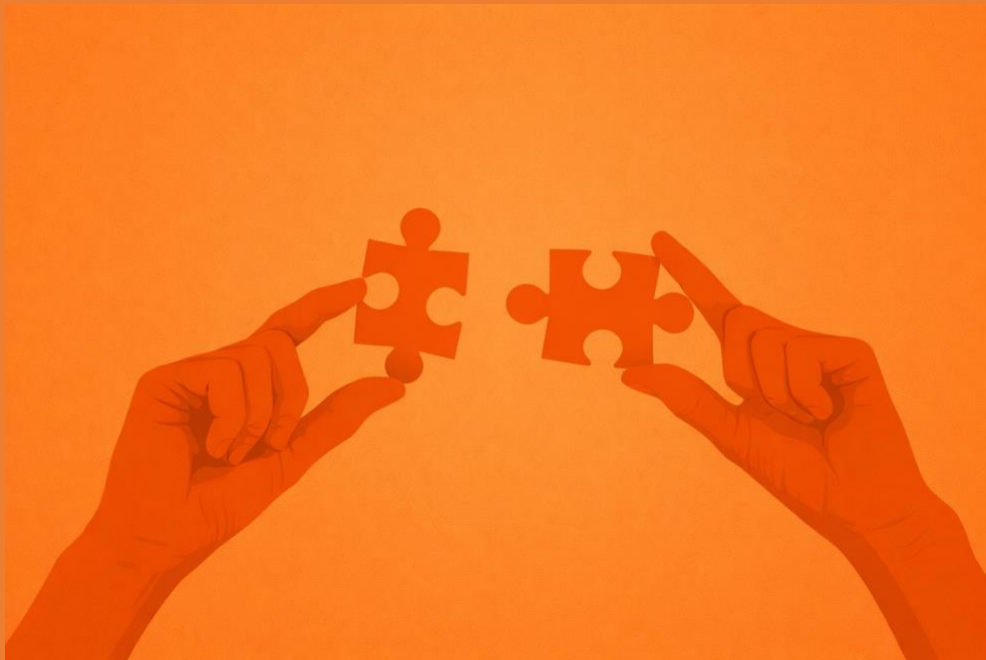




Institute for Development and Social Market in
Belarus and Eastern Europe



POLICY BRIEF

RELIGION, CHURCH AND STATE IN BELARUS AND RUSSIA AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE, CIVIC RESILIENCE AND POLICY OPTIONS FOR EUROPE AND DEMOCRATIC FORCES

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The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule. The analysis therefore reflects the substance of the discussion without attributing individual assessments to named participants.

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Executive summary

Religion in Belarus and Russia should not be viewed solely as a private matter of belief or as an autonomous spiritual sphere. The experts who participated in the discussion indicate that religious institutions, public religious rhetoric, religious networks and international religious contacts are increasingly intertwined with authoritarian governance, ideological mobilisation, public legitimacy and cross-border influence.

In Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has become an important institutional and ideological partner of the state. The available materials indicate that its role extends beyond public loyalty. Official church structures therefore contribute to the symbolic and sacral framing of Russia's war against Ukraine, the promotion of the "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World) narrative and the presentation of Russian state policy as a defence of a historical mission and "traditional values".

Belarus presents a different configuration. The Belarusian Orthodox Church remains formally connected to the Moscow Patriarchate, while religious institutions also operate under political pressure and selective patronage from the Belarusian authorities. This produces a dual dependency: religious actors must navigate expectations from Minsk while remaining embedded in Russian ecclesiastical, cultural and historical narratives. At the same time, the available materials do not support treating the Belarusian Orthodox Church or Belarusian believers as politically homogeneous.

The policy task for European institutions and democratic actors is therefore twofold. They should recognise religion as part of the broader environment of authoritarian influence, while avoiding blanket assumptions about denominations, clergy or believers. Effective policy should support secure documentation of violations, strengthen pluralistic and interfaith resilience, scrutinise the political use of religious diplomacy and prepare a future democratic framework for church–state relations in Belarus.

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Introduction

This policy brief is based on materials from the expert discussion “Religion and Church in Belarus and Russia”, held on 25 May 2026. The discussion examined church–state relations, freedom of religion or belief, the role of religious institutions during Russia’s war against Ukraine, Russian influence in Belarus, the condition of non-Orthodox communities and possible responses by European partners, civil society and democratic forces.

The brief is not a comprehensive study of religious life in either country. It is a policy-oriented synthesis of the available materials. The evidence base consists primarily of the expert discussion and its analytical synopsis. It therefore distinguishes between documented material contained in the source files, analytical interpretation and policy inference.

The central conclusion is that religion should be included in analysis of authoritarian influence and democratic resilience in Belarus and Russia. However, the religious sphere must not be treated as uniform. Official hierarchies, parish communities, individual clergy, religious educators, diaspora groups, active believers and nominal believers may operate under very different incentives and constraints.

The problem is not religion itself. The policy concern is the political use of religious institutions, authority, rhetoric and networks for ideological mobilisation, public legitimisation, suppression of institutional autonomy and cross-border influence.

1. Religion in authoritarian systems: a shared framework

The materials indicate that religious life in Belarus and Russia has become increasingly connected to state ideology, political loyalty, public legitimacy and foreign policy narratives. In both countries, religious institutions may be affected by administrative pressure, informal expectations, selective privileges and the need to avoid conflict with the authorities.

This does not mean that religion is simply imposed from above. The discussion rejects the idea that churches are merely passive instruments of state power. In the Russian case especially, the relationship between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church is described as a convergence of institutional interests, informal networks and ideological priorities. The Church is not presented as an unwilling participant in this relationship. Significant parts of its leadership are understood to benefit from state support, public status, access to resources and influence across the post-Soviet space.

In Belarus, the pattern is different. Religious institutions operate in a system of selective patronage in which public loyalty may be rewarded and visible autonomy may entail risk. The materials describe this environment as a “market of loyalty”: state institutions may grant access, recognition or institutional space to compliant actors, while independent or politically inconvenient initiatives may be exposed to pressure.

The distinction between different levels of religious autonomy is important.

At the liturgical and doctrinal level, religious communities retain substantial room for internal life. The experts do not indicate systematic state interference in theology, prayer or detailed ritual practice.

At the institutional level, autonomy is more constrained. Religious education, clerical formation, personnel policy, charitable work, public communication and access to schools, hospitals, prisons or other public institutions may depend on administrative decisions and political relationships.

At the political and ideological level, autonomy is weakest. Public positions on war, national identity, foreign policy, Ukraine, “traditional values”, repression, and relations with Russia may be shaped by direct pressure, self-censorship or institutional discipline.

This framework is relevant for European policy because it avoids two analytical errors. The first is to treat religion as politically irrelevant. The second is to treat all religious actors as equally integrated into authoritarian systems.

2. Belarus: dual dependency, selective patronage and low-visibility solidarity

Religious policy after 2020

For Belarus, the decisive background is the political crisis that followed the mass protests of 2020, followed by intensified repression, the destruction of independent public activity, forced emigration and growing fear of state institutions.

The materials indicate that religious structures were also affected by this broader political environment. The experts participating in the discussion referred to pressure, self-censorship, personnel consequences, and institutional paralysis within religious communities. Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine intensified these pressures. Anti-war positions, public support for Ukraine, humanitarian links with Ukrainian communities and independent language used to describe the war could become politically sensitive.

The available material does not establish the full scale of these practices. They nevertheless suggest that many religious actors have adapted by limiting public statements, using cautious language and shifting support activity into informal, local or confidential forms.

The Belarusian Orthodox Church between Minsk and Moscow

The Belarusian Orthodox Church occupies a central place in the Belarusian religious environment. The experts describe it as formally subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate and embedded in wider Russian religious, cultural and historical narratives.

At the same time, the Belarusian Orthodox Church is not described as a direct administrative instrument of the Kremlin. The discussion stresses that Moscow’s capacity to control

everyday parish and diocesan life in Belarus is limited. Local clergy and communities may retain room for pragmatic adaptation, cautious distancing and silent disagreement.

The more accurate description is one of dual dependency.

On the one hand, the Belarusian Orthodox Church must operate within the political system of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Public loyalty, institutional caution and the avoidance of open disagreement may be necessary for organisational survival.

On the other hand, its formal ecclesiastical connection to Moscow shapes senior appointments, symbolic frameworks, historical narratives and the broader language of Orthodox identity. The materials suggest that Russian influence may operate through institutional signals, religious networks, public events, symbolic recognition, cultural projects and informal relations, rather than through direct day-to-day command.

This creates a structural vulnerability for Belarusian sovereignty. Religious life may become one of the channels through which ideas about “Holy Rus’”, Russian civilisational unity and the special relationship between Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine circulate. Yet this risk should not be transformed into an assumption that all clergy or believers accept such narratives.

Non-Orthodox communities and interfaith links

The materials describe Catholic, Greek Catholic, Protestant, independent Orthodox and other religious communities in Belarus as comparatively more likely to retain horizontal links, international contacts and practical experience of solidarity. These communities should not be idealised or portrayed as automatically democratic. They contain different political views, levels of caution and degrees of institutional conformity.

Nevertheless, their more decentralised structures and cross-border networks may provide space for mutual assistance, education, pastoral care and social support. The experts particularly stressed the importance of interfaith contacts among Catholic, Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Protestant actors.

The potential of these networks is not primarily electoral or organisational. It lies in the preservation of trust, dignity, moral language, Belarusian cultural agency and practical solidarity. These forms of resilience may be difficult to observe because public visibility can expose people inside Belarus to political or security risks.

Religious diplomacy and reputational risk

The materials also identify religious diplomacy as a policy concern. The Belarusian authorities may use selected international religious contacts, large public events or gestures of openness towards foreign religious leaders or representatives to present themselves as tolerant, stable or internationally accepted.

The available material does not allow a full assessment of the frequency or impact of such practices. However, it supports a practical conclusion: European institutions, churches,

foundations and religious organisations should assess whether high-profile engagement with official Belarusian religious actors advances a concrete humanitarian or human-rights objective, or primarily creates reputational value for the authorities.

3. Russia: ideological symbiosis, war legitimisation and shrinking autonomy

The Russian Orthodox Church and the state

The experts describe the Russian Orthodox Church as an important participant in the ideological environment of the Russian state. The relationship is presented not as simple state coercion, but as a deep institutional and ideological symbiosis.

The Russian Orthodox Church is described as sharing several strategic interests with the state: preserving influence in the post-Soviet space, supporting narratives of Russian historical mission, promoting the “Russkiy Mir” framework and defending a political interpretation of “traditional values”.

Formal constitutional principles of secularism do not alter this assessment. The materials stress that informal practices are central: relationships between religious leaders and members of the ruling class, Church participation in foreign-policy projects, the use of religious symbolism in public language and the provision of sacred legitimacy where legal or political legitimacy is weak.

This does not mean that every Russian Orthodox believer, parish or cleric supports the state’s political agenda. The discussion distinguishes between hierarchy, clergy, active believers, nominal believers and small groups of people who seek to preserve independent or anti-war positions. Yet the institutional role of the Russian Orthodox Church is described as significantly more aligned with state power than in the Belarusian case.

War as a driver of religious politicisation

Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine intensified pre-existing patterns of church–state cooperation. The materials indicate that the boundary between state propaganda, military mobilisation and religious rhetoric has become less visible since 2022.

The Russian Orthodox Church and related structures are described as contributing to the religious and symbolic framing of war through the public blessing of military personnel, support for the front, commemorative practices, rhetoric about spiritual struggle and the portrayal of conflict as defence against external evil.

The significance of this process lies not only in direct persuasion. Religious rhetoric may make violence appear morally permissible, present war as a form of sacrifice or frame political conflict as a sacred struggle beyond ordinary ethical judgement.

The materials therefore suggest that the Church's role is less about independently creating public opinion than about reinforcing state-produced narratives through religious language and symbolic authority.

Other religious communities in Russia

The materials also describe a constrained environment for non-Orthodox communities in Russia. Official Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Catholic structures may be expected to demonstrate loyalty or to operate within state-defined limits. More independent groups may face pressure, marginalisation or restrictions.

The discussion pays particular attention to Muslim communities. Participants argued that their demographic growth, migration-related links, decentralised organisation and horizontal networks make them an object of heightened attention for the authorities and for the Russian Orthodox Church.

This assessment should be treated with caution. The available material does not provide systematic evidence on the scale of restrictions or on the political consequences of Muslim community organisation. It does, however, identify the interaction between religious policy, anti-migrant rhetoric, limits on public religious practice and state concern about autonomous social networks as an important area for further research.

Limits of democratic potential

The materials do not support the expectation that religious communities can become a major driver of democratic transformation in Russia in the near term.

The comparison with Polish Catholicism and the Solidarity movement is considered misleading. The Polish Catholic Church had an external centre, a distinct national role and a specific historical position vis-à-vis communist rule. The Russian Orthodox Church, by contrast, is described as closely integrated into dominant Russian identity and state ideology.

The most realistic potential lies in small groups of clergy, believers, scholars, diaspora communities and independent religious actors who preserve alternative moral language, oppose the war or sustain networks of assistance. Their role may be important for long-term intellectual and ethical renewal, but the materials do not suggest that they currently form a mass political force.

4. Belarus and Russia: key differences and common risks

Belarus and Russia share important features. In both countries, religion can be connected to political loyalty, ideological control, public legitimacy and state attempts to regulate autonomous social life. In both cases, religious institutions cannot be analysed separately from media, education, culture, historical memory and wider authoritarian governance.

The differences are equally important.

In Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church is presented as an active participant in state ideology and the symbolic legitimisation of war. Its leadership is described as having significant institutional incentives to cooperate with the state, and its public rhetoric may reinforce imperial and militaristic narratives.

In Belarus, the Belarusian Orthodox Church is more constrained and politically ambivalent. It is formally dependent on Moscow but does not appear to play the same active role in producing militarised ideology. The materials describe its strategy more accurately as passive adaptation: avoiding open conflict with either Minsk or Moscow while limiting reputational and institutional risks.

Belarus also retains a more visible interfaith environment. Catholic, Protestant, Greek Catholic and other communities may provide alternative networks of solidarity, language and identity. Their potential should not be exaggerated, but it offers a different social landscape from the Russian case.

The common risk is that authoritarian systems may use religion to reduce moral resistance to violence, normalise political loyalty and narrow the space for independent social organisation. The common policy need is to protect freedom of conscience without turning religious communities into objects of ideological labelling or political manipulation.

5. Religion, public attitudes and democratic prospects

The materials caution against treating religion as the main determinant of political attitudes in either Belarus or Russia.

For many nominal believers, views on war, authority, democracy and national identity are shaped more strongly by television, state media, school environments, family networks, social pressure, regional conditions and fear than by formal religious participation.

This matters for democratic communication.

In Belarus, religious language may be useful when it speaks about dignity, conscience, compassion, responsibility, non-violence and the right not to participate in falsehood or injustice. It should not be used as a narrow confessional tool or as a substitute for political, legal and social programmes.

In Russia, the materials suggest that moral criticism alone has limited ability to change public attitudes. Engagement with society requires long-term work with themes of responsibility, the human cost of war, regional inequality, family security, rights and the destruction of the future.

In both countries, democratic actors should avoid the false choice between secular and religious language. Freedom of conscience, human dignity, solidarity and rejection of violence can be framed in ways that are understandable to both religious and non-religious audiences.

Recommendations and policy proposals

At the level of EU institutions and international partners

- Develop distinct Belarusian and Russian approaches to religion, civic space and authoritarian influence. Belarus should not be treated as a minor extension of the Russian case. European policy should recognise Belarus's separate political dynamics, religious plurality, sovereignty concerns and different relationship between church structures and state power.
- Integrate freedom of religion or belief into wider Belarus-related analysis. European External Action Service teams, European Commission services and EU Member State foreign ministries should assess religious policy alongside restrictions on civic space, education, culture, media, historical memory and national identity.
- Apply reputational risk assessments to religious diplomacy. Before high-profile meetings, visits or public events involving official Belarusian or Russian religious representatives, European institutions and religious organisations should assess whether engagement serves a concrete humanitarian or human-rights objective, or may primarily be used to legitimise authoritarian authorities.
- Avoid collective assumptions about denominations. Engagement should be based on institutional role, public conduct, documented state links, exposure to coercion and demonstrated involvement in repression or propaganda. Religious affiliation alone should not be treated as proof of political loyalty.
- Support Belarusian connectivity with European religious, educational and civic communities. Safe links with diaspora communities, educational initiatives, interfaith platforms and human-rights organisations can help preserve alternatives to political and cultural isolation.

At the level of research, donor and civil-society programmes

- Fund long-term research on religion, state policy and political influence. Research should map institutional links, legal arrangements, public rhetoric, religious education, media representation, cross-border networks and the relationship between religion, war, sovereignty and democratic attitudes. The recommendation aims to create safe channels for collecting and verifying information about violations of freedom of religion or belief without exposing victims, witnesses or religious communities to further risk. Such monitoring would provide reliable evidence for diplomatic engagement, international advocacy and targeted assistance, helping to prevent further violations, hold perpetrators accountable and develop effective protection measures for affected individuals and communities.
- Support multi-confessional initiatives rather than confessional competition. Funding should be available to Orthodox, Catholic, Greek Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and interfaith initiatives that work on legal support, education, humanitarian assistance, trauma recovery, family support and preservation of social ties.

- Use a “do no harm” approach. Donors should not require public visibility, identifiable beneficiary lists or politically branded activities where this could increase risk for participants inside Belarus or Russia.
- Support the translation of analysis into practical communication. Civil-society and educational platforms need accessible language that connects freedom of conscience with dignity, solidarity, national identity, non-violence and rights.
- Avoid romanticising religious communities. Media and cultural projects should show the diversity of religious life: official loyalty, fear, adaptation, quiet disagreement, practical solidarity, ideological conflict and diaspora-based initiatives.

At the level of Belarusian democratic actors

- Treat freedom of religion or belief as a distinct area of democratic policy. This should include advocacy for communities under pressure, support for religious actors affected by repression and attention to the political use of religious institutions by the Belarusian authorities and external actors.
- Avoid confessional favouritism. Democratic forces should support equal treatment of Orthodox, Catholic, Greek Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and other communities, as well as the rights of non-religious citizens.
- Develop a future legal framework for church–state relations. This framework should include equality of denominations before the law, transparent registration, protection against discrimination, independence of religious education and charitable activity, safeguards against administrative pressure and measures limiting foreign political control of religious institutions.
- Use the language of conscience, dignity and responsibility. Communication should not reduce religion to ideological mobilisation. For religious audiences, the focus should be moral responsibility, truthfulness, compassion and non-participation in violence. For secular audiences, the focus should be rights, freedoms and institutional independence.
- Strengthen partnerships with religious diaspora communities. Belarusian democratic forces should cooperate with diaspora-based Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and interfaith communities without attempting to politically subordinate them. These communities may become durable centres of trust, service, solidarity, and Belarusian cultural continuity.
- Protect low-visibility networks. Publicly identifying people or communities inside Belarus as democratic or anti-war actors may create risks. Support should therefore prioritise confidentiality, consent and secure communication..



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