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Religion and denominations in the Republic of Belarus

Multi-confessional structure of the Belarusian society has been forming over more than a thousand year history of the nation; it became an important factor that had a great influence on the formation of culture, mentality and state traditions of the present-day Belarus.

The experience of our state, where more than 25 different denominations and religious movements organically coexist, is unique.

The Orthodox Church has been of great importance on the Belarusian lands since the adoption of Christianity in the 10th century and today still attracts a significant number of believers. Four centuries later the Catholic Church came to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that was created on the basis of the Belarusian territory. Since that time Catholicism made a great contribution to the culture of Belarus and its history.

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In the 16th century the European Reformation resulted in the arrival of Protestant movements, among which Lutheran and Calvinist ideas became widespread on the territory of the Grand Duchy of

Lithuania. Even earlier, at the end of the 14th -15th centuries, Muslims and Jews settled in Belarus. A large number of religious denominations appeared during the 20th century.

The importance of religion in Belarus has considerably increased over the last two decades. According to the latest sociological studies, about a half of Belarusians consider themselves believers. 82 per cent of them are Orthodox, 12 per cent are Roman Catholic and 6 per cent are representatives of other denominations.

The leading position in the religious life of the country is held by the *Belarusian Orthodox Church*, which combines 1545 parishes, 11 dioceses, 5 religious schools, 32 monasteries, 14 brotherhoods, 10 sisterhoods. 1334 Orthodox churches are functioning, 150 are being built. 1577 clerics work in parishes.

In 2003 the Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church signed an agreement on cooperation. Its implementation became a unique experience in multi-vector joint work of the state and the church for the benefit of society.

The *Roman Catholic Church* in Belarus combines four dioceses, which have 475 communities. There are 3 religious schools, 9 missions of the Roman Catholic Church. The communities have 464 Catholic churches, 26 churches are being built. 418 clerics work in the parishes.

Protestant religious organizations are represented by 1005 religious communities, 21 associations, 22 missions and 5 religious schools of 14 religious movements. The *Christians of Evangelical Faith* (the *Pentecostals*) (595 communities), the *Evangelical Christian Baptists* (275 communities), the *Seventh-day Adventists* (72 communities) are the largest. Lutheranism, currently represented by 27 communities, is traditionally present on the Belarusian territory.

32 religious communities of *Old Believers* are registered in the Republic of Belarus; there are 27 religious buildings at their disposal.

Judaism is represented by 52 communities representing three movements (*Orthodox, Hesed-Lubavitch, Progressive*). 3 religious associations are registered. There are 7 religious buildings at the disposal of the communities, 4 buildings are being reconstructed.

Islam is represented by 25 communities, including 24 of *Sunni* movement and 1 of *Shiite* movement. Two religious associations are registered. 5 religious buildings are functioning and one mosque is being built in Minsk.

In addition, parishes of the *Greek Catholic Church*, the *Armenian Apostolic Church* and communities of *Hare Krishna* and *Baha'i* are registered in Belarus.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Article 31 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus

In total, as at January 1, 2011, 3321 religious organizations are registered in Belarus.

Legislative Base

The legal framework created in the Republic of Belarus gives the religious organizations the opportunity to adequately operate and develop. The state does not interfere in the internal issues of confessions. Control over the activities of religious organizations is limited to ensuring their compliance with the national legislation.

The rights to freedom of conscience and religion are regulated by the basic law of the Republic of Belarus - the Constitution, and by the law "On Freedom of Faith and Religious Organizations". According to the current legislation:

- Religions and confessions shall be equal before the law.
- Everyone shall have the right to determine independently his/her attitude to religion, to exercise any religion alone or together with others, or not to exercise any religion at all, to express and spread beliefs connected with his/her attitude towards religion, to participate in worship, religious rituals and rites, which are not prohibited by the law.
- The State shall regulate relations among the diverse communities on the basis of equality before the law, respect of their rights and interests.
- Relations between the State and religious organizations shall be

regulated by the law with regard to their influence on formation of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people.

All religious organizations are supported by the State, including by providing special tax incentives.

According to the current legislation, the plots given to religious organizations for religious buildings are exempted from the tax on land. Religious buildings, which are owned or are in the possession of religious organizations, are exempted from the real estate tax.

Policy of the State

State policy of the Republic of Belarus in confessional sphere is aimed at preservation of inter-confessional peace and harmony, maintenance of the traditions of religious tolerance and mutual respect, suppression of any manifestations of racism, discrimination on the grounds of religion or nationality, xenophobia and intolerance associated with it, development of cooperation with historically traditional confessions in directions that are important for social development.

The Head of the State pays particular attention to the activities of religious organizations, advancement of inter-confessional dialogue, strengthening the traditions of religious tolerance and mutual respect in the society. The President participates in solemn events dedicated to Easter and Christmas celebrations. Every year Alexander Lukashenko meets with the members

of the Synod of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Similar meetings of the first person in the country are also held every year with the leaders of Minsk and Mogilev archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church.

In September 2009, the President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko received the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill, who was visiting Belarus.

On April 27, 2009, Alexander Lukashenko paid an official visit to the Vatican, where he had the audience with the Pope of Rome Benedict XVI and the Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone. The head of the Holy See was invited to visit Belarus. One year later, Cardinal Jozef Tomko, the special representative of the Pope, visited our country on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Minsk and was also received by the Head of the State.

Visits paid by the hierarchs of the Roman Catholic Church are a kind of recognition by the Vatican of the religious policy being pursued in our country. Currently, the Vatican and Belarus are completing their work on the draft of the Agreement on Cooperation.

Representatives of various confessions have the possibility to make their faith closer and clearer for the followers of other denominations in Belarus. International forums “The Dialogue of Christianity and Islam in the Context of Globalization” (October 2007) and “Christian-Judaic dialogue: religious values as the basis for mutual respect

in civil society in the context of global economic crisis” (November 2009) served this purpose. The President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko met personally with the leaders of the confessions and foreign guests of the international forums that took place in Minsk.

The meetings of the Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus with the leaders of republican religious associations are an important element in dealing with the issues of religious organizations. Such meetings took place in 2007 and in 2010. During the last meeting the sides noted high efficiency of joint efforts of the church and the state in dealing with the issues of spiritual and moral education of the individual and the society.

Educating Individual and Society

Interfaith Advisory Council was created in Belarus in 2008 under the Commissioner for the Affairs of Religions and Nationalities, which is composed of the leaders of republican religious associations registered in Belarus.

Public Council on Morality works under the auspices of the Belarusian Exarchate, and is composed of representatives of historically traditional for Belarus confessions, scientists and artists. The 5th East Slavic International Symposium of the New Testament researchers was organized in Minsk with the support of the state authorities. Clerics of Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant denominations from different countries participated in this event.

Starting from 2008 Belarusian regions host events elaborated by the Minsk Diocese of the BOC (Belarusian Orthodox Church) within the spiritual and educational program “Family – Unity – Motherland”. The program aims at fostering cooperation between the state and the Church in such important sphere as demographic development of the regions of the country. Dozens of events asserting Christian family and moral values are organized within the framework of this program: concerts, seminars, religious processions, round-table discussions, performances for children and theater forums for teenagers, fairs of religious literature, audio and video materials.

The Belarusian Orthodox Church regularly sponsors Festival of Modern Christian Sacred Music “*Blagovest*”, and International Festival of Orthodox Chants.

The Roman Catholic Church organizes annual international inter-confessional festival of Christian music “*Magutny Bozha*” in Mogilev, festivals of Christian films and TV programs *Magnificat* in Glubokoje, Vitebsk Region, and in Minsk.

District, city and region executive committees actively support the activity of Belarusian religious organizations in the sphere of culture.

State Financing

Substantial financial assistance is allocated from the state budget to restore historical and cultural monuments of religious nature, in particular:

- Zhirovichi Holy Assumption Monastery Complex and Minsk Clerical Academy and Seminary (BYR 7.268 billion was allocated in 2010, BYR 5.312 billion allocated for 2011);
- Holy Resurrection Cathedral in Borisov (BYR 0.992 billion in 2010, BYR 1.57 billion allocated for 2011);
- Monastery of the Assumption in Pustynki village, Mstislavl district (BYR 0.2 billion in 2010 BYR 1.5 billion allocated for 2011);
- Monastery in the village of Yurovichi, Kalinkovichi district (BYR 1 billion in 2010, BYR 1.225 billion allocated for 2011);
- Holy Transfiguration Church in Polotsk (BYR 0.5 billion allocated for 2011);
- Corpus Christi Catholic Church in Nesvizh (BYR 1 billion in 2010, BYR 1 billion allocated for 2011);
- Construction of Orthodox spiritual and educational center in Minsk (BYR 9.958 billion in 2010, BYR 4.96 billion allocated for 2011).

The reserve fund of the President of the Republic of Belarus provided financial support of BYR 298.4 million for a facsimile edition of Slutsk Gospel – a monument of Belarusian written records of the 16th century. Significant financial assistance is provided to religious organizations from local budgets (regional and district).



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