News

Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk, Belarus, celebrates Christmas Mass at his cathed

Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk, Belarus, celebrates Christmas Mass at his cathedral following his return to Minsk Dec. 24, 2020. (CNS/Stringer, Reuters)



by Jonathan Luxmoore

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January 22, 2021

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When Pope Francis accepted the resignation of a veteran archbishop from conflict-torn Belarus at the start of January, just 10 days after his return from regime-imposed exile, the move provoked surprise and anger among Catholics.

Two weeks on, there are fears across the region over what Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz's sudden departure portends — and over what kind of deal was struck on the quiet by the Vatican diplomats who arranged it.

"People are shocked and concerned — this was hardly the time for such a major change, and everyone assumed his time in office would be extended," said Kaciaryna Laurynenka, a Catholic theologian and historian.

"[The archbishop] clearly expected to resume his duties, so he'll be disappointed and gutted," said Laurynenka. "People are naturally wondering about the bargaining games being played out as a condition for his removal."

Kondrusiewicz broke the news himself Jan. 3 during his 75th birthday Mass in Minsk's Blessed Virgin Cathedral, prompting tearful, indignant reactions that were repeated at other emotional farewell services across Belarus, a former Soviet republic sandwiched between Russia and Poland.

An auxiliary bishop from Pinsk, Kazimir Velikoselets, has been named by Francis to administer the Minsk-Mohilev Archdiocese until a permanent successor is appointed.

Yet deep dissatisfaction remains over the circumstances of Kondrusiewicz's dismissal, as repression continues after last August's disputed reelection of Belarus's authoritarian president, Alexander Lukashenko.



Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko attends a meeting Nov. 30 in Minsk, Belarus. (CNS/Maxim Guchek/BelTA, Reuters)

Although Kondrusiewicz has faced some health problems, nothing suggests his capacity to lead is diminished. And while all Catholic bishops must submit formal resignations upon reaching age 75, church observers concur it's highly unusual for

these to be accepted on the very day itself, especially in the case of someone with a distinguished record of service to the church's post-communist revival.

Velikoselets, Belarus's oldest bishop, is 75 himself, and had his own term extended last May. Kondrusiewicz's late predecessor, Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek, was 91 when he retired.

"The government will claim a victory in forcing through this top-level change," Laurynenka told NCR. "There are obvious suspicions that the church has caved in to pressure."

In a January 15 statement to NCR, the Vatican's embassy in Belarus said it was unable to comment on the pope's decisions for the Minsk-Mohilev Archdiocese, saying that Francis had merely accepted Kondrusiewicz's retirement request when he "reached his canonical age."

"Archbishop Kondrusiewicz is a free person and can reside normally in his native country — he regularly travels around and celebrates Masses everywhere," the embassy told NCR.

"There is no reason for any criticism towards the Holy See and its representatives on Kondrusiewicz's return, since the Archbishop returned home without any condition," it said.

Born into an ethnic Polish family in the western town of Adelsk, Kondrusiewicz was ordained in 1981 after training as a priest in Lithuania, and was made Belarus' first post-communist bishop by Pope John Paul II in 1989.

Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk, Belarus, speaks to reporters at his cathedral afte

Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk, Belarus, speaks to reporters at his cathedral after returning to Minsk Dec. 24, 2020. (CNS/Stringer, Reuters)

He had opened a seminary and reconsecrated at least 100 Soviet-confiscated churches by the time he was reassigned to Moscow just two years later, to head a new apostolic administration of western Russia, presiding as bishops' conference chairman over the creation of a formal diocesan structure in 2002.

Five years later, facing hostility from Russia's predominant Orthodox Church, Kondrusiewicz was moved back to his native Belarus by Pope Benedict XVI and named archbishop of Minsk-Mohilev.

Lukashenko, in power since 1994, was declared the winner of Belarus' Aug. 9 elections with an improbable 80% of the votes. Although Kondrusiewicz initially took a cautious stance in responding to the elections, he took a tougher line as thousands of protesters were beaten and detained by the president's security forces.

The archbishop's vocal protestations surprised and irritated Lukashenka's government, especially as the church had mostly stayed quiet when earlier protests were brutally put down after 2010 elections. On Aug. 31, the government reacted by instructing border guards to bar Kondrusiewicz from returning from a visit to neighboring Poland.

Kondrusiewicz, accused by Lukashenko of attempting to "destroy the country," continued to run his diocese from exile. On Christmas Eve, his passport was reinstated and he was permitted to return, thanking those who had helped secure his repatriation in two separate cathedral services the same day.

People take part in an opposition rally to demand the resignation of Belarusian President Alex

People take part in an opposition rally to demand the resignation of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and to protest police violence Nov. 30, 2020, in Minsk, Belarus. (CNS/Reuters)

Anyone who had been exiled, Kondrusiewicz told Catholics, knew what it felt like to return to their homeland. Yet speculation quickly intensified over how the archbishop's return had been arranged, as joy turned into sorrow at his resignation.

Diplomatic talks on the archbishop's fate had started in September when the Vatican's foreign minister, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, spent four days in Minsk, accompanied by Archbishop Antonio Mennini, a former Vatican ambassador to Moscow. The talks had continued when a new Vatican ambassador, Archbishop Ante Jozic, took up residence in Belarus in mid-October.

The key moment appeared to come, however, when the Vatican's ambassador in London, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, arrived on Dec. 17 with a letter from the pope to the embattled president. Gugerotti had previously served from 2011-15 as the

Vatican's ambassador to Belarus and was known to have friendly ties with Lukashenko.

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The contents of the pope's letter have not been revealed. Just five days later, however, Jozic announced there were now no obstacles to Kondrusiewicz's return, while Belarus' foreign ministry confirmed that Lukashenko had ordered officials to find "a legal mechanism" to make it possible.

With a climate of violent intimidation of protestors and at least four Catholic priests still facing charges of participating in "unauthorized events" in Belarus, fears that Kondrusiewicz's career had been curtailed through a secret Vatican-Belarus deal were expressed in a torrent of Facebook messages.

"There are no words — I want to cry at this injustice. Where will it all end?" wrote one lay Catholic, Stanislawa Ciechonowicz, at news of Kondrusiewicz's resignation.

"The congratulatory festive mood has vanished — everyone is crushed," wrote another, Mikhail Osipatski. "He probably knew in advance the price he was to pay, and celebrated Christmas with this stone in his heart."

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The Catholic Church's four dioceses, with more than 900 priests and religious, account for around 15% of Belarus' population of 9.4 million.

The country's predominant Orthodox Church has broadly endorsed Lukashenko, with its leader, Metropolitan Veniamin, urging against "an abyss of emotions and passions" in a message for the Jan. 7 Orthodox Christmas.

Veniamin's Russian superior, Patriarch Kirill, has also warned against any attempt to repeat the 2004-5 "Orange Revolution" in nearby Ukraine, which was followed by war and instability.

"If the authorities have permitted instances of unjustified violence and excessive force, there have also been instances of radical behavior among protesters," Kirill cautioned in a Christmas interview.

"The experience of Ukraine teaches us all that change in society should happen in such a way that it is not accompanied by growing internal unrest," he said.

Yet Catholic indignation over Kondrusiewicz's resignation has extended to Russia as well, where the archbishop started his career as an engineer after having to abandon teacher training because of his Catholic faith under the Soviet regime.

There, too, social media messages have recalled his pastoral and preaching talents, and heroic rebuilding of a once persecuted church during his 16 years in Moscow.

"The resignation has been badly received here — it seems Kondrusiewicz has become a victim of Vatican diplomacy, while a negative evaluation has been placed on his pastoral service at the behest of the civil authorities," said Viktor Khroul, a prominent religious writer and Catholic professor at Moscow's Higher School of Economics.

"In this part of the world, Vatican policy has remained unchanged — to seek good ties with the established powers, even if this means sacrificing local Catholics," said Khroul. "Our own bishops have been cowed into silence and obedience where political issues are concerned. A similar process of discouragement now seems to be occurring among Catholics in Belarus."

The Vatican officials who negotiated Kondrusiewicz's resignation, including Mennini and Jozic, were both involved in his reassignment to Belarus in 2007 at the behest of Russian leaders, Khroul points out.

Jozic, the new Belarus nuncio, previously served in Hong Kong, where he was seen as influential in Rome's controversial 2018 agreement with China over the appointment of Catholic bishops in that country.

If Vatican officials are now seeking deals with regimes in the former Soviet Union over the heads of serving bishops, it will revive bad memories of parallel Vatican approaches to communist regimes in the 1970s, which achieved few if any benefits for local Catholics.

"Unlike John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis have paid little attention to Eastern Europe, simply following the lead of Vatican diplomats," Khroul, a former member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity and advisor to Vatican Radio, told NCR.

"Remembering our past experiences, this has given Russian Catholics a bad sense of déjà vu," he said. "Though we'll pray for Archbishop Kondrusiewicz's successor, we're very much afraid he'll be a pastor who keeps silent on human rights and the common good when no Catholic bishop should do so."

In a tearful address to Catholics in his western home region on Jan. 6, Kondrusiewicz said he had tried over three decades to follow St Augustine's maxim: "For you I am a bishop, but with you I am a Christian."

Having detailed a pastoral program for 2021 in a December message to clergy, Kondrusiewicz has dedicated a new Minsk church and Capuchin monastery since announcing his resignation, and will join Velikoselets and other church leaders at a Mass of Thanksgiving on Jan. 24.

Besides Velikoselets himself, other candidates to succeed Kondrusiewicz appear to include the veteran Bishop Aleksander Kaszkiewicz of Hrodna, now acting chairman of the bishops' conference.

The leader many local Catholics say they would prefer is Bishop Yury Kasabutski, Kondrusiewicz's 50-year-old vicar general, who ran the Minsk-Mohilev Archdiocese while the archbishop was exiled. But Kasabutski faces possible criminal charges for outspoken homilies and statements, and seems unlikely to be considered.

Meanwhile, as Western governments refuse to recognize his reelection and maintain sanctions against his regime, Lukashenko is portraying Kondrusiewicz's repatriation as a personal gift to Belarus' Catholics, indicating that he expects an invitation to the Vatican from Francis, who has discreetly avoided public references to Belarus since last summer.

Laurynenka, the Catholic academic, told NCR she understands church leaders have to "function according to realities," and said she hopes Kondrusiewicz will remain active in retirement.

But local Catholics will interpret the course of events in their own way, she warns, and are likely to remain angry at what many see as a sellout to Lukashenko's regime.

Viktor Khroul agrees.

"Everyone knows Kondrusiewicz's resignation wasn't demanded by age, health or pastoral incapacity, but because he wasn't liked by the political authorities," said the Muscovite.

"Everything the archbishop has said has entirely accorded with church teaching and his episcopal duties," said Khroul. "Yet Vatican officials have accepted the rules of game imposed by Lukashenko and his government. Though things [can] be done to sweeten this bitter pill, its taste and essence won't change."

[Jonathan Luxmoore covers church news from Oxford, England, and Warsaw, Poland. *The God of the Gulag* is his two-volume study of communist-era martyrs, published by Gracewing in 2016.]