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Sacred Language in the Borderlands: Discussions on the Language of Belarusian Catholicism

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Abstract

This article considers in detail the choosing of a language for the liturgy and sermons in Roman Catholic parishes in Belarus. The choice of the Belarusian language is part of a deliberate nation-building policy by the Catholic Church. Moreover, a whole network of local peculiarities, historical stereotypes, and political attitudes is concealed beneath the unified cover of a preference for the use of the Belarusian language. Based on interviews with clergy and religious activists, the article shows that the Roman Catholic Church repeatedly works out compromise solutions that allow it to adapt to the pressures of the state and believers going through a process of contradictory and conflicting nation-building.

Keywords: Belarus; nation-building; liturgical language

The protests against the rigged presidential election in Belarus have drawn particular attention to the country. Quite unexpectedly for many, the Catholic Church played an important role in civic mobilization, as it had previously seemed to be satisfied with a social contract with the Belarusian authorities. But the termination of this contract and the transition to a stage of open confrontation, caused by a ban on the entry to Belarus of the Catholic Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, revealed many contradictions that were previously hidden under the cover of agreements. The old conspiracy scenario, which treats the Catholic Church as agents of Poland aiming to deprive the Belarusian state of its independence, has again been revived. At the same time, the long-term and purposeful policy of the Catholic Church in Belarus, aimed at participation in the processes of nation-building, has produced results. This article takes a closer look at the national policy of the Catholic Church by analyzing the introduction of the Belarusian language as the language of worship.

Recent literature on religion and nation-building in Eastern Europe (Simons and Vesterlund 2015) overlooks Belarus, while publications focusing on language policies in modern Belarus (Woolhiser 2001; Zaprudski 2007) neither consider the role that religion might be playing in nation-building and language politics, nor pay heed to religious institutions as having an influence on actors contributing to social change. While there are a number of historical works connecting religion and nation-building in Belarus (Werth 2014; Dolbilov 2010; Skinner 2009; Staliunas 2007), which shed light on the institutional and ideological legacies, there are very few empirical studies of the role of religion in nation-building in post-Soviet Belarus. The sense of national cohesion is erratic, extraordinarily complex, and confusing in post-Soviet countries, where a contradictory national and religious revival has replaced a long period of anti-religious repression (Agadjanian 2001). Religious identity can strengthen national cohesion, but it can also displace it and thus suspend the nation-building process. The relationship between religious and national identity is

especially complex in geographical areas where Western Christianity meets its Eastern counterpart, and where powerful cultural and political impulses converge and collide. Most of Belarus gravitates towards Orthodoxy, where the core is Russian culture and language, while the northwestern part of the country is predominantly Catholic and leans towards Western Europe.

A short overview of the religious situation in Belarus can help explain the linguistic dilemmas in Belarusian Catholicism. Presently, Russian Orthodoxy has a clear advantage in terms of the number of believers, but Roman Catholicism maintains a traditionally strong position and Protestant denominations are expanding. It is difficult to obtain reliable figures since population censuses in Belarus do not cover religious affiliation. Official data from the Office of the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs¹ include only the number of officially registered communities. Thus, in 2017, there were 3,350 religious communities in the country, including 1,681 Orthodox communities, 496 Catholic communities, and 1,033 Protestant communities split among 14 denominations (US Department of State 2018). Protestant communities significantly lag behind Orthodox and Catholic communities in terms of the number of believers. Sociological data can correct the picture of the spread of religious affiliations. For example, according to the results of the World Values Survey in 2011, respondents in Belarus identified themselves as Orthodox (72.9%), as Roman Catholics (10.5%), and as Protestants (2.0%). Furthermore, The Roman Catholic Church estimates about 1,400,000 Catholics in Belarus or 15% of the population. By any estimate, Roman Catholicism is the second most widespread religion in Belarus, enjoying a special status. In terms of public holidays, Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism have full parity: when it comes to Christmas or Easter, there is no difference in status between these two denominations in the official calendar.

Given the combined problem of language, religion, and national identity in Belarus, this article considers in detail the choosing of a language for the liturgy and sermons in Catholic parishes in Belarus. The empirical part of the study builds on publications by the Roman Catholic Church and a series of in-depth interviews (18 interviews) conducted in 2018–2020 with Catholic priests and church activists.

Borderlands: Between Analytical Tool and Self-Determination

In the 1990s, a radical theoretical break took place in Polish scholarship that signified the transition to the concept of the Borderlands. For a long time, former Polish territories in the west of Belarus and Ukraine were considered *Kresy* (outskirts), “the lost lands.” If *Kresy* is an asymmetric concept, where Poland is necessarily the center, then the borderland presupposes symmetry, a neighborhood with its special culture, commingling elements of different traditions.

A distinctive feature of the Borderlands – the contact, engendering such categories as dialogue and communication, interaction and shared experience – can lead to various outcomes: either positive forms of interaction, cooperation and intense intercultural communication, or negatively imbued distancing and conflict.

Polish researchers tend to emphasize the positive aspects of the borderland, where special communication between “friends” and “aliens” dominates, where each side partakes in a society and culture, with no place left for hostility and aggression. According to Smułkowa (2007, 6), borderline problems manifest clearly and comprehensively only in cases involving the “clash” of ethnic groups through their neighborly and actual interaction that fail to lead to the levelling of their distinctions

To a certain extent, we can even say that the borderland is gradually turning from an analytical tool into an intellectual model, providing for patterns and norms for constructing reality. Defining the characteristics of the borderland is no longer about what is underway but how it should be. It also involves a hidden criticism of the homogeneous project of the nation-state, which aims at the unification of cultures, the creation of a common cultural canon, and forming an environment for interaction. Straczuk (1999, 25–30) proposed to introduce the concept of “borderland culture,” to imply a special cultural structure with features of different origins but with functional integrity.

Thereby, researchers emphasize the local world of meanings, comprising a unique and special cultural situation and a relativistic perspective of socio-cultural difference.

The borderlands concept became popular in Belarus from the late 1990s into the early 2000s as tentative self-determination in the local intellectual environment. At the time, philosophers and sociologists (Ihar Babkou, Uladzimir Abushenka, and Valiantsin Akudovich) expanded the term to the whole country, and since then the whole of Belarus has become the perceived borderlands, where different cultures, religions, languages, and identities are closely intertwined. No single culture dominates it, thus prompting Belarusians to search for modes of coexistence. However, where a single, reliable, and homogeneous national culture and identity is lacking, it is also traumatic (Lastouski et al 2016). More “successful” national projects in Central and Eastern Europe might also view Belarus as “underdeveloped.” Existing research often formulates Belarusian identity in negative terms, either treating the country as a “denationalised nation” (Marples 1999) or emphasising its anachronistic “sovietisation” (Leshchenko 2004). However, when observed through postcolonial optics rather than using any external stereotyping, this fundamental weakness of heterogeneity favorably turns into transculturalism, the presence of numerous Others and boundaries in the cultural space, and the willy-nilly crossing these boundaries (Babkou).

Previous Research

Polish ethnologists have developed a rather strong tradition of studying the identities and linguistic practices of the Belarusian-Polish Borderlands. These studies ground on a solid empirical base and place their main emphasis on the study of complex phenomena of mixing and differentiating languages and beliefs, as well as of the transformation of pre-national identities in the “nationalizing” Belarus. There is a movement away from the pre-national understanding of the world, whereby “nation” means “people,” and religion is inextricably linked to it. This way of describing the world gives way to modern “national” concepts (Engelking, 1999; Engelking 2015). At the same time, religion is of great importance for the self-determination of a “mixed” population, but the main distinguishing factor here is not religion as such, but the language of prayer (Straczuk 1999). According to existing research, many Poles in Belarus build their Polish identity by identifying themselves with the Catholic religion and on the feeling of belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. However, the role of the Catholic faith in the formation of Polish identity gradually weakens, as the language of the liturgy and catechism changes. It leads to the concept of “Catholic” undergoing changes and the destruction of the “Pole equals Catholic” and “Russian equals Orthodox” stereotypes, although this process is going to be slow and protracted in time (Kabzińska 1999; Smułkowa 2002).

This set of studies provides an excellent snapshot of the consciousness of the inhabitants of the Borderland, without attending the institutional dimension of nation-building but mainly focusing on the region of the Belarusian-Polish borderland, where the Polish population lives compactly.

Existing literature on the language of prayer in the Catholic Church in Belarus is focused mainly on the question of the preservation of Polish identity in Belarus. Accordingly, the main emphasis was placed on the question of the Polish language in Belarusian Catholicism. Golachowska’s (2020) ethnological study of the identity of Catholics in Belarus stressed the choice of language in self-determination. Dzwonkowski’s (2004) position is unambiguous: the Polish language is traditional for Belarusian and Ukrainian Catholicism and is the core of the identity of local Poles. A sociological study under his leadership collected a wealth of empirical material from interviews with believers of various parishes throughout Belarus (albeit with the pre-set optics of looking for the Polish language in local communities). This study and Gołachowska’s works constitute the most significant scholarly treatment of the issue. Some Polish authors are much more radical in openly positing “depolonization” of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus, and by viewing the introduction of the Belarusian language as a conspiracy by the Belarusian authorities and nationalists (Giebień 2015).

Many publicists write in this vein, notably Winnicki (2010) whose publications represent an interpretation of media reports.

Although Belarusian researchers do explore the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus quite actively, only a few scholarly publications examine its current situation (Bekus 2018). However, there are apologetic reviews of the problem of the Belarusian language in Roman Catholic worship by Uladzislau Zavalniuk, Rector of the Church of Saints Simeon and Helen (Zavalniuk 2019). There, one can glean some historical details on the spread of the Belarusian language in the service and its main initiators, but it is impossible to understand the current language problems and dilemmas. This gap is explainable by the weakness of research in Belarus, where sociology is state controlled, and religious studies are concerned mostly with the historical perspective.

Reassessing the Historical Background

Helping to explain the persistence of Catholicism in Belarus, a historical excursion will correlate religious identities with the language and ethnic composition of the population. Western Christianity consolidated on the territory of Belarus after the baptism of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania by Prince Jagiełło in 1387. Belarus, in its present borders, was thus the last country in Europe to adopt Christianity officially. At that time, most of the local population of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, especially in its Belarusian and Ukrainian territories, were already Christians of the Eastern rite.

The gradual expansion of Roman Catholicism was associated with two processes. Local elites converted to Catholicism in pursuit of political and social privileges. There was also a creeping Catholicization of the multi-ethnic substratum settling the territory between Vilnius and Minsk (Turonek 2001). In connection with this process, the ethnic group of “Poles” formed. Although they were Catholics, their spoken language was closer to Belarusian. To distinguish these local Poles from the Poles “proper,” the former were called “Lithuanian Poles” or “Vilna [Vilnius] Poles.”

Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy came to acquire ethnic markers like “the Polish faith” and “the Russian faith” (Törnquist-Plewa 2001; Buhr et al. 2011). Over the centuries, an enduring identification of Roman Catholicism and Polishness has formed in the Belarusian lands. Even nowadays, especially in the traditional village environment, one can find “Poles” and “Catholics” employed as synonyms. Iwona Kabzińska (1999, 148), reporting on her fieldwork among the indigenous Polish villagers in the districts of Hrodna and Minsk in western Belarus, says, “Most of the informants’ responses make it clear that they conceive of religion as synonymous with national identity. ‘I am Catholic means I am Polish’ was the most common answer to the question about one’s nationality. Or: ‘I am Polish because I attend the Catholic church’; and, ‘here, for us, Polish means Catholic.’” It is noteworthy here that this tradition had proliferated before the origin of the Belarusian nation and later came into contradiction with national movements.

Belarusian national mobilization, as it began in the second half of the 19th century, proved irrelevant to religion. Ethnic Belarusians were united by language but divided by religion. As was rightly emphasized by Turonek (2001, 57), “At the beginning of the 20th century, a new generation of Belarusian activists understood that without the support of both cultural segments of the Belarusian population, the idea of national renewal would have no chance to succeed.” Still, Catholics dominated the Belarusian national movement until the beginning of the 20th century.

The languages of Roman Catholic worship on the territory of Belarus in the 19th century were Latin and Polish. Latin was liturgical language and Polish was used as auxiliary language. Russian imperial authorities perceived it as a threat, inasmuch as two major Polish uprisings had been supported by Roman Catholic priests, and because both uprisings proliferated mostly in areas with a predominantly Catholic population. The Russian administration tried to resolve this problem by translating the Catholic service into Russian and thus “separating” Catholicism and Polish identity. This initiative met stiff resistance and ultimately failed (Weeks 2001). Over an extended period, Roman Catholicism showed its resilience to oppression and the generally hostile environment of the Russian Empire. Polish national liberation thought also strongly influenced Belarusians by

fighting the Russian Empire, which invariably relied on Orthodoxy and the Russian language. In Poland, the Russian language in nationalist and Catholic circles has always had and still has a negative connotation, acting as a symbol of national oppression and religious restrictions. Albeit in a milder form, Belarusian Catholicism has adopted the same attitude and later transmitted it to the Belarusian national movement.

Belarusian Catholic organizations emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, together with the idea that Catholic priests should preach in Belarusian for Belarusian-speaking peasants, even though there were no Belarusian translations of liturgical texts at that time. The situation was especially complicated in the Vilna (Vilnius) diocese, whose parishioners included Poles, Lithuanians, and Belarusians. Bishop Edward von Ropp of Vilna supported the Lithuanian and Belarusian languages and instructed priests to conduct public worship in local languages, which led to the displeasure of Russian imperial authorities and to his transfer from Vilna.

In the wake of the First World War and the collapse of the old imperial structures, national movements grew rapidly. These movements and especially the creation of the Belarusian People's Republic in March 1918 forced the Roman Catholic Church leadership to pay much more attention to the language of worship. On December 6, 1918, Bishop Zygmunt Łoziński (an ethnic Pole) conducted an official service in Belarusian for the first time, in the Minsk Cathedral (Mróz 2003).

The division of Belarus into two parts following the results of the Riga Peace Treaty of 1921 had grave consequences specifically for Belarusian Catholicism. Eastern Belarus became a Soviet republic, fiercely suppressing religion. Its Belarusianization of the 1920s included an attempt to make the Catholic Church transition to the use of Belarusian. However, the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s gravely affected Roman Catholicism in Soviet Belarus (BSSR), when almost all churches were closed and priests were persecuted. In this way, this issue was closed.

Western Belarus became part of Poland, where the Belarusian national movement developed in two competing directions: communist and Christian democratic. Reverend Adam Stankevich headed the Belarusian Christian Democracy, centred in Vilnius, and became an important figure in the Belarusian national movement. He and many other Roman Catholic priests of Belarusian origin translated liturgical texts and preached in Belarusian (Labyntsev 2019). However, the church leadership did not recognize these translations. Use of Belarusian as auxiliary language signaled a suspicious disloyalty to the Polish authorities and often resulted in the imprisonment of the priests.

After 1944, the Roman Catholic Church throughout Belarus fell under Soviet control, but without facing such brutal repressive measures as in the 1930s. Many churches, especially in the western part of the BSSR, functioned in Soviet times.

The Second Vatican Council (1963–65) played an extremely important role in adapting the church to new realities and included the language issue among the many reforms that it planned.

The Vatican set a course for the expansion of the liturgy in national languages. Thanks to the work of Zianiuk (2019, 202), we can judge how this expansion affected Belarus: “The Roman Catholic clergy accepted the Council’s decisions with enthusiasm The priests welcomed its decision to conduct divine services in the national language. Now, instead of Latin, the service is held in Polish everywhere.”

Only Reverend Uladzislau Charniauski, of the Vishnieva church in the Minsk region, translated the service into Belarusian. It caused protests – not from the Vatican leadership or the Soviet authorities, but other Roman Catholic priests in Belarus and local parishioners. “The Catholic clergy is hostile to the priest of the Vishnieva church in the Minsk region, Charniauski, who has been to the Vatican on a visit, only because he communicates with believers and preaches in the local language” (Zianiuk 2019, 203).

In 1967 Reverend Charniauski met with the Pope in the Vatican, who then considered appointing him bishop, but the Soviet authorities did not give their permission for this appointment. Polish historian Adam Hlebowicz testifies, “Throughout Belarus, only the rector in Vishnieva near Valozhyn Uladzislau Charniauski preaches in Belarusian. In the 1970s, except for the older generation, most believers who considered themselves Poles did not use Polish in everyday life.

[However,] [w]hen Latin disappeared from the church service, they wanted to pray in Polish. It is explainable by their desire to differ from their Russian or Belarusian-language [Soviet secular] environment and the Russian Orthodoxy with its liturgy in the Church Slavonic language” (Hlebowicz 1991: 37–38).

Religious Revival and Belarusian State-Building: Paradoxes of Language Choice

In the late 1980s, in the wake of *perestroika* in Belarus, a parallel religious and national revival took place. When the national intelligentsia realized that the Roman Catholic church in Belarus was Polish-speaking, it caused a heated controversy on the pages of *Litaratura i Mastactva*, the then mouthpiece of the Belarusian-speaking intelligentsia, such as in a 1990 publication by historian Anatol Sidarevich, later a leader of the Belarusian social democracy. Sidarevich focused on the interwar period, when, in his opinion, the Polish secular and church authorities pursued a “chauvinistic” policy aimed at assimilating Belarusian Catholics (“Viartajemsia na kresy?” *Litaratura i mastactva*, April 13, 1990). Sidarevich calculated that Belarusians constituted the majority the congregations of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus, so drawing his parallels to the present he inferred that “[we] must very seriously talk about the need for a Belarusian Catholic Church, the need to train future priests in the Belarusian language, and the need for a Belarusian episcopate.” In a discussion with Reverend Roman Dzwonkowski, this Belarusian historian asserted that “Polonization is, as before, the main function and task of the Catholic Church in Belarus,” and proposed to prohibit Polish missionaries in Belarus (“Ci budziem my nacyjaj?” *Litaratura i mastactva*, June 29, 1990).

By the 1990s, the policy of the Roman Catholic Church leadership had radically changed. In 1989, the Vatican appointed Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz the first bishop of Minsk diocese and Apostolic administrator for Catholics of the Latin rite in Belarus after World War II. This appointment caused discontent among the Belarusian intelligentsia, because Kondrusiewicz was an ethnic Pole, while one of the main directions of renewal of the Roman Catholic Church was a change in its language policy. Thus, one of the central concerns of the newly appointed bishop was a Belarusian translation of the Catechism and the Order of the Mass, the two most important liturgical texts.

In 1991, Kazimierz Świątek became the first archbishop of the newly created Minsk-Mahileu archdiocese. A Pole by origin, he continued the purposeful transition of the Roman Catholic church to the use of the Belarusian language. Because liturgical texts had to be translated into Belarusian, a corresponding commission was created in 1992 and is still active. Eventually, the year of 2017 saw the publication of the New Testament translated into Belarusian, which was awarded a special prize of the President of the Republic of Belarus.

As Vasilevich and Kutuzova (2014, 127) note, the language of publications of the Catholic Church in Belarus is also telling: “the differentiation of the religious media space in Belarus by language renders Russian Orthodox media predominantly Russian-language, whereas Roman Catholic outlets mostly employ Belarusian.” Liturgical texts in Belarusian appear matched by the spread of the language in the liturgy and especially in sermons. All experts note that, in comparison with other denominations in Belarus, the Roman Catholic Church deliberately prioritizes the Belarusian language. According to cleric K.B. (Minsk),

at the beginning of the 20th century, when the national revival began, Roman Catholic was the most common denominational affiliation of the intelligentsia, poets, writers, or those who published newspapers, which did not prevent and even encouraged them to consider themselves Belarusians. Nowadays, the Roman Catholic church also plays an important role, because of all religions, it most actively worships, preaches, and publishes in Belarusian. In the latter case, “publishing” less and less often implies printed editions and increasingly involves internet publications in Belarusian. I estimate that Belarusian services account for about 80%

of all the services in our diocese. No other religious denomination in Belarus uses the Belarusian language so actively, both in its worship and mission. Even among all the public institutions, the Roman Catholic Church is the most noticeably Belarusian. (2019)

Not only pragmatic reasons define the choice of language. The choice of the Belarusian language is becoming part of a deliberate nation-building policy. As Viciebsk Dominican priest V.S. puts it, “the Roman Catholic Church acts as the guarantor of the preservation of the Belarusian language. Our Belarusian church, especially our eastern dioceses, conduct services and preach in the Belarusian language, where even foreigners preach in the Belarusian language – I think this is our great achievement.”

Thus, the Roman Catholic church employs the Belarusian language often not because the local population predominantly speaks it, but to guarantee its preservation, which implies a certain value orientation. “The protection of the Belarusian language is a programmatic priority of the Roman Catholic Church,” agrees the director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies Piotr Rudkouski (2018).

The well-established stereotypes (such as associating “Catholic” with “Polish”) are often seen as an obstacle to the development of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus. According to the interview with the press secretary of the Conference of Roman Catholic bishops of Belarus Yuri San’ko (2018), “now it is hard to imagine a Roman Catholic church without the Belarusian language. When our church serves in the Belarusian language, it also changes worshippers’ consciousness, removes the stereotypes whereby the Catholic church is Polish, while the Russian Orthodox Church is only Russian. And where then is there a place for Belarusians?”

The following groups of factors account for the decision of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus to switch from the Polish language to the Belarusian language. First of all, it is important to take into account the internal logic of the development of the Catholic Church in the modern world, as embodied in the decisions of the Vatican Council requiring the Church to adapt to social and political realities. According to Minsk-based priest K.B (2019), “for the Roman Catholic Church, the ‘number one’ task is to serve in our native language.” The emergence of an independent Belarusian state prompted the Roman Catholic Church to introduce the new policy.

Secondly, as for any denomination, the understanding of liturgical texts and sermons by worshippers is important for the success of evangelism in the Roman Catholic Church. A gradual decrease in knowledge of the Polish language was a defining feature of the long-term sociolinguistic situation in Belarus, which was reflected in the diminishing importance of this language in the Roman Catholic liturgy. Back in 1993, the priest Uladzislau Charniauski noted, “People do not understand sermons in Polish. I asked them repeatedly about the content only to find out that they did not understand” (Zavalniuk 2019, 184). Many interviewees noted that the local population’s knowledge of the Polish language has deteriorated, thus hindering the goals of evangelism. Sociological studies also indicate the decreasing knowledge of the Polish language among young people (Lashuk and Shelest 2011).

And thirdly, the Roman Catholic Church as a public institution is subject to external pressure from interest groups. We have already mentioned that the speedy transition of the Roman Catholic Church to the Belarusian language removed the initial mistrust and critical claims, such as those by the Belarusian intelligentsia. Yet the Roman Catholic Church in independent Belarus remains under constant pressure from the authorities. The ongoing conflict of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus with the state bureaucracy unfolds along two lines: regarding property, such as the restitution and restoration of religious buildings, as well as the construction of new churches, and concerning the alleged dominance of Polish priests among the clergy. It should be noted that 95% of foreign priests come to Belarus from Poland, and only a few priests have their origins in Lithuania and Ukraine. The secular authorities resolve this issue in a rather strict manner: each foreign priest must obtain a work visa.² The authorities can easily revoke these permits, whereby the priests can no longer carry out their duties. Often, the official reason for the expulsion of priests is their poor

knowledge of the Belarusian state languages (Belarusian and Russian), which implies that they conduct the liturgy in Polish.

In 2005, the chairman of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Stanislau Buka (2005) articulated the official position of the Belarusian authorities on the language issue in the Roman Catholic Church: “Nobody says that sermons in churches should be conducted only in Russian or Belarusian, but they should not be held only in Polish.”

Buka also noted that in many regions of Belarus, younger people often do not understand sermons in Polish. In his opinion, sermons in the Belarusian language contribute to the spread of religion among young people, and by calling for conducting sermons in the Belarusian language, the State Committee for Religions helps to attract young people to churches. In 2012, Leanid Hulyaka replaced Stanislau Buka as Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs³ and demonstrated the persistence of the official approach by continuing the non-extension of work visas to Roman Catholic priests over the language issue, namely for not using the Belarusian or Russian languages during the liturgy. Thus, the Belarusian authorities are continuing to put pressure on Catholic hierarchs to reduce the role of the Polish language and the number of Polish priests, which the Church, undoubtedly, takes into account.

There are several reasons for the Polish issue proving so painful for the Belarusian authorities. Firstly, it can be explained by the Belarusian leadership’s complicated relationship with the Polish state, which is one of the main supporters both of democratization and the political opposition in Belarus. Secondly, Poland stands up for the rights of the Polish community in Belarus, which finds itself in an ongoing conflict with the authorities. Since 2005, there have been two separate Unions of Poles in Belarus, one supported by the Belarusian authorities, and the other bolstered by the Polish state. In this situation, the Belarusian authorities consider Polish priests as potential carriers of conflicting views – oppositional to the Belarusian government or pro-Polish.⁴ The fundamental problem does not concern the Roman Catholic Church as such, but rather the Belarusian authorities’ bias in respect to the policy of Poland and its citizens’ activities in Belarus: “The image of Polishness in Belarusian cultural discourse reflects both historical and contemporary tensions, which in turn reflect the power-laden relations between the two nations” (Bekus, 2017, 261).

The Belarusian state puts pressure not only on Polish priests. This pressure also has to do with the Polish language, such as requiring all foreign priests to know Belarusian or Russian and subjecting non-compliers to punitive measures – non-extension of work visas and subsequent expulsion from the country.

In this way, the authorities strive to form a “Belarusian church.” As a former employee of the Office of the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs M. (2020) testifies in an interview,

we recommend using the Belarusian language, which is our principled position and, hopefully, we can implement it. We cannot interfere directly in the religious sphere, but we can make Belarusian priests more numerous, and make our Belarusian church dissociate itself from the Polish church. Quite naturally, Belarus is interconnected with Poland, but often newly arrived Polish priests say that Belarus is Poland - not that they are fraternal peoples, but precisely that Belarus is Poland, and that the border still bisects Belarus in the middle. [We work toward] more independence from the Polish side, because [nowadays Belarus receives from Poland] a lot of pressure. We treat priests from Poland very attentively, [in order to understand] how pro-Polish they are, how much they understand that we have our own goals.

According to Yuri San’ko, if priests from Poland made up about 60% of the local clergy in the early 2000s, today their share has decreased to 15%. The increasing share of Belarusian priests is attributable to the opening of Catholic seminaries in Belarus: in 1990 a higher seminary began in Hrodna, and in 2002 another seminary opened in Pinsk. However, the Pinsk seminary may close upon its merger with the Hrodna seminary due to a decreasing number of candidates. It is not yet

possible to fully staff the Church with Belarusian priests since the two seminaries do not produce a sufficient number of priests. Priests from Poland now know Russian and/or Belarusian well enough. To believe Ryhor Astapenya (2013), “some Polish priests turn out to be more pro-Belarusian than Belarusians themselves.” While Belarusian priests never declined my proposal to communicate in Russian, Dominican priest T. (2018), who had come from Poland to Viciebsk, refused to do so. In his words, unfortunately, many people in Poland still consider Belarus as part of the Polish Kresy (eastern frontier). In his opinion, this was wrong, and if Poles want to live in a safe country, then they must support Belarusianness in Belarus. At least some of the priests of Polish origin are thus ready to promote the Belarusian national revival.

Another controversy is the introduction of the Russian language into the Roman Catholic liturgy. It relates to the principle of the primacy of catechesis, implying the correct and complete understanding of the service by parishioners. The sociolinguistic situation in Belarus is characterized not only by the decline of the Polish language but also of the Belarusian language. A strict adherence to the primacy of catechesis in this situation would require the services to be translated into Russian. At the moment, the liturgy is held in Russian in Hrodna Cathedral once a week. Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz in an interview spoke about the introduction of the Russian language: “From the practical point of view of evangelism, this would be very effective [...]. We tried to introduce the Russian language in Mahiliou churches, and there was a Russian-language service in Mahiliou,⁵ but there weren’t many people who attended it. If a few people come, then it is clear that there is no point in it. We see that the majority of people speak Russian, but believers want to speak Belarusian. They choose Belarusian” (Kondrusiewicz 2019).

Herewith, a question arises: why do believers speak Russian in everyday life but do not support Russian-language church services? According to Roman Catholic priests and sociological studies alike, Russian is the main language of communication in Belarus, while knowledge of the Belarusian language is significantly weaker (Zeller and Sitchinava 2019). If the Roman Catholic Church were to consider evangelization the main determinant of its language policy, it would be logical to switch to Russian, which has not taken place. Based on extensive fieldwork, we have managed to identify several reasons:

- Many believers and Catholic priests still have a persistent stereotype that Russian Orthodoxy is the “Russian faith,” whereby the Russian language is identified with Orthodoxy.
- The Roman Catholic Church in Belarus (and in Poland, where many priests come from) remembers the forceful introduction of Russian Orthodoxy, persecutions and Russification via the introduction of the Russian language and by the elimination of the Catholic Church. Naturally, this historical memory immediately gives rise to a wary attitude towards the Russian language in the liturgy.
- Nationally oriented priests and activists, for whom the religious and national revival in Belarus are interconnected, are very active in lobbying for the Belarusian language. They perceive the Russian language as a symbol of the Russification of Belarus, the loss of national identity and a symbol of Russia’s aggressive foreign policy.

The combination of these factors results in the fact that the use of the Russian language remains very limited in the Catholic Church in Belarus, despite all its potential advantages for evangelism. When the liturgy employs the Russian language in the eastern dioceses, it comes as a forced measure. The main struggle thus unfolds between the Belarusian and Polish languages. Even the strategy of the Roman Catholic Church, as supported by the Belarusian authorities and the intelligentsia, to increase the use of the Belarusian language, does not eliminate the many problems related to national identity. Golachowska (2013) regards the differentiation between the populations in western and eastern regions of Belarus as significant. Those born in eastern Belarus consider Polishness as something foreign. They never hear the Polish language in the church. The churches were closed during the Soviet period, and these people had no opportunity to visit Vilnius as people

in western Belarus occasionally did. The religiosity of eastern Belarusians was gradually diminishing in the meantime. Nowadays, when the Roman Catholic Church in eastern Belarus is gradually being revived, it has nothing to do with Polishness. In western Belarus, the Belarusian language in the liturgy sometimes revives the old controversy and doubts as to whether this language should be there at all.

Golachowska's view correlates with the stable sociocultural division of Belarus into western and eastern parts. Researchers most often attribute this division to the period between WWI and WWII, when the western part of Belarus was part of Poland, and the eastern part became a Soviet republic. However, the division has much deeper historical roots. When the Riga Peace Treaty was signed in 1921, it accounted for the pre-existing socio-cultural division. Poland targeted those lands whose population could be easily assimilated. The historical division was based both on the spheres of the spread of Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy and on the dividing lines between *Litva* and *Rus'* passing through Belarus.

The public view of cultural and spatial divisions is often oversimplified. This is the case of the much-discussed division of Ukraine into western and eastern parts. The same applies to Belarus, where the linguistic situation in the Roman Catholic Church does not fit the "west-east" stereotype. Based on a detailed analysis of the spread of the Belarusian-language liturgy, our study discerns the following three regions:⁶

- The eastern part of Belarus (Homiel region, Mahiliou region and the eastern part of Viciebsk region). The local population is most Russified in terms of language. Russian Orthodoxy prevails, while Roman Catholic parishes are few. Polish is not used in sermons, and very rarely in services. The Russian language predominates in the public sphere. Roman Catholic priests from Viciebsk and Homiel complain that the local population poorly understands the Polish language and experiences difficulties even with the Belarusian language. Therefore, Russian is often used in sermons for catechetical purposes.
- Minsk, Minsk region, and the western part of Viciebsk region. In addition to the traditional division into western and eastern Belarus, its central region stands apart if we consider the socio-synchronic situation in the Church. This region has also become a center for the development of the Belarusian national movement and the preservation of the Belarusian language. Besides, the church in the capital attracts many nationally oriented young people. It is a reference region for the language policy of the Roman Catholic Church, where the Belarusian language undoubtedly predominates both in services and in preaching, leaving only a small percentage of Polish-language services. There are practically no conflicts about the language. We would also associate with this region the western part of the Pinsk diocese (encompassing Brest and Pinsk), where there is no clear predominance of either Polish or Belarusian in the liturgy.
- The Hrodna region (coinciding with the Hrodna diocese) stands out in terms of a large proportion of Roman Catholics and Belarusian Poles. The Hrodna region preserved many churches that operated in Soviet times. As previously mentioned, they conducted their services in Polish. The Hrodna region was almost as Russified as Eastern Belarus in terms of the language of everyday communication. Although the Polish language has lost its communicative function for the local population, it retains its status as an important liturgical language. Roman Catholicism in this region is an important factor in the preservation of Polish identity. The Polish minority thus perceives the transition of the Roman Catholic church to the use of the Belarusian language as a threat to the preservation of their identity. It is in this region that most of the priests who came from Poland serve. In large cities, Polish often remains the only language of worship. The Hrodna region saw many conflicts when believers protested against the forced transition to the Belarusian language. In some parishes, they came out with collective petitions and even boycotted the services.

Language policy in Belarus often involves a compromise, since local communities and many priests advocate retaining the Polish language, in practice almost absent from their daily communication. This commitment to the Polish language is for such reasons as its special status in the Catholic liturgy. Moreover, according to Piotr Rudkouski, for Belarusian-speaking people the Polish language remains a sacral language. The Polish language is sacral as compared to the profane Russian and Belarusian languages, but it is more intelligible in comparison to Latin. Moreover, for some of the clergy and political elites, it serves as a political instrument.

In this regard, the Polish language differs sociolinguistically from the Belarusian language not only in terms of its former sacral status. As mentioned above, the political elites were Polonized during the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Rzeczpospolita/Commonwealth. At the same time, the Polish language became elitist. Urbanization and modernization have eroded the pre-national stereotypes, but these stereotypes persist among the older generation in villages. The high social status of the Polish language not only helped local Roman Catholics, mostly ethnic Poles, to distance themselves socially from the Orthodox population, but also gave them a sense of social and cultural superiority. Naturally, they perceived the transition from Polish to Belarusian as traumatic.

In the Belarusian village diglossia is encountered in its classical form: each of its languages serves particular social functions. The Polish language, which was once the language of the then elites – the Polish landowner and the priest, has now become the language of educated people. Endowed with high prestige, this is a high culture language – delicate, cultured, intelligent. However, nowadays only the older generation is fluent in Polish, those who have studied in Polish schools before the war. Having received education in Russian or Belarusian, the postwar generation uses these languages in more formal settings, while at home and with neighbors they most often switch to a “plain” language, for instance, a local dialect of the Belarusian language (Straczuk 1999).

The preservation of the Polish language in the church is extremely important for maintaining the collective identity of local Poles as they undergo cultural assimilation. The Union of Poles of Belarus (the original one, which has existed since the early 1990s) is in conflict with the Belarusian authorities, while being supported not only by the Polish government, but also by the Polish mass media and researchers. The Belarusian state treats this Poland-backed Union as a hostile, subversive organization, and instead supports the alternative Union of Poles under their control.

From its very inception, the original Union of Poles supported the Belarusian national revival, but was negatively disposed to the transition of the Roman Catholic Church to the Belarusian language. At the time, the mouthpiece of the organization, “Głos znad Niemna,” published letters and collective appeals of local Roman Catholics against the replacement of Polish by Belarusian in the church. The Belarusian authorities fomented an internal struggle in this organization and inspired the creation of an alternative structure. Now the authorities employ as an additional justification for repression of the oppositional Union of Poles in Belarus their criticism of the Belarusianization of the church. The authorities have had to take recourse to anonymous collective appeals in their propaganda campaign against the opposition.⁷

Union of Poles of Belarus activist A.P. (2019) states, “The authorities support the Belarusian language, displacing the Polish language in the church. Practically, the church is the only place where the state authorities directly support the Belarusian language. I don’t know any other sphere involving such an alliance of those in power, ‘nationalists,’ and the nationally oriented part of the clergy.”

Some publications by Polish authors about the situation of the Church sounded alarmist and presented the language policy as part of depolonization and threatening to Polish identity in Belarus. Both local Polish activists and Polish researchers assume an alarmist stance about “self-Belarusianization of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus” (the expression of Zdzisław Winnicki), presented as the main factor of “depolonization.” Reverend Roman Dzwonkowski, usually cautious in his assessments, also asserts that the ongoing linguistic Belarusianization and Ukrainianization of the Roman Catholic Church in the long term will lead to the implementation of Russia’s

long-standing plan of depolonization and Russification. Since, according to the author, it is difficult to russify the Poles, the authorities employ their assimilation into the Belarusians. However, in practice, they come under the influence of Russian culture, with the “Russian World” spreading its influence in the region. Helena Giebień (2015) also claims that the supposedly conformist leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus is also a consequence of pressure from the Belarusian authorities in order to further depolonize the local population.

The issue of choosing the language of worship in the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus has a complex prehistory and is presently ambiguous. The priority of the Belarusian language has made it possible to relieve the tensions of the Belarusian authorities with the national intelligentsia but has led to their conflict with the Polish minority. Presently, the Roman Catholic Church is the most pro-Belarusian institution in Belarus, strengthening the position of the Belarusian language and identity. This orientation also contributes to the weakening of Polish identity, historically associated with Roman Catholicism. There is a rapid decrease in the number of Poles in Belarus through their assimilation. As Golachowska (2017) stated, the respondents with a Polish national identity who belong to the Roman Catholic Church allow for the possibility of modifying their nationality while retaining their Roman Catholic faith. It is obvious that the erosion of the “Catholic = Pole” stereotype, which intensified with the new linguistic and ethnic policy in Belarusian Roman Catholicism since the early 1990s, increasingly results both in dual identities (“Belarusian-Pole”) and the gradual assimilation of local Poles. On the other hand, this is an objective process for any “nationalizing” country of Eastern Europe. The only question is how some mutual understanding of the “mixed” world can be preserved during the transition from one premodern type of identity (nation-faith) to new national types thereof?

Conclusion

While Huntington’s (1996) pessimistic predictions partly hold in Ukraine, they are less applicable in Belarus. Much criticized for its “weakness,” the project of Belarusian nationalism is surprisingly stable. Belarusians thus have a single national identity but different religious identities. Religious identities in Belarus cannot claim a monopoly and have to coexist with other identities. Since no language can completely dominate the borderlands, hybrid tactics of coexistence and differentiation replace monopoly. Agreeing with Golachowska (2012, 174) our study has shown that it is possible to utilize the Belarusian language in the sacral purposes, whilst simultaneously Polish identification and the national identities of individuals are maintained.

The choice of the language of worship for the Roman Catholic Church is rather complicated and confusing. While evangelism and understanding of the liturgy by believers is most often used to explain language policy decisions, this logic is still not dominant. It involves pressure from the state, which defends its vision of language policy (first of all, reducing the role of the Polish language) as well as the nationally oriented intelligentsia. Historical stereotypes also influenced the choice of language via inducing a negative attitude to the Russian language in catechesis, although its use could be justified if it was only a question of evangelism. The preferences of believers who are ready to retain their preferred language of worship should also be taken into account. Thus, a whole network of local variations is hidden under the unified exterior of the preference for the Belarusian language. In the Hrodna diocese, the Polish language is still preserved as the main liturgical language, which is due to several factors that go beyond the confessional framework. This situation has to do both with the preservation of the Polish minority’s identity and the social status of the Polish and Belarusian languages. The language policy of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus can be called a “policy of compromises” when bishops and priests find solutions to conflicting interests and tensions. It seems that this policy of balancing is quite successful, because most of the internal conflicts over the language have subsided and disappeared from the public sphere. In the ethics of the borderlands, the search for a model of coexistence is dominant. The Roman Catholic Church repeatedly works out compromise solutions that allow it to adapt to the needs of a country

experiencing a phase of contradictory and conflicting nation-building. Choosing a language thus depends not only on the intra-confessional situation. In the absence of stable borders, any policy, including linguistic policy, is necessarily flexible and prone to compromises.

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Notes

- 1 A state body, among the main tasks of which is the regulation of relations between the state and religious communities in Belarus.
- 2 The maximum duration of such a work visa is one year, but shorter-term visas may be issued.
- 3 In 2006, the Committee on Religious and Ethnic Affairs was transformed into the Office of the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs.
- 4 According to Leanid Gulyaka, “Some priests from Poland try to get involved in politics. They don’t like our country, our laws, our leadership. In such cases, we do not agree on the extension of their stay in our country” (Gulyaka 2015).
- 5 Services in Russian were held at the Mahiliou Cathedral from October 2016 to July 2017. Pastor Vitaly Drazdouski assessed the results of this innovation: “People came, but one cannot say that there were many of them. Maybe 10–15 people came. It cannot be said that this will increase the number of parishioners” (Drazdouski 2017).
- 6 Naturally, the proposed regionalization is not ideal; it would also be possible to single out the Pinsk diocese as a separate region, or further split the dioceses by parishes. But our proposed option for identifying three regions allows us to capture those differences that we consider significant. We also note that the existing division of the Catholic Church in Belarus into dioceses is based on the administrative division of the country (with some exceptions in the case of the Pinsk diocese), which often do not correlate with stable cultural and religious divisions. A typical example is the Viciebsk region, which includes regions dominated by Orthodoxy and the Catholic-oriented western regions (which historically were more associated with Vilnius).
- 7 Thus in May 2017, the newspaper *Grodnenskaya Pravda* published a collective anonymous letter with accusations against the head of the unofficial Union of Poles in Belarus Anzhelika Borys: “In January, when holding a New Year event in the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary in Kemelishki in front of the parishioners, Borys negatively assessed the service conducted by the priest Pavel Haradzeichyk in the Belarusian language, accusing him of nationalist views. She criticized our bishop for the small, in her opinion, number of services in Polish in churches! And how many more such cases, how much more filth will be poured on us? Why does this woman allow herself such attacks on the Church? Who gave her the right to decide in what language we should pray, who gave her the authority to condemn our bishop and call our priests names?” Naturally, Anzhelika Borys herself rejected these accusations: “I consider this a provocation. We defend the Polish school, the Polish language, but we have never opposed the Belarusian language, never even talked about it.” For more details see Borys, 2017.

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