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Special Issue: Christian Pro-democracy Activism in Belarus

Belarus is routinely referred to as the “last dictatorship in Europe” due to its autocratic rule by Aleksandr Lukashenko, a former Soviet collective farm boss, since 1994. Lukashenko’s vise-like grip over the nation of 9.4 million means that the scale of mass protests—involving hundreds of thousands nationwide at their peak—against his claim of winning a sixth presidential term on 9 August 2020 astonished many observers. Yet the protests’ predominantly peaceful and determined spirit has long been characteristic of Belarus’s pro-democracy opposition, which—exceptional among former Soviet states—contains a significant Christian component. Alongside a Nobel laureate for literature, a tractor factory union leader, and a former minister of culture, the seven leaders of the opposition’s Coordination Council—formed by Lukashenko’s main rival Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia in the wake of the disputed election—include a co-chair of the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party, Vólha Kavalkova.

In this issue, the East-West Church Report begins an exploration of the extraordinary nexus between church and political life in Belarus with an introduction to the people and ideas that propel the country’s Christian pro-democracy movement. While some of this material dates back to December 2010—the aftermath of an earlier disputed election in which the movement crystallized—it remains key to understanding the role played by Christians in the current situation in Belarus.



*Night of Executed Poets, Kurapaty, Minsk outskirts, 29 October 2020
(Source: Z. DASHKEVICH)*

Change Comes Only Through Repentance: Zmitser Dashkevich

GERALDINE FAGAN

A Pentecostal, Zmitser Dashkevich (b. 1981) came to prominence with the Young Front [Belarusian: *Malady Front*], a youth opposition movement with a Christian ethos. He served as its leader from 2004 until 2017 except for two lengthy periods of imprisonment: September 2006 to January 2008 (for “representing an unregistered organization” as well as refusing to testify against another Young Front member), and March 2011 to August 2013 (for “malicious hooliganism”—Dashkevich maintains that in fact he was physically attacked in the relevant incident—and “deliberate insubordination” to the prison authorities).¹ He has been recognized as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International.

Dashkevich has additionally been placed in administrative detention—typically lasting 15 days—on multiple occasions. These include several such terms for participation in unsanctioned protests in the wake of the disputed presidential election of August 2020. In court prior to one of these on 27 October 2020, Dashkevich told the judge:

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Dashkevich (continued from page 1)

It does not matter what sentence you give me today. I have spent a long time in prison and in different times—the darkest ones. Now I will be serving time when rays of sun are already on the horizon. So 15 days or 15 times 15—it means nothing to me. You judge as if the Lord sees nothing... I know that I will complete my sentence and obtain what I am fighting for... but what will happen to you and your colleagues? Think about that.²

A major aspect of Dashkevich's activism has been preservation of Kurapaty, a site on the outskirts of Minsk where Soviet secret police executed an estimated 200,000 people between 1937 and 1941. Evidence of the mass shootings was first uncovered and publicized in 1988 by Zianon Pazniak, a leading pro-democracy activist of the time and a devout Catholic. Kurapaty has been a contentious issue since Aleksandr Lukashenko first became president in 1994, however; as he has resisted its investigation and commemoration as a symbol of Stalinist repression. KGB officers continue regular monitoring of visitors to the site's cross-marked graves. (In Belarus, the KGB retains its title and has made no attempt to distance itself from its Soviet past.) Only stubborn popular protests at Kurapaty by the Young Front and others prevented the state authorities from bulldozing the site in construction projects in 2001 and 2017. Following their 2017 efforts, Dashkevich and his friends introduced the *Night of Executed Poets*, an annual commemoration of Belarusian writers who were among those murdered at Kurapaty.³

Amid the wave of post-election public protest in 2020—since suppressed by the authorities—Dashkevich promoted *Chain of Repentance from Kurapaty to Akrestsina: Never Again* on 21 August. For two hours, participants in this event stood in a human chain from Kurapaty to Akrestsina, a pre-trial detention center which has housed hundreds of protesters since the disputed 9 August election, some of whom have reported torture.⁴ Those forming the chain began their demonstration by singing the alternative Belarusian anthem, *Mahutny Bozhe* [Almighty God], and concluded by reciting the Lord's Prayer.⁵



Map of *Chain of Repentance from Kurapaty to Akrestsina: Never Again*, Minsk. (Source: Z. DASHKEVICH)



Zmitser Dashkevich with his family, Easter 2021. The banners read “Christ is Risen!” in Belarusian. (Source: Z. DASHKEVICH)

In February 2021 a variety of prominent Belarusian Christians—including Dashkevich at Kurapaty—produced a short video calling for prayers for Belarus every evening at 9 p.m. (EST + 8 hours).⁶ ♦

Notes:

¹ [In Russian] “Dashkevichu—2 goda obshchego rezhima, Lobovu—4 goda usilennogo (Video),” *Charter '97*, 24 March 2011, <http://www.charter97.org/ru/news/2011/3/24/37065>; “Provokatsiia protiv Dashkevicha ustroili militseiskie seksoty,” *Charter '97*, 3 June 2011, <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2011/6/13/39549>.

² [In Belarusian] “Dashkevich u sudze pra svoio zatrymanne: Liudzi u balaklavakh pazvanili palkouniku i skazali ‘zadacha vykanana,’” *Tsarkva i palitychny kryzys u Belarusi*, 27 October 2020, <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/dashkevich-u-sudze-pra-svayo-zatrymanne-lyudzi-y-balaklavax-pazvanili-palkoyniku-i-skazali-zadacha-vykanana/>.

³ Geraldine Fagan, “BELARUS: KGB pressure Orthodox not to venerate Soviet-era martyrs,” *Forum 18*, 12 May 2008, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1127.

⁴ Tanya Lokshina, “Witness: Tortured in Belarus,” *Human Rights Watch*, 15 September 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/witness-tortured-belarus>.

⁵ [In Belarusian/Russian] “Lantsuh Kurapaty – Akrestsina. UZHIVUIU | Tsep’ pokaianiia Kuropaty – Okrestina. PRIAMOJ EFIR,” *Radio Svaboda*, 21 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2_xujktJlk.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/vola.sieviaryniec/videos/3501110183332770/>. Dashkevich appears at 1.01; Pavel Seviarynets’ wife Volha at 1.36.

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From *Metanoia* to Awakening: A Victory Plan

ZMITSER DASHKEVICH

Translated from Belarusian and published with the author's permission, the following are extracts from three of Dashkevich's commentaries circulated on social media between August 2020 and October 2021. They illustrate the central role played by Dashkevich's Christian faith in his pro-democracy activism.

Metanoia **Saturday, 22 August 2020**

The Council for Religious Affairs telephoned church leaders a few days ago and tried to intimidate them into not taking part in the *Chain of Repentance from Kurapaty to Akrestsina: Never Again*. I do not know if they succeeded in intimidating anyone, but I do know about a telephone call to one Protestant pastor.

“Do you know what will happen on Friday?” The religious-affairs observers were outraged.

“I do!” confirmed the bishop.

“So, do you agree with it?”

“I do—we are not summoning people to any barricades, but to repent for the crimes of Communism. Or do you think that we have nothing to repent of?” The preacher subtly got to work and carried on preaching about repentance for five minutes.

“We understand your position,” echoed the voice from the offices on Communist Street. “So, you give this event your blessing?”

“I give this event my blessing, and I am taking part!”

Later on, people with loudspeakers came and tried to intimidate everyone, but the faithful withstood this test. The *Chain of Repentance* for the crimes of Communism and *lukashism* [colloquial term for the authoritarian regime of Aleksandr Lukashenko] arose thanks to thousands of patriots who felt responsibility in their hearts for our people and their history. There were many Protestants with their pastors, many Catholics with their priests, and thanks are also due to those Orthodox believers who stood holding icons. Above all, thanks to the four Protestant pastors who came to Akrestsina pre-trial detention center on Monday evening and said to me: “Let’s do something.” Without this support and inspiration I would not have undertaken such a daring act—to call upon people to join in a prayer stretching almost nine miles.

I know that many atheists also took part in the event, including one who carried a box containing the New Testament to our Golgotha of Kurapaty and said, “This is my cross.” For it is a spiritual act—to come out and bear witness not with your lips, but with your feet; to bear witness to repentance for the crimes of Communism, from which all today’s crimes stem. Here, we should not understand the word “repentance” in an atheistic way, as if we had to kneel and beat our heads against the ground. Repentance—from

the Greek *metanoia*—means “rethinking” or “a change of heart.” And this change in thinking took place yesterday, both among atheists who came to a realization of the crimes of the Communist and Lukashenko eras, and the many believers who stood beneath the flag of their nation for the first time in their lives.

Only do not say that there is nothing for which we must repent! The Germans are still repenting for the crimes of Nazism, although in 2020 all of them can say that they did not participate in Nazism. Yet instead of that, the Germans say: “Forgive us, we are repenting for our people and for the



Zmitser Dashkevich alongside protesters in Minsk, summer 2020. His Belarusian sign reads: “Let my people go. Exodus 5:1.” (Source: Z. DASHKEVICH)

crimes of our history.” For the most part, we think that we lived good and blameless lives until the Father of Lies descended upon us in 2020. But the Father of Lies did not descend upon us in 2020, nor even in 1994 [the year of Lukashenko’s initial election to the presidency]. The Father of Lies is the natural consequence of the unexamined crimes of Communism. For 26 years, millions of people falsified 20 election campaigns, jailed thousands of political prisoners, restored monuments to Lenin and Stalin—and millions looked upon all of this unperturbed. And now we say that we have nothing to repent of before Heaven and earth! Friends, are we in our right minds?

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This is why I understand only now why Jesus Christ explained everything in parables—because people do not want to understand plain language. So, I will tell you a parable. A certain man cheated on his wife for 26 years. Family and friends knew about and facilitated this, while the neighbors said it was none of their business. Then, when he had had enough of the other woman, he appeared under his wife’s window with a bouquet of white flowers saying, “Come outside, let’s forget about everything that has happened!” If we are all so intelligent, then tell me—is this okay? Why, even if he had cheated on her once, common sense tells us that he would need to weep tears of repentance before Heaven and his wife. But we were complicit in criminality for 26 years: some were perpetrators, while for others it was none of their business. You cannot change this by clicking your fingers, bringing flowers, or parading through the streets. We do need to take to the streets, but we must also do very difficult work upon ourselves; we must rethink ourselves and our history; we must change our minds—repent of crimes so that we never go back to the next “other woman.” Only *metanoia* will give us the chance to secure real change that will last, not just for a couple of years as in the 1990s, but for centuries.

Victory Plan **Friday, 5 March 2021**

1. What is happening?

After seeing the terrible news about arrests, trials, and reprisals, almost everyone is now asking what is happening, and what will happen next. I think it was clear from the start: a clean-up operation would begin as soon as people left the streets, even though common sense prevented us from believing until the last minute that a reign of terror could appear in the center of Europe in 2021. But this is happening before our very eyes: torture in Akrestsina pre-trial detention center and prison terms handed down for journalism. Even our national flag, under which independence was proclaimed in 1918 and 1991, is subject to ridiculous persecution: broken windows, confiscated cars, and arrests, arrests, arrests. The sole aim of these awful repressions is to intimidate us, to fill us with horror as we read the news each day.

I am afraid myself: I go to Kurapaty, I write my will, I prepare some things for prison. Unfortunately, it has to be this way. We must grasp this: millions of people were raised by the Beast; hundreds of thousands of followers of the Father of Lies falsified, bore false witness, beat people up for a quarter

of a century. This needs to be repeated out loud: “QUARTER OF A CENTURY” and “MILLIONS OF PEOPLE.” So how did we imagine that we could part with all this in a day or a week? If we had parted with it quickly, then only the name of the leader of the occupation would change. All those who have propped up this terror—from the “liberal” foreigner to those who built its concentration camps; from the 26-year-old propagandist to the 22-year-old public prosecutor who sends journalists to prison—would remain in their places.

If changes occur quickly then we—as a newly born nation—cannot withstand them. He who has ears to hear will hear: I am talking about the nation as one organism in which each person bears responsibility for all. So it is a long road—and this works in our favor, it is for our own sake. This has happened before in our history. In 1988, when the truth about Kurapaty shocked Belarus and even the Soviet Union, all who followed Truth understood quite well that the prison of nations was finished, but the Evil Empire ended in convulsions that spanned several more years. So we need to understand

clearly that what is happening to us now is happening in the best way possible—it could not be better! Belarus is being cleansed from an army of maniacs and people’s consciousness is being cleansed.

2. What is to be done?

There is a joyful message hiding here that will inspire anyone who poses the next question: “And so what is to be done?” While with us in the flesh, God spoke of two commandments upon which the whole universe rests: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. He repeatedly explained the second commandment to those fighting for Truth in those days: do to others what you would have done to you; whoever wishes to be the first among you is to go last and be a servant to all. This is still a matter of great importance for us today: do not think about them, think about us; don’t think about hell, think about ourselves and be a servant to anyone fighting for Truth. We can donate to the

families of political prisoners, we can support those who have been beaten, we can pray for suffering bodies and souls. If we learn to love all those who struggle like ourselves, we are halfway to victory.

The second part of our victory is a gift granted to our people at birth, for if our Heavenly Father is one of us, then we have the same language. We have long neglected it, we have long said [in Russian], “later,” “what difference does it make?” and “it does not matter.” But everything in this world matters, including language, especially when your native language is



Publicity for *Night of Executed Poets*,
“Kurapaty-Akrestsina: Parallels.”
(Source: Z. DASHKEVICH)

under occupation in times of terror. If we could walk the streets without repression, we would not think about this. If we could raise the flag without prison as a consequence, we would leave our native language for later. Now, when you are detained for the flag, arrested for a demonstration, jailed for journalism, now we are remembering that we have forgotten about our main weapon—our language. It is our everyday, individual protest. If it is the last remaining thing that you can do today, do it—because the last thing is the first. Just imagine if millions of patriots said *dziakui* [Belarusian: thank you] when out shopping, how the atmosphere would change, how Belarus would change in one moment, with just one word!

So now, when our path to victory is longer than we thought and harder than we wanted, hold fast to the One Who said about Himself: I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; love all who strive for Truth as yourself; hold onto the sword of language—Belarus rests upon these commandments, these commandments are our plan that guarantees Victory.

I Will Awaken **Saturday, 30 October 2021**

After defending Kurapaty from destruction in 2017 we were inspired to come and spend 29 October there and commemorate the *Night of Executed Poets*. Around 100 people gathered with a modest torch and a crackling speaker—and even then it was profoundly touching and mysterious. Some activists laughed: “Who needs that? Fewer people turned up than were originally shot that night.” But in the subsequent years we continued to fight for Kurapaty and commemorated the *Night of Executed Poets* despite such insults, whose cause is a lack of understanding of the meaning of Kurapaty for Belarus. And today the *Night of Executed Poets* commemorations are happening around the world—Belarus is awakening.

For until recently many people thought that history was made up of coincidences: Kurapaty happened by chance and later people were tortured in Akrestsina by chance. But nothing happens by chance and nothing comes out of nowhere—every action under Heaven has its own cause and precondition. The reason for what is happening to us today is lack of appreciation for Kurapaty in the 1990s. The reason

for what happened at Kurapaty in the 1920s and 1930s is rejection of God as the Creator of human life. Finally, brothers and sisters, we must agree: the reason for the horrors of the 1920s and the 2020s was the same.

Sometimes I argue with my dear friend Hanna Seviarynets [sister of leading fellow Christian pro-democracy activist Pavel Seviarynets]: She maintains that salvation from repeating the mistakes of history is found in education. I insist that salvation is found in Him, Who is the source of Life and Truth. I even dare say that this is self-evident. The proofs are Nazism and Communism, which were supported by intelligent people in their day, [including] great thinkers and Nobel Prize winners. And today? Look how many of the most educated lawyers write pseudo-laws and imprison innocent people; how many of the most educated teachers help to falsify elections and expel students from college! For without Him, Who gave the standard of Truth, everything is relative—everyone has his own “truth.” For without Him, Who gave human beings life, you can torture, beat, and destroy whomever gets in your way—after all, they are only units of biology.

My beloved warrior atheists, in these conditions of awful occupation which grow stronger day by day, on these ice-cold iron bunks inside black prisons, we should turn to our Father, Who created human beings in His image and likeness, gave freedom to and sacrificed His Only Begotten Son for the sake of these creatures, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but have eternal Life.

If our people realize this and turn to Heaven, the terror of 1937 and 2020 will never happen again in our exhausted land. If we do not appreciate this, and we do not turn to Heaven, the same thing will happen in Belarus time after time in different forms. Today we are in a life or death situation—and with each passing day it becomes harder to understand this as a metaphor. So let us choose life, so that Belarus can hear Christ say, “She is not dead, but asleep! Little girl, I say to you, get up!” [Mark 5:39-41], so that Belarus, like that girl, wakes up. ♦

Zmitser Dashkevich is a prominent Belarusian Christian pro-democracy activist. He lives in Minsk.



**Crosses at Kurapaty,
Minsk outskirts
(G. FAGAN)**

Christ Speaks Belarusian Too: Pavel Seviarynets

GERALDINE FAGAN

Christian activists in the Belarusian pro-democracy movement routinely name Pavel Seviarynets as their leading light. A writer and co-chair of the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party as well as a practicing Orthodox Christian, Seviarynets (b. 1976) has repeatedly been imprisoned for his political activity, as no independent opposition is tolerated in Belarus. This includes two terms of correctional labor in 2005-07 and 2011-13, as well as his current penal colony term of seven years on charges of “organizing mass unrest” after the disputed 9 August 2020 presidential election. This is while he has been held in detention since 7 June 2020—two months before election day and the subsequent opposition protests.

Seviarynets’ latest book is the second volume of his *Belarusalem* [Belarusian: *Belarusalim*] trilogy. The novel’s semi-fantastical plotline centers on the use of a remote control system programmed by a company called Eternal Light, whose logo is a black square. With the assistance of the state authorities, it is able to manipulate an emerging movement of spiritual renewal in Belarus.

While the novel was completed in January 2020, readers in Belarus have been struck by uncanny similarities between its narrative and developments after the August 2020 presidential election. These include: a summer of demonstrations across the country with hundreds of thousands of participants carrying red and white Belarusian flags and wearing white, leading to Belarus becoming topical across Europe; a violent crackdown by the regime, including the torture and death of jailed protesters; criticism and then removal of the leading Orthodox bishop; and the exile of many prominent pro-democracy activists. There is also the resonance of the volume’s title, *Heart of Light* [Belarusian: *Sertsya Sviatla*], with the name of the unexpectedly key figure

Belarusalem: Heart of Light, Pavel Seviarynets’ Belarusian-language novel published in June 2020.



in the election: exiled presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia.

“Everything that we went through in August 2020 is contained in a book published in June 2020,” fellow Christian activist Aliaksei Shein noted. Shein also reports receiving a letter from Seviarynets in prison stating that his narrative had not been a “calculated prognosis,” but that he himself had been stunned by the many coincidences.¹

Seviarynets experienced the post-election events behind bars in Akrestsina—a pre-trial detention center in Minsk—and was able to hear the cries and moans of detainees being beaten in neighboring cells on the night of 9-10 August. According to his wife Volha, “He prayed long and fervently for the people who were being beaten. When he began to pray for those who were carrying out the beating, everything went quiet.”²

As Seviarynets’ latest case was heard in court during May 2021, he chose to remain silent on principle, except to say, “I have already said everything in my books.”³ Only on the final day, when his seven-year sentence was pronounced and a few relatives and journalists were admitted to the courtroom, did he insist that, “Belarus will be free” before leading a common chant of the pro-democracy opposition: “We believe! We can do it! We will win!” [Belarusian: *Verym! Mozham! Peramozham!*]⁴ Shortly afterwards, he conveyed a statement illustrating the core tenet of his latest writing:

“We can do it!” and “We will win!” are impossible without “belief.” People who have been granted the ability to believe should therefore speak louder than others, defend good and resist evil. The voice of the faithful, who currently stand still and are restrained, should be the loudest of voices.”⁵



Protesters in Minsk, summer 2020 (Z. DASHKEVICH)

Given the prescience of *Belarusalem*, what of the future in Belarus now that the democratic opposition has been forced underground? Seviarynets remains undeterred:

You see, we are following God's path, there must be mockery and scourges, an unjust trial and the cross. There is no path forward without it if we are Christians. But then the Resurrection will come, of course... I think this is a matter not of "chances" but of destiny. God has already prevailed. He has already left for Belarus. That means He is coming, and nobody can stop Him. The hearts of Belarusians are changing, and that is the main thing. The Lord does not come by the road of Conqueror, but through human hearts.⁶

Seviarynets is not without controversy in some quarters. A conservative Christian, he has commented on LGBT behavior that, "The Bible says that this is not the norm... Everyone has the right to behave as one sees fit. But this cannot be imposed as a social norm."⁷ In late 2020 his name was removed from a nomination for the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought due to his views on LGBT issues. The 2020 Prize was nevertheless awarded to the democratic opposition in Belarus as a whole, represented by its leading Coordination Council. This includes Seviarynets' fellow Belarusian Christian Democracy co-chair Volha Kavalkova, currently in exile after 10 days' detention in 2020.⁸ ♦

Notes:

¹ [In Belarusian] "Belarusalim. Sertsia Sviatla," Pavel Seviarynets' personal website, <http://ps.knihi.tilda.ws/belarusalimserca>.

² [In Belarusian] Volha Seviarynets [Pavel's wife], public social media post, 3 June 2021.

³ "Belarusalim. Sertsia Sviatla," *ibid*.

⁴ This episode may be viewed at: "Pavel Severinets posle oglasheniia prigovora sude," *Reform.by/YouTube*, 26 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIgnSXAitX8>.

⁵ [In Belarusian] Hanna Seviarynets [Pavel's sister], public social media post, 28 May 2021.

⁶ [In Belarusian] Letter from Pavel Seviarynets conveyed in 10 February 2021 public social media post by Volha Seviarynets.

⁷ [In Belarusian] Aliaksandra Dyn'ko, "Paval Seviarynets: Vel'mi shkada liudzei, iakiia khvareiu'ts' na homaseksualizm, zaimaiut'sta feminizmam," *Radyio Svaboda*, 6 June 2016, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/paval-sieviaryniec/27782779.html>.

⁸ [In Russian and Belarusian] "Sestra Pavla Severintsa o ego iskljuchenii iz spiska laureatov na premiiu Sakharova: 'My pra hetuii situatsyiu vedali dauno'," *Brestskaia Gazeta*, 24 October 2020, <https://www.b-g.by/news/sestra-pavla-severinca-o-ego-isklyuchenii-iz-spiska-laureatov-na-premiyu-saharova-myi-pragetuyu-s-tuacyiyu-vedal-da-no/>.

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"The very concept of Belarus is in essence Christian": An Interview with Pavel Seviarynets

The editor of the East-West Church Report reached Pavel Seviarynets by telephone in the northeastern Belarusian city of Vitebsk [Russian: Vitebsk] back in July 2011. In the wake of mass opposition protests—brutally dispersed by riot police as unlawful—on the night of the 19 December 2010 presidential election, he had spent five months in a KGB detention center (in Belarus, the secret police retain their Soviet-era title). At the time of the editor's interview, Seviarynets was confined to his home city while awaiting an appeal against a sentence of three years' correctional labor, handed down due to his involvement in the December 2010 protests as campaign manager for the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party. This appeal being unsuccessful, Seviarynets was sent to an open-regime prison soon after this interview and held there until his release in November 2013. He has been recognized as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International.

*The interview took place in Russian. Other than a brief quotation, it has not been published previously.**

In the early 20th century most Belarusian Christian Democrats were Catholic. The majority of Belarusian Christians I have spoken with who are involved in the present-day pro-democracy movement are Protestant. Were you already a Christian when you first took an interest in politics?

** The interview was conducted in the course of research undertaken by the editor with the support of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Her principal findings—"Truth Stumbles in the Street: Christian Democratic Activism in Belarus," *Demokratizatsiya*, 20, no. 1 (2012), 7-27—may be found at https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/20_1_066278R7V06016N2.pdf.*

Was there a connection between your interest in politics and your becoming an Orthodox Christian specifically?

As far as the church affiliation of Belarusian Christian Democracy activists is concerned, just over 30 percent are Protestant, 22 percent are Catholic—including Greek Catholics—and 45 percent are Orthodox. So Orthodox are the largest component group, and they include our [2010] presidential candidate, Vital Rymasheuski, myself as one of the co-chairs, and most regional leaders. Why there are fewer Catholics than 80 years ago is a question for us too,

(continued on page 8)

of course—we have a special program focused on work with Catholics that includes contact during pilgrimages, as Catholics are the most politically passive of the churches in Belarus, unfortunately. This has to do with the position of the Catholic hierarchy. Also, when a Belarusian national revival took place during the early 20th century, Catholics were its driving force, and so the Soviet machine deliberately destroyed them. This meant that the Catholic Church was in a very weak state by the time of the second Belarusian revival 20 years ago [1990-91]. The only Catholic political leader then was Zianon Pazniak, and the Catholic Church has not produced a serious political leader since, unlike the Protestants and Orthodox.

As for me personally, I was a non-believer when I became involved in politics. I was imprisoned in 1998 as leader of the Young Front [Belarusian: *Malady Front*], the largest pro-democracy youth organization. It was in prison that I repented and recognized Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Was this due to people you met in prison?

No. It was just an inner revelation, very strong. I just understood that God was acting in that way, more than I could understand, even.

So it had nothing to do with anything you had read, or anywhere you had gone beforehand?

No. I didn't go anywhere before that, absolutely nowhere.

Did it have any connection with your family?

No, no. My family were non-believers. Afterwards, I went to various churches—including Protestant churches—for almost three years. But I was never a member of a Protestant church. I tried to attend a Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox church every Sunday. I was finally baptized in 2001. Once again, it was not my human, personal decision, so to speak, but a decision for which I prayed and received an answer. The Orthodox Church was the church where I was supposed to be. And so it was not a human or personal choice. I think that God was simply leading me.

How did becoming a Christian change your view of politics?

Straight after I repented in 1999 we carried out

reforms in the Young Front. Until then we had not identified ourselves politically with any ideological or Christian movement, but in that year we drew up a program: *A Christian Choice for the Young Front*. Working with like-minded believers, we had essentially transferred the organization to the track of Christian democracy by 2000.

The Young Front remains the largest, best-known democratic organization in Belarus. While there were several thousand members when it was founded, there are fewer now due to pressure from the regime. I cannot say exactly how many, because five of its leaders are currently [July 2011] in prison in the wake of the 19 December 2010 protests, and people are prosecuted for membership. Young people are particular targets—they are expelled from university and so on. But I can say that the current leader of the Young Front—Zmitser Dashkevich—is a Protestant, and the vice-chairs are either Protestant or Orthodox believers.

Once many [of the original] members of the Young Front reached their late twenties, they decided to found—or rather, revive—Belarusian Christian Democracy, and from 2004-05 we began to set up the party's organizational committee. To me it is clear that the very concept of Belarus—its national idea, as they say—is in essence

Christian. Belarusians were created by God as a Christian nation, a Christian people. And if we, with the help of the Bible, the Church, and God's commandments, are able to decode this national program—that is, to propose a Christian answer to problems in the spheres of economics, politics, and culture—then we will realize the plan set out for us by God.

Is the principle of religious freedom important for Belarus in this context?

Without religious freedom, the Church cannot work to its full extent for the benefit of all society, everyone in culture... I won't say politics, because the Church as an institution cannot interfere in the affairs of the state. However, believers may—and are even called to—participate in politics in a positive sense. That is prohibited right now. The Church is not just separate from the state; in some cases it is banned from working in social, cultural, and especially political life. Without religious freedom we cannot develop such fundamental things as a people, a national idea, national economics, national



Pavel Seviarynets at home with his family
(Source: P. SEVIARYNETS)

politics. Religious freedom is a fundamental value. We cannot do anything without it—anything we tried to do would be built upon sand.

In Belarus, religious freedom has a special role, because the Church is the only structure of civil society not under the control of the authoritarian regime. In practice, only the churches are capable of undertaking social initiatives that might be realized upon a national scale. This is because all NGOs that are not connected with the regime are either not permitted to work or else neutralized so that they are small and cannot do anything even in their local region, let alone the whole country.

In order for churches to operate, however, they need registration. Our Orthodox and Catholic Churches need to form parishes and register them. Protestants have a huge number of problems—they have dozens of congregations that are not registered. The current law [On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, adopted in 1992 and substantially amended in 2002] is thus the main limitation on religious freedom in Belarus. In practice, the three main churches can be controlled and prevented from working on a Belarus-wide scale by threats to take away their registration or to confiscate their land—it is the state that allocates land to the churches, after all.

If the churches are not allowed to work, then social projects dealing with problems like abortion or alcoholism—rehabilitation centers—are not allowed to develop beyond a few initiatives. In Belarus there are a huge number of problems connected with both abortion and alcoholism—a third of men are alcoholics, according to the World Health Organization. The churches would work with them effectively, but they are not able to do so. At first glance the churches aren't restricted—"please go ahead"—but as soon as you organize a charitable concert, evangelization, a rehabilitation center, or some other initiative, or if you want to register a new congregation, that's it: the goodwill of the state ends. It starts to ban, does not allow access, and only in rare cases—through a corrupt scheme or by exacting a promise not to get



KGB headquarters, Minsk (G. FAGAN)

involved in public or political life—does it register or permit. But in most cases it just does not grant permission.

The state proclaims its readiness to work with alcoholics, but it is ineffective because it is the state that turns these people to drink. In Belarus we have very cheap alcohol—catastrophically cheap. It is ten times cheaper to drink strong liquor here than it is to buy food. The state has no interest in this work happening, and there are a huge number of problems as a result. So religious freedom is like a key—huge social and political problems are linked to it. If you unlock using this key—that is, if you return religious freedom to Belarus—the climate will change within the churches in the first one or two years, and—as far as I can judge by social processes—after another few years it will change throughout the country.

In fact, if you were to propose various reforms to me—a bloc of economic reforms, a bloc of social reforms, or a new law on freedom of conscience and its implementation, I'd choose the last one. Because I know that through that, however surprising it may seem, Belarus can be opened up in the most effective way—opened up to God and to positive social processes. ♦



Pavel Seviarynets' current address in prison is:

Republic of Belarus 213004
g. Shklov
ul. 1-ya Zavodskaya 8, ИК-17, отряд 17,
Северинцу, Павлу Константиновичу

Cyrillic version:

Республика Беларусь 213004
г. Шклов
ул. 1-я Заводская, 8, ИК-17, отряд 17
Северинцу, Павлу Константиновичу

Drawings by Pavel Seviarynets of his son Frantsishak and Vitsebsk Cathedral, sent from prison
(V. SEVIARYNETS)

Alone with God

PAVEL SEVIARYNETS

The following piece from the book Heart of Stone [Belarusian: Kamennae sertsya] by Pavel Seviarynets was selected for the East-West Church Report by the author's wife, Volha Seviarynets, as exemplifying the role of faith in his writing. Seviarynets wrote the text in early 2011 while in the main KGB detention center in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, following peaceful opposition demonstrations there on the night of the 19 December 2010 presidential election that were brutally dispersed by riot police as unlawful. The manuscript of this text—sent to the editors of pro-independence newspaper Nasha Niva in response to their request that Seviarynets write a literary or philosophical piece which would pass prison censorship—may be viewed at: <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=52243>. The original is in Belarusian.

If God wants to have a serious talk with you alone, He will not explain anything half-heartedly, in passing, taking just half an hour of your time in your kitchen or at the office, where you think you can pay your dues with fussy prayer and furrowed brow. Nor will He hurl signs and wonders after you. He will simply allow you to grow tired of your own confusion until you are at the point of total spiritual suffocation, and then silently enter and close the door behind Him.

Only then, afraid to lift your eyes, feverishly trying to clear your throat and pretending to look prepared, will you hear the unique, incomparable, expectant and reproachful silence of God.

“Er... Lord... Well, You saw everything yourself, right?”

What is there to say? Sorry, of course. “Sorry. I really should have guessed that when attending church once a week, as is proper, you do not get to speak alone. There were so many things to do here. You simply wouldn’t believe...”

You are a pitiful sight. Burning with shame, staring at the toes of your shoes, you realize that He does not need this disgrace, or childish chatter, or your hang-ups. He is not a voter, a journalist, a diplomat, or a police officer. He is not looking for strong pieces in a poor game of chess.

So He is silent, patiently waiting for you to stop fussing and finally, on demand, twist from your neck your little silver key in the form of a cross.

“Lord, do you want to see my heart, to be sure?”

You hear your own muttering as if from the other world. There seems to be nothing too bad, at least. After all, you had a look there a couple of days ago and He remained silent. I thought so... “God, I’m sorry.”

The cross jams into a rusty keyhole. Your hands shake and creak annoyingly as you try to turn... and by a musty scent you guess that in fact things are bad, for it will not open at all. “Oh no, no, Lord! Don’t touch, no need... I will do it myself!” You can’t go wrong here—it is your own heart, after all.

“Forgive me, God!” There is nowhere else to go, of course, but standing alongside feels impossible. What is so cold in there? Now, who would have thought it... I’ll try to find out.

Taking a breath you climb in, first by feel and then head first. You are terrified, you swear to yourself—and you begin to fall to where there are... stinking sins; some placards and percentages mixed up with newspapers and posters. Rotten arrogance and vanity, reams of conversations with parents,

brothers, and sisters all crumpled into a nerve cell, tons of raised tones and an undigested web of grimaces, all woven into strings of comments, farewells to the wind and irritated remarks, cowardly moans; so much was said and not done. How many forgotten and offended souls, general confusion, and finally, complete lethargy and indifference to life! Oh, and failures—you cannot dig to the bottom.

But He simply stands before you, as He once was silent before Pilate. And you understand that it pains Him so much, but you are afraid to look and see tears—tears!—in that eternally silent look, not one of which you are worthy.

Then suddenly, with a salty gulp, you are gazing at the bells ringing on Freedom Square.

The cathedral.

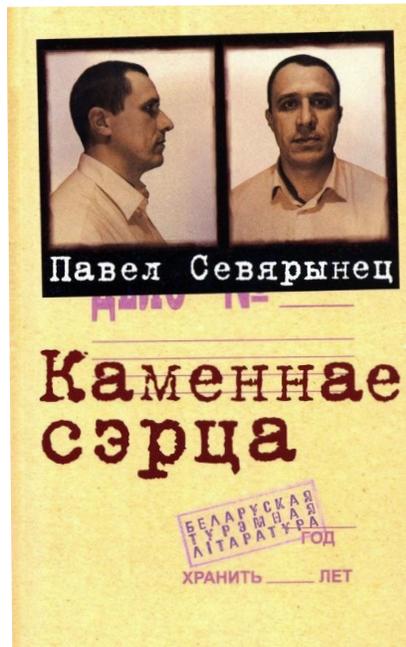
The town hall.

Piercing and measured.

You suddenly understand that you are in the very heart of Minsk. Such a place!

How much more time is needed—a month, a year, or a decade—to learn to start with this at the beginning, and not the end?

And then you promise to start all over again, and you decide to do without superfluous words, and to listen, finally, to HIM. ♦



Pavel Seviarynets' 2019 book, *Heart of Stone*

Pavel Seviarynets is a prominent Belarusian Christian pro-democracy activist and writer. He is currently imprisoned in Shklov, eastern Belarus..

“The primary reason why God raises up kings is the will of the people”:

An Interview with Anatoly Kisel

The editor of the East-West Church Report interviewed Anatoly Kisel, a Pentecostal, in the Belarusian capital Minsk back in 2010. The meeting occurred amidst a general mood of fear and dismay. Three days earlier riot police brutally dispersed a large peaceful demonstration on a central Minsk square. Its participants had gathered to protest the official result of the 19 December 2010 presidential election, which gave authoritarian leader Aleksandr Lukashenko a fourth consecutive term.

Among the eight candidates then running against Lukashenko was Vital Rymasheuski, an Orthodox Christian representing the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party. Under Belarusian law, presidential hopefuls nominate multiple trustees to represent their candidacy. Anatoly Kisel was one of 15 chosen by Rymasheuski, who at the time of this interview was in KGB detention. (In Belarus, the KGB security police retains its title and has made no attempt to distance itself from its Soviet past.)

Immediately prior to this portion of the interview, Kisel described how he first took an interest in Christian involvement in politics due to the example of his friend Heorhi Dzmitruk. A Pentecostal whose Soviet-era upbringing was in the underground church, Dzmitruk is now a leading figure in the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party. Here, Kisel provides profound insight into the course of spiritual reflection that led him and other Belarusian Christians to engage with political developments in their country. His account thus remains highly relevant to the political crisis of 2020-21, in which Christians have been involved on a broader scale.

*The original conversation took place in Russian. Other than several brief quotations, it has not been published previously.**

How have events in Belarus affected your view of Christian involvement in the political sphere?

I do not consider myself a person actively involved in politics. However, I think that God is directing people with clean hands and hearts to enter this sphere of life today and, if I can play some kind of role in this, then it is my duty to do so.

Even in the 2000 elections [in which Kisel’s friend Heorhi Dzmitruk ran for local office] God began to reveal how strongly lawlessness was striving to get established in our country. There was such blatant falsification and pressure that I began to feel pain as a believer. On the one hand, I saw God, and the desire and will that He might be glorified on earth so that, as the Bible says, “truth does not stumble in the streets”—so that truth is triumphant. And then there was this [political corruption].

In the elections that followed in 2004 I also ran for our parliament. [Editor’s note: Here Kisel gives a lengthy and detailed account of how he was ultimately disqualified when a local electoral commission representative pressured three out of over a thousand people who had endorsed his candidacy—a

** The interview was conducted in the course of research undertaken by the editor with the support of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Her principal findings—“Truth Stumbles in the Street: Christian Democratic Activism in Belarus,” *Demokratizatsiya*, 20, no. 1 (2012), 7-27—may be found at https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/20_1_066278R7V06016N2.pdf.*



Anatoly Kisel, December 2010 (G. FAGAN)

requirement of Belarusian electoral legislation—into amending their signatures. The representative did this by falsely claiming that Kisel would not be able to run if the signatures remained unaltered. Kisel further described how, after he discovered this ruse, Lidia Yermoshina—now Belarus’ top electoral commissioner—contemptuously refused to consider his formal complaint.]

After that experience I became convinced that, while God cannot stand falsehood, the idea that He is a conjuror and will suddenly produce freedom for us out of a hat is an illusion. Following the 2004 election, Heorhi Dzmitruk, Pavel Seviarynets, Vital Rymasheuski, and others realized that we had to work together through some kind of structure, through Christian solidarity. We could see that Christians were willing to participate in the political sphere. God brought us together and simply placed in our hearts the idea to found a Christian party. At that time I was used to a passive position—I was going to a church where they constantly preached about meekness and subordination to the authorities. Yet these guys [Dzmitruk et al.] were not aggressive or radical in any way. They had a firm, godly position, and I could see that God was really working through each of them. At the founding congress necessary to register our party with the Ministry of Justice, I sensed that people could not drive this movement on their own, which meant that God must truly be with them.

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Has Belarus therefore reached a point where Christians can no longer hold to a position of meekness and subordination, as this amounts to complicity with lawlessness?

That moment came only three days ago [i.e. the police crackdown on peaceful protesters in central Minsk on 19 December 2010]. The seeds [of greater Christian political engagement] were sown perhaps six years ago, but they were not visible. The first shoots appeared in 2006. God was cultivating them, and we watered them with our prayers. Initial discussions began inside churches, but they resulted in sharp division. Most churches adopted a purely

“religious” position. They took verses from the Bible out of context, such as Romans 13:1, where it says that all power comes from God [“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.”] Also Daniel 2:21, which says that God appoints kings. [“He deposes kings and raises up others.”]

If you do not regard God as someone who wishes to give you something concrete today, then you can justify anything in life. The Pharisees justified themselves their whole lives, even though they prayed and sprinkled ashes on their heads and tore their clothes. But Jesus said in the New Testament that if you do not surpass the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, then you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Is this not a harsh sentence for us, if all we are doing is praying and seeking justification? Saying that there



December 2010: People leave candles at a statue of the Archangel Michael on Independence Square, Minsk. Riot police violently broke up a pro-democracy rally on the square a few days earlier. (G. FAGAN)

is no authority except from God and reasoning that, if God allows whatever happens, we will not do anything?

So, around 2006 this sharp division came about. Unfortunately, the majority got carried away with this “religious” idea that we must not participate in politics. Fortunately, however, there were also many pastors who took the opposite position—but pastors also feel responsible for their flock and do not want to appear to be revolutionaries. So, the personal position of pastors began to change rapidly—I could see how they were becoming stronger as citizens—but this was not encouraged by ordinary people in their congregations. That has been going on for the past four years. But what has happened in these last few days is a breakthrough. Even if a pastor does not speak openly to the church about his civil position, his preaching cannot help but indicate to people that he has his own opinion, that he does not accept falsehood, and so on. And what has just happened [the violent crackdown by police] was seen by very many people.

I can give a concrete example. Yesterday I was with a prayer group where there are two sisters who always used to get into discussions with me: When one found out I had begun to support Rymasheuski, she aggressively argued that it was not God’s will, and so on. But during yesterday’s meeting a pastor prayed openly against this lawlessness. He said that the authorities have now destroyed all ways of approaching God and of assuming their God-given role of serving the people; that is, the authorities have renounced their calling completely. He recommended not watching Belarusian television, saying that it was a poison infecting people’s minds and could not be believed. One of these women then said: “Nobody believes it, not even my acquaintances who are not Christian.”

This regime has supposedly now shown the whole world by its strength that any attempt to change its status will be suppressed. But I have seen the opposite—that by this latest action members of the regime have deprived themselves of all



December 2010: Heorhi Dzmitruk with Tatsiana Seviarynets, mother of then-detained Pavel Seviarynets, at a Minsk press conference (G. FAGAN)

possibility of remaining the authorities in this country. The authorities have by this ceased, from God’s perspective, to be the authorities. In the verse I mentioned, the Prophet Daniel says that God “deposes kings.” But that is only one half of the verse. “Religious” people forget that the full verse is: “He deposes kings and raises up others.” So a person has a choice. God didn’t create kings and then the people, he created mankind in his image and likeness, and when mankind in the Old Testament said, “Please give us a king,” He didn’t want that, but He let them have a king. God said that it is not quite right—He wanted to be their king—but that He created them to be free, not slaves, so if they wish... What does the Bible say? “Choose from among you.” [Acts 6:3]

We can argue about the places in the Bible concerning kings and government and subordination, but if we return to the root of this problem, to when kingship arose, God placed the will of the people higher. And when the people chose their king, then maybe—the Bible does not say this, but this is what I think—maybe God was not always in agreement, maybe God looked and thought, “Guys, you have not chosen the right one. But you are the people, and if that’s what you want, I’ll raise him up.” So for me, the primary reason why God raises up kings is the will of the people. And on this point the first part of Daniel’s verse [“He deposes kings”] also has foundation—if the people say they don’t like a king, then God removes him. God doesn’t listen to kings.

People from different churches in Belarus work together in the Christian democracy movement. What accounts for this rarity, do you think?

If we start to adopt a “religious” position and not see God personally, His will for us, then of course we will not find any points of contact. We will only look for what divides us. But when people begin to sense that God wants to use us for a particular purpose, then in order for us to carry out that purpose... there is an expression by a famous preacher on this topic: “In essentials unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, love.” [Editor’s note: The provenance of this quotation is uncertain.] We always used to focus upon what was secondary, because we did not see the goal. Our goals were so small: to have our own church building, our own piece of land, healthy finances, music and equipment. But when the authorities begin to squeeze, and you have no building—not only that, but they take your building away, do not let you gather due to the law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations... If we were to read the Bible together now, a neighbor could report it, and we could be arrested—and there have been such cases. Some people will argue that while this is in the law, they have not arrested everybody. They haven’t, that is true. But why should I rejoice about the fact that we have not been arrested? It is still a violation of God’s will.

Whenever a period of persecution starts, people begin to turn from what is secondary to what is most important—to look for what God wants. And when we are all searching for

God, and we are all searching—Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox—I have no time to ask why my neighbor has not raised his hand like this [makes the sign of the cross], or why I praise God like this [raises his hands palms uppermost] while he does it like this [puts his palms together]. Because I am not looking at him, I am looking at God. God is speaking in his heart and mine. I cannot say precisely, but around 40 percent of those in Belarusian Christian Democracy are Orthodox, somewhat less than that are Catholic, and the rest are Protestants of different denominations. And the main thing is to find out what God wants, not only so that you change, but so that your people and your country change. If you have no aim—or if it is for another building or a larger congregation—then you will ask, “Why were the Orthodox given land and not us?” If it were not for the current situation in our country, we would be divided and looking at who worships God “rightly” and who “wrongly.”



2010 presidential election poster for Vital Rymasheuski of the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party (G. FAGAN)

How do you view the situation going forward?

Superficially I do not feel despondent, but inside I am troubled by what is happening: people being imprisoned, summoned for questioning. Isaiah speaks about this situation [59:14-16]: “And righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene.”

That is what I was talking about earlier. God is not a conjuror. He won’t say to you, “You need freedom? Okay, I’ll just move this piece,” as if this were a game of chess. He looks at us and He grieves—it even says that He “was displeased that there was no justice.” When we were “religious,” we got used to saying that we would pray to God and then see that He had performed something. No, “the Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice.” God won’t implant notions of what is just and unjust in our minds, if we don’t see

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it ourselves. If they repress us, won't allow us to have a church building, take away our building, ban us from meeting, stop foreign missionaries from visiting, and so on, then where is justice? We ourselves must be able to judge, not in the sense of punishment, but in the sense of discernment. And this is beginning in churches. People are beginning to ask, "So where is truth?"

So far, people are coming together not as churches, but in associations in which people first unite around a common goal. People of different confessions join in and there is no division at all. To be honest, I talk to many people in Belarusian Christian Democracy and I cannot tell you what church they belong to, because I do not know. I know about Vital [Rymasheuski], Pavel [Seviarynets], and Heorhi [Dzmitruk], but I do not know about the others. This is not

because I am scared to ask—it is because I am not interested. I see their eyes and I see that God is there, the very same God Who is in me. So what difference does it make?

I believe that today God is showing our churches—not through bishops or pastors, but through civil associations—that if we want to do something for God, we shouldn't look at what confession a person belongs to or what is right or wrong there, as this is secondary. As I said, the main thing must be unity. Freedom comes second, and what is secondary must not arouse a lack of understanding among us: "Why do you do it like that?" In this we must be free. I feel I must worship God singing "Alleluia, alleluia!" while a grandmother in another church might feel she should worship on her knees. Earlier there was division over this. But today people have begun to understand that this is secondary, and that God wants to do something more important through us. ♦

BOOK REVIEW

Soviet Religious Policy in Estonia and Latvia: Playing Harmony in the Singing Revolution

by Robert F. Goeckel

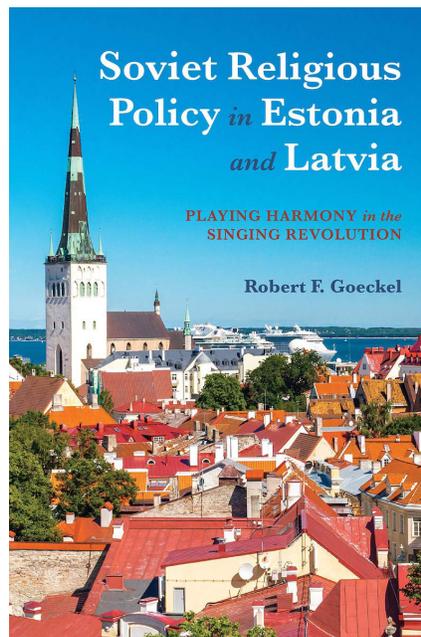
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MATTHEW HEISE

Latvia and Estonia seem to be increasingly irreligious or pagan. A few years ago I was astonished to see wooden figures of the old Latvian gods in the popular Baltic seaside resort of Jurmala. Estonia routinely polls among the least religious countries in Europe. How did they arrive at this point? Did Soviet consciousness minimize the role of Christianity? As the reform era of *perestroika* dawned in the late 1980s, what role did the institutional Lutheran Churches play in the two countries, and what could that tell us about their citizens' relationship with Christianity? Robert Goeckel provides wonderful insight here, creating an effective framework in which to address these questions and more.

As he seeks answers to how successfully these two Baltic republics were severed from their Lutheran roots, Goeckel painstakingly lays out their Soviet history. The initial religious policy after 1944 was accommodating and showed uncertainty as to how quickly to restrict local Western Christian churches, with



which the Soviets were unfamiliar. But after excitement among the local population grew over a possible return to faith following the Second World War, the authorities clamped down. One recognizes the old Soviet playbook here, as the tactics are similar to those used against the Lutheran Church in Russia during the early years of Soviet rule. With the lack of a powerful Orthodox presence in Latvia and Estonia, the Communists could also cut to the chase in their attempts to drastically minimize the role of the local Lutheran Churches. Nationalization of church property, arrests of pastors, banning church publications, increasing taxes on churches and clergy, delaying confirmation from the age of 16 to 18,

atheist indoctrination of young people: All of these tried-and-true tactics were repeated in the Baltic States. Riding events out while wearing down the resolve of Christian believers over time was also something in which the Soviets were well versed.

Unlike in Russia, however, Baltic Lutheranism was associated with the nation-state, and Latvia and Estonia had been independent for two decades prior to the Second World War. The Soviets therefore had to tread warily, or they could arouse nationalist sentiment in support of the Lutheran Church, as when restricting “cemetery day services,” an Estonian folk tradition for commemorating the dead. In order to diminish national consciousness within the two local Lutheran Churches, they needed compliance at the very top of their hierarchies. They therefore placed obedient bishops into positions of authority in an attempt to gain the upper hand.



Traditional Midsummer's Eve celebration, Estonia, 2013
(G. FAGAN)

In Russia, Bishops Arthur Malmgren and Theophil Meyer had fought the Soviets with a tenacity that the Lutheran faithful in Latvia and Estonia could only have wished for in their own bishops. Both were established leaders in the Lutheran Church in Russia at the time of the 1917 Bolshevik seizure of power. The Communists ended up biding their time until Bishop Meyer's death in 1934, and their extreme pressure led an aging Bishop Malmgren to leave for Germany in 1936. Following the Soviet annexation of Latvia in 1944, leading cleric Kārlis Irbe [nephew of a pre-War first bishop with the same name] was found to be in the same mold as those tenacious Russian-German bishops, so in 1948 the more pliable Gustavs Tūrs was installed instead. For his part, Estonian Lutheran Archbishop Jaan Kiivit [Sr.] served as a useful tool for the Communist Party in Estonia after his installation in 1949, advocating for the Soviet international perspective on peace and supporting collectivization.

In order to consolidate their authority by manipulating the bishops while still presenting a positive front to the West, the Soviets also needed to severely curtail the role of the laity. As Goeckel notes, “By subverting the intrinsic democratic features in the synodal structure, the regime guaranteed that Lutheran Church leaders would derive very limited legitimacy from synods.” The *dvatsatka* [Russian: group of 20] was the original Soviet model of appointing 20 laypeople as a church council in order to provide a semblance

of lay participation while also allowing the potential for coercing clergy when necessary. This tactic had worked well in Soviet Russia during the 1920s and 1930s: Whenever an international organization questioned the Church's freedom, the Soviets would point to lay participation in the decision-making process of the congregation. Whenever the Soviets chose to close a congregation, on the other hand, they only needed to threaten members of the *dvatsatka* with arrest or deportation. Repeating this procedure in Latvia and Estonia allowed for little resistance to centralized authority in the person of the bishop, effectively appointed by the state and under its control. Recalcitrant laypeople could be curbed by pressurizing the bishops, while recalcitrant clergy could be curbed by pressurizing the *dvatsatka*: It was a win-win situation for the atheistic state.

Yet despite the Soviets' best efforts, the Baltic peoples did not show signs of becoming militantly atheistic. When describing the Estonian Lutherans' mindset, Archbishop Kiivit noted that, “they relate to the church as a natural phenomenon, which neither attracts them nor repels them.” This somewhat ambiguous response to the Church would allow for a status quo that would simultaneously give the Soviets hope that the Church would gradually wither away while Kiivit and fellow Lutheran leaders could argue that their actions were keeping the Church alive. In Latvia, Archbishop Tūrs appears to have followed the same path, and the fact that his predecessor, Kārlis Irbe, had been arrested for not toeing the Soviet line was never far from his mind. Tūrs' public praise for the Red Army's liberation from the German fascists struck the right tone from the Soviets' perspective, and he would do little to disappoint them in general. However, even Archbishop Tūrs pursued a nationalist policy that was not entirely to their liking. The Soviets wanted a Church in name only, reduced to basic functions but not allowing for spiritual publications or seminaries, something for which Tūrs advocated. Archbishop Kiivit too would not be a Soviet stooge in perpetuity. Once the Soviets permitted international

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Archbishop of Tallinn Jaan Kiivit Sr. (left) and Archbishop of Riga Gustavs Tūrs (right)
(Open Source)



Goeckel Review *(continued from page 15)*

contacts in order to advance their foreign policy and present a “human face” to the rest of the world, Kiivit would eventually prove to be too cozy with the West for the KGB’s comfort. He was pushed aside in 1967 and replaced as archbishop by Alfred Tooming, whom the state considered “loyal, realistic” and unlikely to pose a challenge.

During the succeeding decades, the situation in Latvia and Estonia largely mirrored the leadership changes in the Kremlin. From the breath of freedom that came from Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization program to the political stagnation that occurred under Brezhnev, the local Lutheran Churches kept in lockstep. By the end of Brezhnev’s rule in 1982, it was obvious that religion had become moribund primarily due to indifference rather than ardent militant atheism. After celebrations for the Quincentennial of Luther’s birth in 1983, openings to the Western world occurred more frequently. Bilateral relationships with Western European Lutherans flourished as a new generation of pastors looked to do things differently from the older generation. The winds of change were blowing: In Estonia, my friend Villu Jürjo drew young people through summer church camps and criticized new laws on



St. Olaf’s Church (Estonian: *Oleviste kirik*), Tallinn, Estonia. The Soviets transferred this church from the Lutherans to the Baptists in 1949. (G. FAGAN)

religion promoted by the increasingly out-of-touch Archbishop Edgar Hark. Other reformers like Harri Motsnik, who served Estonian Lutherans in then-Leningrad, decried the state’s destruction of spiritual values. Finally, when Gorbachev began to open the path to reform after 1985, Lutherans in Latvia and Estonia took advantage of the changes to encourage still greater freedom.

Here, Goeckel argues that they played harmony instead of melody, with Moscow being the driving force for societal change, not Riga or Tallinn. In the end, there is little doubt that Soviet rule seriously damaged Lutheranism in Latvia and Estonia. Their Churches’ weak institutions and accommodation to the state did not bring forth anyone comparable to Cardinals Wyszyński or Mindszenty, as the Catholic Church had in post-War Poland and Hungary. A cultural Christianity best exemplified by song festivals and cemetery days—or an openness to “believe in anything,” as G.K. Chesterton may have reasoned—seems to have been the Latvian and Estonian response to the steady drumbeat of atheist propaganda. However, there have been some positive signs of revival in the Latvian Lutheran Church in post-Communist times under Archbishop Jānis Vanags, one of those dissident pastors from the 1980s. Perhaps the church bells have not fallen completely silent? ♦

Matthew Heise is executive director of the Michigan-based Lutheran Heritage Foundation. His forthcoming book, *The Gates of Hell: An Untold Story of Faith and Perseverance in the Early Soviet Union*, will be published by Lexham Press in 2022. It investigates persecution of the Lutheran Church in the Soviet Union before the Second World War by drawing upon archival sources and survivor accounts.

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