

URAL REGION

Belarus and Russia

Official Languages: Russia – **Russian**, Belarus – **Belarusian**

Vision Statement

As an international community of priests and brothers, bound together by the bonds of religious life and the missionary charism, we believe that only Jesus Christ can heal the deep wounds of human beings today and fulfill the expectations of those who are searching for meaning. Attentive to the signs of the times and trusting in the guidance of God's Spirit, we enter into the life of the East. We share with the people our understanding of life and community as we experience them in the Catholic Church and in our SVD communities.

Mission Statement

As missionaries of the Society of the Divine Word we seek to be messengers of dialogue, unity and brotherly solidarity: first to those who profess to be Catholics, by cultural tradition or personal conviction, who for decades of persecution had no pastoral care; to non-believers, the religiously indifferent, and to seekers, to all who feel a call and are willing to become disciples of Jesus; to the followers of the Orthodox faith and tradition, with whom we are called to work together to hasten the hour in which all will praise the Father in spirit and truth.



1. Societal Setting

Although Russia and Belarus are living in a new era, it is extremely difficult to sense the direction of the states. If the communist state had a clear-cut objective presented before the nation, today it is a "don't know what's going on" political situation. The people are feeling suppressed even today, and sometimes much worse than during the days of the past regime. Unemployment, delays in the payment of wages, a very poor standard of education, medicine and social guarantees are all problematic. People are losing faith in any good future. The only hope is that there will be no war.

Russia is a huge country, with a population of 142.7 million composed of nearly 200 different national or ethnic groups. The majority (77.7%) are Russian, followed by Tatar (3.7%),

Ukrainian (1.4%), Chechen (1%) and smaller percentages of all the others. All, except for the younger generations, share a Soviet cultural experience under Communism. Some 15-20% of the population is Russian Orthodox, Muslims

There is an immense sea of opportunities for spreading the Word of God

account for 10-15%, and other Christians make up only about 2%. The legacy of seven decades of atheistic Soviet rule has left the majority of people as either non-practicing believers or non-believers. Income from vast natural resources, above all oil and gas, helped Russia overcome the economic collapse of 1998, but the oil price slump of 2014 ended the long run of prosperity. Overall life expectancy is 71 years, while the median age is 39.6 years.

Belarus attained its independence in 1991 following seven decades as a constituent republic of the USSR. It has retained closer political and economic ties to Russia than have any of the other former Soviet republics. Its population of 9.5 million is predominately composed of ethnic Belarusians (83.7%), followed by Russians (8.3%), Poles (3.1%), and Ukrainians (1.7%). The territory of Belarus has had a diversity of religions through the centuries, but here too the effects of atheistic Soviet rule has left some 41% of the population as non-believers, with Orthodox Christians (48%) and Catholics (7%) forming the largest religious groups today. Belarus had been one of the most prosper-

ous parts of the USSR, but with independence came economic decline, including a heavy dependence on Russia for its energy supplies. Life expectancy is now estimated to be 73 years.

2. Ecclesial Setting

In **Russia**, due to the long-held views of the Russian Orthodox Church, Catholicism is not recognized by the state as a legitimately Russian religion, and Catholics have often been seen as outsiders, even if they are ethnically Russian. Relations with the Russian Orthodox Church have been rocky for nearly a millennium, and attempts at re-establishing Catholicism have met with opposition. The members of European Catholic ethnic groups (Germans, Lithuanians, Polish, etc.) are mostly elderly and rapidly decreasing. At the same time, the numbers of ethnic Russian Catholics account for more of the younger faithful, especially as the children of mixed marriages between European Catholics and Russians are registered as ethnic Russians. There also has been a slight boost in Catholics via immigration of Armenians, some of whom are Catholic. Financially, the local Church is still far from being self-reliant, with about 90% of its operating costs borne by foreign benefactors.

In **Belarus** most of the Catholic populations belong to the Latin Rite, with a small minority belonging to the Byzantine Rite, forming the particular Belarusian Greek Catholic Church, which is in union with the Holy See and follows the Byzantine Slavonic ritual. Polish and Lithuanian mi-

norities in Belarus are predominantly Latin-Rite Catholics, but over 1 million Latin-Rite Catholics are ethnic Belarusians. The Greek Catholics are mostly ethnic Belarusians, with some Ukrainians. The State still tries to exercise control over the different religious groups while favoring the Orthodox. There is some unhealthy spirit of rivalry among the different religious denominations.

3. Intercultural Mission – *Ad Extra*

Those in Final Vows

IN ACTIVE MINISTRY	Personnel	2018 (%)	2012 (%)	2005 (%)
Parish	25	73.5	54.5	36.5
Education	2	5.8	6.1	2.7
Schools	0	-		
Universities	2	-		
Formation/ SVD Vocation	1	2.9	3.0	5.4
Administration/ Support	5	14.7	15.2	17.6
Other Apostolates	0		6.1	13.5
JPIC	0	-		
Bible	0	-		
Communication	0	-		
Mission Animation	0	-		
Others	0	-		

Those in Final Vows

NOT IN MINISTRY	Personnel	2018 (%)	2012 (%)	2005 (%)
Studies/ Orientation	1	2.9	12.1	21.6
Retired/Sick	0	0	3.0	0
Others	0	0	0	2.7

The SVD URAL region is celebrating the 25th anniversary of its beginning as a district in Belarus and the 20th anniversary of its arrival on the territory of the Russian Federation. The Region has been enriched during the last couple of years with new confreres and OTP students. It has certainly brought a freshness and new initiatives. Their presence fills us with hope and urges us on in our religious missionary endeavors. The Word of God is now proclaimed and shared on a new level, influenced by the cultural, economic, and political context of each confrere's origins. The closeness of the SVD internationality to the laity is something unique to the SVD all over Russia. There is a new dynamism in the region, in spite of the visa regime and strict laws concerning missionary activities. Overall, the region has seen a movement towards a brighter future. The Congregational Directives and the Action Plan based on them have paved a clear-cut path for its growth and development. Here are the basic areas, in which the region is involved and working its way forward.

Characteristic Dimensions

Biblical Apostolate: The URAL region has become a member of the World Biblical Federation. The community in Belarus has opened an interactive biblical exhibition. We are yet to draw a plan of action regarding the biblical apostolate, so as not to violate the new laws concerning missionary activities. However, the vast domain of youth conferences and ecumenical exchange remain open for developing biblical awareness.

Mission Animation: The Catholic Bishops Conference of Russia had organized four congresses during the year of faith and the All-Russia Missionary Congress was one of them. The SVD was entrusted with the task of organizing the Missionary Congress in St. Petersburg. The exhibition organized during this congress has become a travelling exhibition and is visiting various parishes in western Russia at present. It will continue to do so as much as required. Every parish community makes its own efforts to form a community of outreaching Catholics. Realizing the particular needs of the society around them, in each parish community, the SVDs and the sisters working in that parish draw a plan for the parish and social apostolates.

JPIC: Social-cultural involvement of the Church in the Russian society is welcomed, at least in most spheres. The SVD communities in the whole of the region are involved in such programs as giving food and clothing to the poor, care for the elderly and the sick, working among the addicts and homeless, medical and educational facilities

for the children from underprivileged or dysfunctional families. The Catechetical College at Baranovitchi in Belarus has opened a new facility directed towards pastoral assistance to families.

Communication: Wherever possible we do make use of TV, radio and newspapers. The monthly magazine *Dialogue*, published by our community in Belarus, has served the local Church for many years. Musical concerts, exhibitions, and internet sites are put to the best possible use to bring to the larger public the values of faith, hope and love.

Priorities among Congregational Directions

Primary and New Evangelization: In the face of the uncertainties of the political and social context, the Church is called to witness to the Kingdom of God. Gathering a community of disciples today is a near to impossible task, with all the frustrations of the common people on the one hand and the scientific gadget revolution making the youth and younger generation deaf and immune to the crisis situation on the other. Fishing for the Lord is a task of patient waiting, longing and deep faith. The Region is carrying on its task within the Catholic Church at large. Catechesis, faith sharing on a one to one basis or through mass media, and organization of major events on a state level are some of the strongholds of the Catholic Church in Russia and the SVD URAL members are into it. There is an immense sea of opportunities for spreading the Word of God and bringing people to the faith, in spite of the stringent laws concerning mis-

nary activities. The SVD URAL members are open to new initiatives, suggestions and personnel for this tremendous task.

Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue: It is indeed very providential that Pope Francis met with the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Kirill (2016). Developing and strengthening the relations between two of the major Churches in the Catholic and Orthodox world respectively has been a work of patience and deep prayer. Thanks to the openness of the present Patriarch,

There is an immense sea of opportunities for spreading the Word

many of the Orthodox Bishops are having a friendly approach towards the Catholics. We will have to work for years to come, in order to instill this sense of fellowship within the common Catholics and Orthodox circles.

The initial step has come from higher-level initiatives, and much is to be done on lower levels. We have successfully organized concerts, exhibitions, pilgrimages, etc. to foster the spirit of unity and brotherhood. Inter-religious dialogue is important in today's situation of growing fear and distrust. The vast task of communicating the ideas and concerns of this dialogue to the public is still at hand.

Family and Youth: The dynamics of marriages and divorces for the year 2015-2016 are as follows: for every 1,000 marriages, the highest registered number of divorces is 752; the lowest rate was in the Muslim-dominated regions of

the Russian Federation. The main reasons for such a rate of divorce are alcoholism, drug addiction, and lack of housing. The high rate of abortion (about 6 million abortions according to unofficial statistics) is another terminal illness of the Russian society. The Catholic Church has taken a lead role along with the Russian Orthodox Church to conscientize couples and youth regarding the value of a family life for the country and the Church. There are common projects of Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches in supporting single-mothers. The URAL members are long involved in family seminars, youth camps, and the rehabilitation of addicts.

Migrants, Ethnic Communities: Russia has kept its boundaries open to all citizens for work, studies and business. The vast inflow of migrants at present is from former USSR Republics, the majority being Muslims. There are also Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean migrants. The student community is also international, having members from countries of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The SVD members are involved full time with these communities. Much needs to be done, especially with the student communities, so that they are strengthened in their Catholic faith and secondly, that they give a strong witness to the Russian youth, both within the Church and without. So far, we do not have any formal or organizational structures for the migrant communities regarding health issues, the work atmosphere, labor rights, cultural development, etc. We lack trained personnel for these areas.

Lay Collaboration

Since most of the parish communities are rather small, the laity forms an integral part of all our projects. They play a very significant role in organizing various projects. The members of our parishes understand that they are the foundational members of the Catholic Church in Russia and Belarus after the past regime of difficult times.

4. Intercultural Life – *Ad Intra*

MEMBERSHIP	2018	2012	2005
Bishops	0	0	1
Clerics	29	30	28
Brothers (final vows)	5	7	8
Brothers (temporal vows)	2	0	1
Scholastics	3	3	5
Total	39	40	43

AGE AND COUNTRY	2018	2012	2005
Average age	43.6	43.2	39.4
Nationalities	8	7	9

Spirituality: We share a common heritage of our Founder. And although coming from different countries and cultural backgrounds, we are able to communicate freely. There is a deep sense of being of help to other members and

community. The SVD members have not stopped short of a deep prayer and religious life, in spite of constant travels and absences from their communities. The members have a group of the *Living Rosary*. Each community has its program of spiritual exercises. The lack of neighboring priests around some of our communities is quite a difficult aspect to deal with.

Community Life: Most of our members are living in communities. There is an international touch with European, Asian and African members in the Region. We are extremely grateful to the generalate and to the respective provinces for being generous in sending confreres to the URAL Region. There are now regular district meetings and annual assemblies.

Leadership: Providence has largely blessed the region with personnel who do not fear to venture into new areas and take up responsibilities, organize pastoral work, and remain open to suggestions from other confreres, sisters and laity. So far the aspect of appointing personnel according to the priorities and their ability is just not feasible due to lack of personnel and the difficulties of the visa regime. However, the newcomers are ready and fast learners. The regional council meets in different parishes, thus strengthening the SVD spirituality and presence in them.

Finance: Self-sufficiency is the ideal towards which each PRM is moving. The URAL region is making its best possible efforts towards reaching this ideal. At present the region is almost totally

dependent on the generalate's budget subsidies. The confreres continue to preach and collect donations for the missions in their own respective countries. Most of the confreres pay their own holiday expenses. The major projects are sponsored by the SVD mission offices, local Bishops, and other international organizations.

Formation: All the parishes make every effort in attracting new vocations through various children's and youth programs. The seminary in St. Petersburg continues to provide the necessary infrastructure for local vocations. The OTP pro-

gram to Russia and from Russia is already working its way forward. We are open to OTPs from other provinces. The parish house in Tambov is ready to take up the postulancy program. The regular meetings of formandi in the sub-zone have made their positive impact on the spiritual and affective growth of our seminarians. The first five year integration program and the inculturation program for the newcomers are effectively being carried out in our region. The stress on local language learning and the knowledge of English for the local seminarians is our close concern.