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BELARUS: Why no full TV broadcast of papal funeral and inauguration?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

About 20 per cent of Belarus' population is Catholic, but less than an hour of the late Pope John Paul II's funeral mass and none of Pope Benedict XVI's inauguration was broadcast on state TV, Forum 18 News Service has found. The only Catholics able to view full live coverage of the funeral were those who can receive terrestrial Polish TV. Catholics were surprised by the small amount of TV coverage, but, "there was no outcry," a Catholic laywoman told Forum 18. That the inauguration of Pope Benedict XVI was not shown on Belarusian television, and given next to no coverage in news broadcasts, "offended us a bit as we wanted to hear about who the new pope was," a Belarusian Catholic journalist remarked to Forum 18. She did not believe the lack of television coverage to be the result of Belarusian state policy, a view supported by Ilona Urbanovich-Sauka of the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists. She told Forum 18 that her colleagues had encountered no evidence of a bar on broadcasting recent Vatican developments. Several believed that the minimal coverage simply reflected unprofessionalism.

Although approximately 20 per cent of the Belarusian population belongs to the Catholic Church, less than an hour of the late Pope John Paul II's funeral mass and none of Pope Benedict XVI's inauguration was broadcast on the republic's state television, Forum 18 News Service has found.

Speaking to Forum 18 from Minsk on 15 April, Eastern-rite Catholic laywoman Larysa Androsik estimated that the republic's first state channel aired roughly the first 40 minutes of Pope John Paul II's funeral on 8 April, the public portion of which actually lasted for some two and a half hours. Consequently, she said, the only Catholics able to view full live coverage of the event were those living in an area up to approximately 120 km (75 miles) from the western Belarusian border whose antennas receive terrestrial Polish television. While Belarusian Catholics were surprised by the small amount of television coverage, however, "there was no outcry," Androsik remarked to Forum 18.

On 28 April the Minsk-based editor of the "Ave Maria" and "Nasha Vera" (Our Faith) Belarusian Catholic journals told Forum 18 that Catholics unable to watch the papal funeral simply gathered in churches for prayer or special masses at the same time as it was being conducted. Krystyna Lyalko also confirmed that the inauguration of Pope Benedict XVI on 24 April was not shown on Belarusian television, and given next to no coverage in news broadcasts. "That offended us a bit as we wanted to hear about who the new pope was," she remarked.

Lyalko did not believe the lack of television coverage to be the result of Belarusian state policy, however. "Our television is slow to react to events, especially religious ones," she explained, pointing out that a local Minsk television station had subsequently broadcast a positive documentary film about Pope John Paul II. She also pointed to Catholics' minority position in Belarus.

Ilona Urbanovich-Sauka of the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists similarly told Forum 18 on 27 April that colleagues who monitor the republic's television had not encountered any evidence of a bar on broadcasting recent Vatican developments. Several believed that the minimal coverage simply reflected unprofessionalism, she said.

Asked by Forum 18 on 28 April why only about 40 minutes of the papal funeral and none of the papal inauguration was broadcast on the first state television channel, which belongs to Belteleradiokompaniya (Belarusian Television and Radio Company), a spokesman at the latter's press department responded that Catholics did not form the predominant part of the population. "While we do respect other confessions that have been here for many years – Catholics, Judaism, also Protestants – 70 per cent are Orthodox," he explained. The spokesman also maintained that the channel's coverage of the papal funeral had been closer to an hour, and that the recent Vatican developments had featured prominently in state news and current affairs programmes.

Forum 18 notes that, according to both the Belarusian Constitution and 2002 religion law, the state regulates its relations with religious organisations "taking into account their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people." Previously appearing prominently only with the Orthodox, however, President Lukashenko promised to assist and co-operate with the Catholic Church at a meeting with Catholic bishops on 21 October 2004, "on condition that you are prepared to love Belarus as I do and fight for her territorial integrity and independence."

In Russia, whose Catholic population is proportionally far smaller than in Belarus, national television channels similarly failed to broadcast either papal funeral or inauguration, although both events did feature prominently in news bulletins. The extent of the coverage provoked more debate than in Belarus, however. On 6 April Aleksei Mitrofanov, a member of parliament for the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, complained that "the death of a pope should not be the first item of newsâ€ we are an Orthodox country," while, in an 11 April open letter to President Vladimir Putin, Catholic layman Aleksandr Minkin questioned why "our national channels all took the same (the only right) decision. Does this show loyalty to an idea or to the leadership? (It is said that they do everything according to Kremlin directive)."

While claiming not to have any particular insight into the situation, a source at Russia's Kultura (Culture) state television channel told Forum 18 on 28 April that there had been no special directive not to cover the recent Vatican developments.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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