “Holy war” in Ukraine has shocked many Orthodox leaders and resulted in the ROC losing much of its traditional international influence. Yet, in a time of fundamental disagreement, the spiritual leaders do not necessarily seek to compromise. In their view, the conflict will be resolved with time, at latest during the Last Judgement. In this way, Church leaders see their mission in the scope of centuries, even millennia, which affects their interpretation of present-day events.<sup>100</sup> The eschatological perspective of the Church makes it approach world politics and temporality *per se* in different terms than secular leaders do.

The different approaches to “this-worldly” matters of the state and the Church provide one more interpretative lens to the recent changes within the BOC, too. Certain figures within the Church might have significant power to affect worldly matters, but this is not what they themselves would consider a priority. The devout “maslovcy” leaders of the Belarusian

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World Council of Churches, the main Christian ecumenical group with a global focus, encounters growing pressure from its member Churches to expel the ROC from the Council.

<sup>99</sup> Ryhor Nizhnikau, “Belarus and the War: Gradual De-Sovereignization of the Country,” *Ponars Eurasia Memo*, May 23, 2024, at <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/belarus-and-the-war-gradual-de-sovereignization-of-the-country%E2%80%9C/> (last accessed June 7, 2024).

<sup>100</sup> ROC representative, interview, September 22, 2021.

Orthodox Church may be useful for the secular authorities precisely because they focus on advancing spiritual or doctrinal questions instead of political ones, which then leads them to ignore the concerns of their flock.

The issue of escaping Russia's grip, as the processes of the erosion of post-Sovietism intensify, and forming various postcolonial alternatives, will continue to dictate the agenda in the region. Consequently, the pressure on Churches will rise. Thus, further studies focusing on this ongoing and unresolved conflict in the region that recognize Churches as important and multifaceted institutions are needed. Moreover, the case of the BOC shows how people living "in-between" blur the identity boundaries and hold multiple and complex loyalties—which both Russo- and Eurocentrism fail to understand. Instead of perceiving institutions or societal groups merely dichotomously as "either/or," it should be acknowledged that colonial pasts and hegemonic presents forge hybrid identities.

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