

Religion and Politics in Neighboring Belarus and Poland: Gender Dimensions

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During the years of postcommunist transition, the major developments in neighbors Belarus and Poland were quite different. Poland became a liberal democratic state belonging to Europe politically and economically. Belarus maintained its communist heritage, which influences the population's values and everyday life.

However, some similar value changes took place in Belarus and Poland as well. One important change relates to religion. In Soviet times, Belarusians were officially nonreligious; however, after the collapse of the USSR many Belarusians expressed their religious attitudes and beliefs. In Belarus, as in many other post-Soviet republics, the population experienced a religious renaissance. Although the level of religiosity is still much lower than in Poland, religious beliefs are on the rise in Belarus.

The second important change in major values relates to politics: unlike in Soviet days in Belarus, the level of political interest is now very low, and in Poland, the sphere of politics is even less attractive for most of the population. Both dimensions, religion and politics, have gender specifics in each country. In this article, I examine those features based on the results of the last European Values surveys (of 1999 for Poland and of 2000 for Belarus).¹ I explore national differences in the religious values in Belarus and Poland and describe the political shifts with a strong focus on gender dimensions.

Belarus and Poland: Similarities and Differences

Poland and Belarus are in the center of Europe. Until recently, for several decades they belonged to the socialist world. Before the period of socialism, Poland and Belarus were parts of tsarist Russia for more than a century. Even earlier, during the Middle Ages, the territory of contemporary Belarus was part of Poland, so that both Poles and Belarusians lived together, experiencing the same legal rules, civic habits, cultural traditions, and so on. Even their languages have much in common, so that Belarusians easily understand Poles and vice versa.

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Having such an interrelated history, the two Slavic nations have many common features in their cultures. For the same historical and cultural reasons, they also have many differences in their pasts that influence their present situation.

First, Poland was an independent state for most of its history. Even when it was part of the socialist world, with the political center in Moscow, Poland kept its independence and enjoyed fundamental privileges among socialist countries, such as the prevalence of private property in agriculture and the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in spiritual life. Belarus, on the contrary, practically appeared on the map of Europe in 1991 after the collapse of the USSR. Since 1919, Belarus had been a part of the multinational Soviet state and totally followed the Soviet political principles emanating from Moscow. After World War II, Belarus was represented in the United Nations, but like other Soviet republics it did not enjoy real political independence. The previous national culture of Belarus was suppressed, and a new “socialist culture” was cultivated during Soviet days.

Second, the Polish nobility were famous in Europe for their liberal rules and liberal freedoms (such as *liberum veto*) at the time when many other European countries were authoritarian monarchies. Poland had a parliament and some democratic practices for centuries before partition of the country at the end of the eighteenth century. Belarus has been ruled by foreigners (Lithuanians, Poles, Russians) for most of its history.

Third, Poland recently has joined NATO and is preparing to enter the European Union, indications of its clear pro-western political orientation. Belarus has stayed under Russian political influence even ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For more than seven decades, the people of Belarus shared so-called Soviet values, socialist traditions, norms, and the like. This Soviet period of Belarusian history still influences contemporary ideology and everyday life of Belarusians. That is why some people say that post-Soviet Belarus is still in many aspects “a forepost of socialism.”

Religion: National and Gender Differences

To compare religious matters in Belarus and Poland, it is necessary to explore several dimensions of religion using the results of the European Values surveys. These dimensions include religiosity, affiliation with church, and the role religion plays in society. We shall start with the role religion plays in each society and with public opinion about the importance of religion in people’s lives.

Importance of Religion

Among six major values in the European Values surveys of 1999–2000, religion occupies next to the last position among Belarusians: Only 11.6 percent of respondents said that religion is very important for them, while 21.2 percent said that it is not at all important. The number of people who said that religion is very important for them is only about half the number who say that it is of no importance for them, and it is almost the same as Belarusians expressed ten years ago in the European Values survey of 1990 (11.3 percent and 23.4 percent).

The responses indicate that this social sphere was not fundamentally changed during the last ten years. Probably only in one or two generations can one expect significant differences in Belarus regarding religion. However, even now there is a positive trend toward religiosity: almost twice as many people (31.9 percent) said in 2000 that religion is quite important for them, compared with 16.6 percent who said the same in 1990. The fact that many more people have expressed some interest in religion confirms the general tendency in this sphere: it is easier to change the opinions of those who are not strong believers or strong atheists; a so-called neutral audience may quickly change its opinion, unlike those who represent the left wing or the right wing, whose positions are more stable.

Poles give religion much greater importance. Table 1 shows the major differences in this area between the two nations, including gender differences.

It is interesting to compare the general importance of religion in the two countries. More than one in five among Belarusians did not mention any importance of religion in their life, while in Poland, such people were counted in single percentage. Almost half of the Poles surveyed said that religion is very important for them, while in Belarus only one in ten said the same. In Poland almost 84 percent of the population said that religion is important, while in Belarus it was only 43.5 percent.

The differences are even more remarkable when analyzed on the basis of gender. The general tendency for all the European countries is that more women than men say that religion is important for them. This tendency is valid for both Belarus and Poland. At the same time, when asked about religion the differences between men and women in Belarus are more significant than between men and women in Poland. Sixteen percent of women versus 6 percent of men in Belarus say that religion is very important for them (2.5 times more women than men). In Poland, this difference is also visible—18.7 percent—but it is much less than in Belarus if we take the numbers proportionally. In Belarus, less than 30 percent of men say that religion is important for them, and almost the same number of men say that religion has no importance at all; almost 55 percent of women say

TABLE 1. Belarusians' and Poles' Responses to Survey on the Importance of Religion, in Percentages

	Belarus			Poland		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Very important	11.6	6.2	16.0	44.9	36.8	51.5
Quite important	31.9	23.4	38.8	39.0	42.1	36.4
Not very important	30.4	34.5	27.0	12.7	16.6	9.6
Not important at all	21.2	29.6	14.3	3.4	4.5	2.5

Source: Loek Halman, *The European Values Study: A Third Wave: Source Book of the 1999/2000 European Values Study Surveys*, Tilburg University, EVS WORC, 2000.

that religion is important, compared with 14 percent expressing the opposite opinion. In Poland the numbers of those who say religion is important are 79 percent among men and 89 percent among women. Polish society is much more homogeneous from this point of view (positive attitudes toward religion among men and women) than Belarusian society. If we look at this issue by age group, we'll see that old women express the highest level of importance of religion in their life both in Poland and Belarus.

Religion and Society

As for the role that religion plays in society, Poles and Belarusians focus on the same spiritual needs, but there are some differences. Although the majority of men and women in Poland think that the church adequately meets spiritual needs of society, and more than a half of men and women agree that the church meets moral and family life problems, only one-third of men and 44 percent of women in Poland agree that the church helps in understanding current social problems.

In Belarus the numbers are quite different (see table 2). Less than a half of the men polled selected spiritual needs, 43 percent stressed moral problems, and quite a few agreed that religion may answer the problems of family life or social problems. Among Belarusian women the tendency is quite the same, but more women stressed the role of religion in every sphere of life than men did. The major difference between Belarus and Poland is the role of religion in family life: people in Belarus think that this role is rather limited (approximately one-fifth of men and one-third of women selected it), while in Poland almost two-thirds of men and women agree that the church adequately answers family life problems. It can be expected that this difference will have a strong impact on several issues regarding family life, gender roles in the family, and the like.

Religious Affiliation

As could be expected, religious affiliation and church attendance are very high in Poland: more than 95 percent reported belonging to a religious denomination

TABLE 2. Respondent Beliefs Concerning the Adequacy of the Church's Answers to Life Problems (Percentage Who Responded "Yes")

	Belarus			Poland		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Moral problems	65.0	63.5	67.3	43.1	34.7	49.9
Family problems	64.4	62.4	66.0	28.1	22.5	32.7
Spiritual needs	82.9	83.3	82.6	55.9	49.0	61.5
Social problems	40.5	36.2	44.3	16.9	13.1	20.0

Source: Loek Halman, *The European Values Study: A Third Wave: Source Book of the 1999/2000 European Values Study Surveys*, Tilburg University, EVS WORC, 2000.

(almost all to the Roman Catholic Church). Almost 60 percent go to church once a week or more often; less than 5 percent go to church once a year or less, and 6 percent never attend church. There is no difference between men and women regarding church attendance. When they were twelve years old, their church attendance was even higher—91.3 percent (22.9 percent attended church more often than once a week, and 68.4 percent once a week)—because the church served “as a bastion of anti-Communist opposition in Poland” during the post-war period. The church lost this important political role after the end of socialism in 1989, and church attendance declined. However, the current level of church attendance appears to be extremely high.

In Belarus only 52.2 percent said they belong to a religious denomination (41 percent of men and 61 percent of women), including 43.2 percent Russian Orthodox believers and 6.3 percent Roman Catholic believers. Approximately 5.6 percent go to church at least once a week (2.2 percent of men and 8 percent of women); 8.8 percent go

to church once a month (4 percent of men and 13 percent of women); and 34 percent go to church only on Christmas, Easter, or other religious holidays. Some 12.2 percent attend church once a year; 10 percent even less often; and 27.5 percent almost never attend church. Roughly speaking, less than 15 percent of Belarusians go to church once a month or more often; 27.5 percent (or more than a quarter of the population) never attend church (41 percent of men and 17 percent of women); and the rest attend church very seldom. According to these answers, we may conclude that even those who identify with a religious denomination (52.2 percent) do not go to church on a regular basis or even several times a year.

When asked how often respondents attended church when they were twelve years old, 4.9 percent of Belarusians answered once a week or more often; 5.3 percent once a month; 19.8 percent attended church for Christmas, Easter, and other religious holidays; 17.4 percent once a year or less often; and 46.1 percent never (52 percent of men and 41 percent of women).

Because only slightly more than 10 percent of the respondents to the 2000 survey were younger than twelve in 1991 when the USSR collapsed we may conclude that the level of church attendance remains more or less the same in Belarus as it was under the socialism. There is only one significant exception—women older than sixty: according to the survey, they attended church more often when they were twelve years old. More people now attend church only for religious holidays than was the case when they were twelve (23 percent versus 17.8 percent). However, many more people reported that they never attended church when

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they were twelve than now (46 percent versus 28.5 percent)). The portion of strong believers was not much higher in 2000 than in 1990.

Although in Poland regular church attendance is declining, it is still at a very high level. In Belarus church attendance is becoming slightly higher, but still remains relatively low.

The level of membership in religious organizations is low in both Poland and Belarus: in Belarus 2 percent of those surveyed reported that they are members of religious organizations, while 4 percent voluntarily help these organizations. In Poland, around 5 percent said they were members of organizations, while even fewer reported that they work for these organizations on a voluntary basis.

Practice of "Rites of Passage"

In Belarus the importance of a religious celebration of such events as birth, marriage, and death is relatively low: death ranks highest with 78 percent (72 percent of men and 84 percent of women), then birth with 75 percent (66 percent of men and 82 percent of women), and marriage with only 54 percent (46 percent of men and 60 percent of women). The differences among the three "rites of passage" are quite significant: Almost half of Belarusians do not associate marriage with a religious celebration, while three in four make such an association concerning death and birth.

This hierarchy of importance is typical for Western Europe in general as well, although the average level for a religious marriage celebration is higher in Western Europe than in Belarus. Belarus is closer to the average level of celebration in Eastern Europe, especially for the countries where Russian Orthodox believers prevail. When compared with Poland, the difference is great: more than 95 percent of Poles consider religious celebrations of rites of passage important.

Religious Beliefs

Almost 97 percent of Poles reportedly believe in God; more than 85 percent believe in sin; more than 70 percent believe in heaven and life after death. A much smaller number believe in nontraditional and even non-Christian beliefs: only 38.5 percent believe in telepathy and 24 percent in reincarnation. In general, this is a traditional pattern of beliefs.

In Belarus, the pattern is quite different. The highest level of belief is expressed regarding sin (48.2 percent), while less than one-third believe in life after death (31 percent), in heaven (27.6 percent), and in hell (26.5 percent). However, there is no significant difference between those who have traditional beliefs in hell, heaven, and sin, on the one hand, and those who believe in reincarnation (26 percent) and telepathy (23 percent) on the other. This probably means that Belarusians do not have strong traditional beliefs and do not care which of their beliefs are "fundamental" and which ones are rather new and not essentially Christian.

Intrinsic Religiosity

By intrinsic religiosity I mean the subjective religious dispositions, such as a personal God, self-identification as a religious person, experience of comfort and

strength from religion, and frequency of meditation and/or praying. In Poland, these indicators are much higher than in Belarus. The absolute majority of Poles think they are religious, and four in five express the importance of God in their personal life. More than 80 percent have a personal image of God, and almost 10 percent think God is a spiritual force. More than 80 percent experience strength and comfort from religion, and almost 80 percent pray at least once a week.

In Belarus only a quarter of the respondents identified themselves as religious persons, while 9 percent reported being atheists (three times more men than women among them). More than half (59 percent) believe that every person has his or her image of God, 8 percent believe that God is a spiritual force (the rest either do not believe in God or do not know about personal image of God). Four in ten declare the high importance of God in their life, while three in ten believe that God is not important for them. Only 42 percent reported that religion gives them comfort and strength (27 percent of men and 54 percent of women). Twenty-eight percent of people never pray, while two-thirds of the respondents reported they pray or meditate: 15 percent pray or meditate every day, 15 percent pray at least one a week or more often, 13 percent pray or meditate once a month. This pattern is more or less typical for Eastern Europe.

Confidence in the Church

In the areas tested, Belarusians have the highest level of confidence in the educational system, second highest in the church, and confidence in the army ranks third. Religion was almost prohibited for anyone who cared about a professional career or social status in Soviet society. Recently, however, the church (both Orthodox and Catholic) is associated with the process of transition from communism to democracy and political independence. That is why, unlike many other social institutions, confidence in the church is very high in Belarus. Thus, 20 percent of those polled expressed a great deal of confidence in church and 44 percent a lot of confidence; only 17 percent expressed not much confidence in the church and only 9.5 percent no confidence. It is not surprising that women's confidence in the church is higher than men's. In general, this level of confidence is higher than the average level for Eastern Europe.

The level of confidence in the church is higher in Poland than in Belarus because of the unusual role that the Catholic Church played in the anticommunist struggle during the socialist regime. During the last decade, for many reasons, the level of confidence declined; however, it is still very high: 33 percent expressed a great deal of confidence, 35 percent a lot of confidence; 23.7 percent expressed not much confidence and around 8 percent no confidence.

Political Attitudes

Importance of Politics

One can say that currently politics is the least important value for the majority of people in both Poland and Belarus (see table 3). However, it is interesting that in general more Poles say that politics is important for them (31.3 percent) than do Belarusians (28.9 percent). Also, more people in Belarus say that politics is

TABLE 3. Importance of Politics among Belarusians and Poles, in Percentages

	Belarus			Poland		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Very important	6.5	9.0	4.4	5.7	7.1	4.5
Quite important	24.8	24.3	25.3	23.2	29.8	17.8
Not very important	44.2	46.5	42.2	43.3	43.9	42.8
Not important at all	24.5	20.2	28.1	25.6	16.7	32.8

Source: Loek Halman, *The European Values Study: A Third Wave: Source Book of the 1999/2000 European Values Study Surveys*, Tilburg University, EVS WORC, 2000.

not at all important for them (25.6 percent), than in Poland (24.5 percent). The difference is not big, but the tendency is rather remarkable: People in Belarus are dissatisfied with what is going on in the country and do not believe that their political actions would change the situation for the better. These attitudes disclose the high level of political pessimism among Belarusians. Ten years ago, in 1990, there were two times more people who were quite interested in political matters (13.6 percent) and two times fewer who had no interest in politics at all (12.4 percent).

Gender differences in the area of politics are visible. Unlike religion, the proportion of men for whom politics is very important is 1.5 times higher in Belarus and twice as high in Poland as for women. More women than men say that politics is of no importance for them: in Belarus, almost twice as many women than men say so (32.8 percent of women versus 16.7 percent of men), and in Poland 28.1 percent of women versus 20.2 percent of men. Gender differences regarding politics are smaller in Poland than in Belarus, so that one may conclude that Polish society is more homogeneous in this respect as well as in religious issues. Probably, regardless of the decades of Soviet propaganda, gender equality in the Soviet Union was a myth. Latent patriarchal stereotypes in the mass consciousness of Belarusians remained strong in the Soviet decades, and these stereotypes have been openly expressed by both men and women as soon as it became possible after the collapse of socialism.

The absence of women in the political arena in Belarus confirms our hypothesis. Probably this is one of the reasons for the low prestige of feminism in Belarus as well.

Interest in Politics and Political Discussions

Further comparison of Poles and Belarusians shows that Belarusians are interested in politics as a matter of their social life and political discourse: they like to have political news and discuss it with others. However, in comparison with Poles, in general they are less interested in political matters. Also, they do not follow political news as closely as Poles do. Only 7.9 percent of Belarusians say

they are very interested in politics and 37.9 percent are quite interested. This means that less than half of the population has some interest in politics, while 36.6 percent are not very interested, and 16.1 percent are not interested at all. Among the age groups, young people are less interested in politics than other age groups. In this area, Belarusians are similar to Poles: only 43 percent of Poles expressed interest in politics, while 57 percent did not

At the same time, 21.5 percent of Poles frequently discuss political matters when meeting friends, and 53.3 percent discuss political matters occasionally. One in four says he never discusses political matters when meeting friends. In Belarus, 17.8 percent of people frequently discuss political matters with friends, 60.7 percent occasionally do so, and 19.7 percent never do. More than a half of Poles (54.4 percent) versus 33.8 percent of Belarusians follow politics every day in the news, and 21 percent of Poles do so several times a week (versus 18.8 percent of Belarusians). Only 9.9 percent of Poles follow politics in the media once or twice a week, and only 10.8 percent do so less often. Among Belarusians, 25 percent follow politics once or twice a week and 15.7 percent do so less often. It seems there are either better conditions in Poland than in Belarus to follow politics on a daily basis, or Poles have stronger political interests.

As for gender differences in discussing politics and expressing political interests, significantly more men are very interested in politics than women (14 percent of men versus 3 percent of women in Belarus, and 10.5 percent of men versus 2.9 percent of women in Poland); significantly more men discuss politics with friends frequently in both countries (29.5 percent of men versus 14.9 percent of women in Poland; 23 percent of men versus 14 percent of women in Belarus); more men follow politics in daily media every day than do women (61 percent of men versus 49 percent of women in Poland; 39 percent of men versus 29 percent of women in Belarus). The tendency in both countries is similar, while the proportion of both men and women involved in political discussions and who expressed political interest is higher in Poland. Probably, the political isolation of Belarus negatively influenced the level of political interest of Belarusians.

Political Activities

Belarusians are not politically active, or at least they do not report their actions. Their membership in political parties is less than 1 percent, as is their volunteer work for NGOs. When asked whether they would vote in the national elections, more than half of the respondents answered either that they would not vote or that they do not know. It is not surprising that rating of political parties is extremely low: none of the parties has more than 5 percent support, and the majority of parties have less than 3 percent. The majority of people cannot even decide whether they would describe their own political views as “the right” or “the left”: 49 percent said they do not know, while more than 30 percent answered neither the left nor the right, just in between. The general level of confidence in the parliament is very low (more people do not have confidence in this institution than have confidence), while one-third would support the idea of a strong political leader in Belarus who would not care about the parliament and votes.

Unlike the Poles, who actively struggled for democracy and fought for their human rights, the majority of Belarusians are passive in any protest actions. Thus, 15.5 percent reported that they took part in the legal demonstrations, 8.2 percent signed petitions, but only one in four said that they might do the same, and more than 50 percent were sure they would never do that. When asked about participating in non-permitted forms of protest, such as boycotts, unofficial strikes, and occupying buildings or factories, no more than 4 percent said they had done so in the past, and less than 20 percent might do so under some conditions, while more than 70 percent answered all the questions they would never do these things. As usual, men are slightly more active than women. Almost two-thirds of the population strongly support the government in keeping social order as the most important task, and an absolute majority support gradual reforms to improve society.

Relationship between Politics and Religion

In general, there is a big difference between Poland and Belarus regarding the relationship between politics and religion. Unlike the Poles, many Belarusians do not connect the issues of religion and politics. There is no strong correlation between their answers regarding political and religious matters. The majority of the population value both religion and politics rather low. Half of the respondents feel that there is no need for politicians to be believers. More than 30 percent of the respondents did not think that it would be better for Belarus if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office, and almost the same proportion support the opposite position as they do not trust those who are in politics now. Almost two-thirds agree that religious leaders should not influence government decisions, and three in four agree that religious leaders should not influence how people vote in elections. When asked whether the church has an influence on national politics in Belarus, one-third answered positively, while almost half answered negatively.

Conclusion

The most striking difference between Poland and Belarus is in religion: while Poland expresses the highest level of religious belief among the ex-socialist countries, Belarus demonstrates a typical (rather low) level of religious beliefs and practice. Among the Poles, religion ranks third among their most important values, and in Belarus religion ranks fifth.

In general, Poles express a more homogeneous pattern of attitudes toward politics and religion than Belarusians, which indicates that Belarus is still in a deep political crisis and needs more time to reach a stable position both in political and spiritual aspects.

NOTE

1. Loek Halman, *The European Values Study: A Third Wave: Source Book of the 1999/2000 European Values Study Surveys*, Tilburg University, EVS WORC, 2000. The survey was conducted in 1999–2000 within the framework of the European Values Study. This study covered 32 countries of Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. Loek Halman is one of the heads of this project.