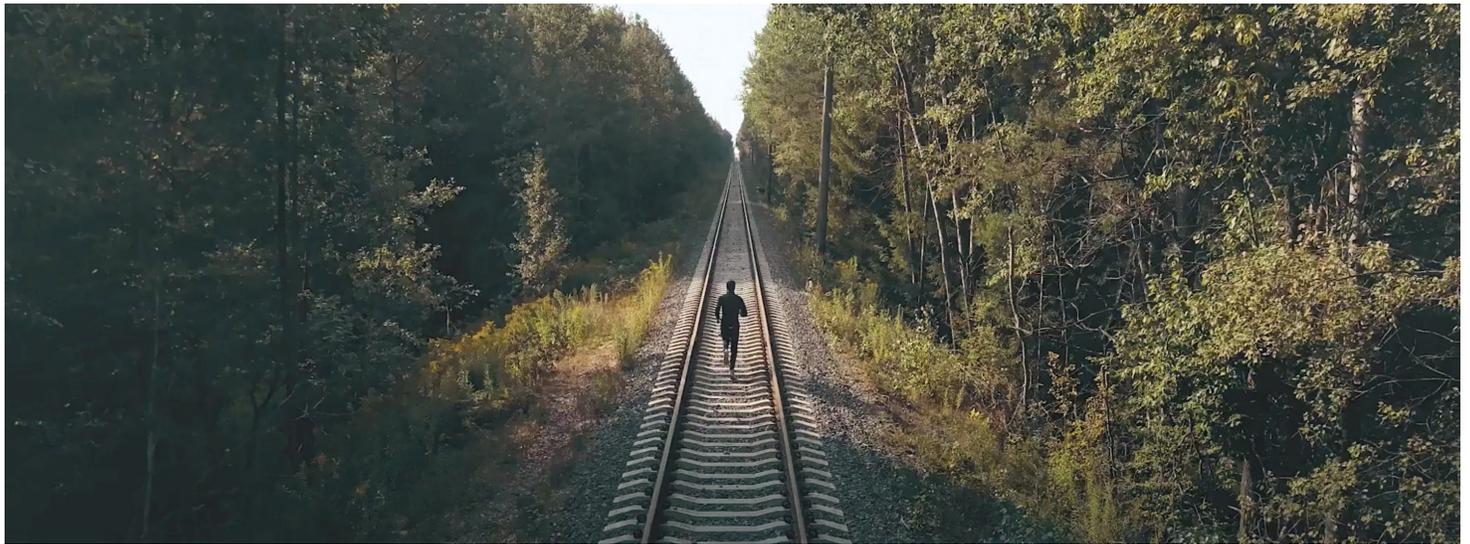




# EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

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Still from promotional video for Pastor Telkovsky's 500-kilometer Skaryna Run ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=hP1FJ-lbRGk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hP1FJ-lbRGk)).

## “When there is moral conflict in society, believers should be salt and light”:

### An Interview with Taras Telkovsky

*On 2 March 2022 the editor of the East-West Church Report spoke with Taras Telkovsky, founder of Trinity Church, an Evangelical congregation in the Belarusian capital, Minsk. In 2021 Pastor Telkovsky was forced to flee his native Belarus amid an escalating crackdown by its authoritarian regime. Now in Warsaw, Poland, he has embarked upon a Christian initiative to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees from the war in Ukraine. The interview took place in English via Zoom.*

#### **How did Trinity Church come to be founded in Belarus?**

In 2013-15 I studied expository preaching in England. This was not a seminary education, but the Cornhill Training Course, begun by Dick Lucas and David Jackman of St. Helen's Bishopgate in central London. When I returned to Minsk I gathered a small group of people—12, coincidentally—and for a year we clarified what we were about. We wanted to create two things—a culture of theological clarity and a healthy community. Our first official service took place in 2017. We were mainly first-generation Christians, 25-35 years old, white-collar workers. Before the pandemic hit, we had around 70 members.

#### **Is the congregation linked to a more established church union in Belarus?**

Technically we belong to the Baptist Union, but how we believe the church should be structured and led is very different. We joined the Baptist Union out of pragmatism because we thought we might get official registration [Editor's note: required to function legally in Belarus], legal support, and more opportunities for ministry.

#### **Did you manage to obtain official registration as a church community?**

No. I did try, but I was only manipulated and threatened by the government.

*(continued on page 2)*

## Telkovsky Interview *(continued from page 1)*

### **Did you become a Christian within the Baptist Church?**

Yes. I became a Christian in 2008, when I was 21. I still consider myself Baptist in a general theological sense, but my soteriology and eschatology are leaning towards the Reformed tradition.

### **I understand you used to be a professional athlete.**

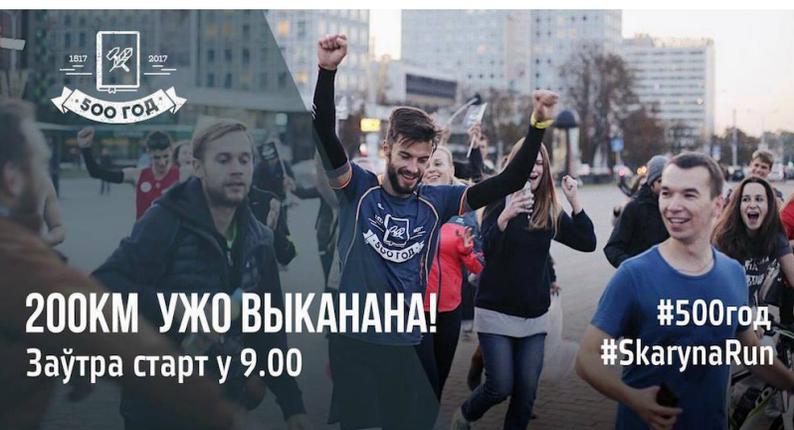
Yes, I was on the Belarusian national athletic team for a few years. But once I became a Christian my values in life shifted. I decided that I did not want to commit the rest of my life to professional sport. I began to train less and lost my place in the national team.

### **You have put your athletic talent at the service of your faith, nevertheless. How did that come about?**

In 2017 the rest of the Protestant world was planning to celebrate 500 years of Reformation, but in Belarus we were celebrating 500 years since Frantsysk Skaryna's translation of the Bible into [Old] Belarusian. This is quite remarkable—even Martin Luther's translation came later—and most Belarusian churches were organizing cultural events such as history lectures or organ concerts. I wondered whether there was anything I could do to draw public attention to the Bible, not just as a literary landmark, but as something which continues to change people's lives on a daily basis, including mine. I thought, "There's not much I can do: I can speak, and I can run, so maybe I can combine them." I decided to run 500 kilometers [approximately 300 miles], or 100 kilometers a day over five consecutive days. I asked people to join me, and on each of the five days I tried to share a section of the Christian story. The idea was to get as much attention as possible, and that did happen—I was on every national television channel in Belarus. A lot of people expressed interest in the Christian faith and started to come to our church and Bible studies.

### **How many hours did you run per day?**

The first day I ran very fast—I completed the 100 kilometers [approximately 60 miles] in eight hours and 20 minutes. After that I started to lose pace, so the fifth day took nearly eleven hours.



**Announcement for a stage of the 2017 Skaryna Run**  
(Source: T. TELKOVSKY)



**Pastor Telkovsky with his family (Source: T. TELKOVSKY)**

### **Why are you currently in Poland?**

I cannot go back to Belarus. I was very outspoken during the 2020 pro-democracy protests. They actually began earlier than election day itself [9 August 2020] because [Belarusian President Aleksandr] Lukashenko denied the existence of the coronavirus—he claimed that there was no virus because he had not seen it. We could see that people around us were dying from coronavirus, but the government was hiding the statistics from us, and so people felt increasingly bitter towards the government. When opposition candidates decided to run for the presidency and started to collect signatures, there were long lines of people waiting to sign up to support them. Lukashenko then started putting one candidate after another into prison. At that point something happened in Belarusian society—people started awakening to what kind of ruler we had been living with for the past 25 years. I was one of many people who became active—I wrote articles, delivered public speeches, and tried to bring a Christian perspective to what our government was doing. All that was before the election.

The first three days after the election [Editor's note: widely rejected internationally as illegitimate] were horrific. Thousands were arrested, and some people were killed. I organized non-denominational public prayers in central Minsk, after which we would join the protests. Here I did not use the pulpit as a political platform—the pulpit is for heralding the Gospel. I did not even encourage anyone to go out and protest. This was something that people knew in their heart they should do themselves.

At the end of August the protests were violently suppressed. I was arrested at one of them, but—amazingly—I was released the next day. I had never been arrested previously, and there were so many arrests that they could not hold everyone in the cells, so they had to release some people. At a court hearing a few weeks later I received the maximum fine—more than \$300—despite the fact that I have three kids under 18 to support.



**Pro-democracy demonstrations in Minsk, August 2020**  
 (Source: T. TELKOVSKY)

**Where did your motivation to protest come from?**

I grew up in a family where political issues were discussed constantly. Before the Soviet Union collapsed, my father, Andrei Telkovsky, was a chief executive for human rights in our parliament. In 1990-91 he delivered a lot of pro-democracy speeches on our central square in Minsk. My father participated in the Soviet war in Afghanistan [1979-89], and when he returned from that war he realized the Soviet Union was in a total mess. Yet even after its collapse, when he became politically active, he was surveilled by the KGB [secret police, still functioning in Belarus]. They threatened him by showing him a picture of kids similar to myself and my brother and telling him that we might not come back home from kindergarten one day if he did not stop what he was doing. So he gave up politics, but later on he felt that he had betrayed his ideals. He had not been able to achieve what he wanted in politics, and when he saw who came to power [Lukashenko in 1994] it crushed him completely. He became an alcoholic. Later on this actually influenced my turn towards faith. I realized that my father had been unable to find answers in business, politics, the military, or sporting achievements, and I began to investigate the Christian faith more deeply. Once I became Christian, I started to think about how I could bring a Christian perspective into politics.

**How do you understand your duty to protest in biblical terms?**

I formulated this in a series of points just recently:

1. All power belongs exclusively to God.
2. God delegates some of this power to the institute of the state.
3. Christians should submit themselves to God and therefore to the state.

4. God hates evil.
5. If the state becomes an agent of evil, then Christians should call upon the state to repent for the evil that is being done.
6. God loves life, and the state is His instrument to supply all the necessities of life. If the state takes away life, it stops functioning as God designed. This is like adultery in marriage: the marriage covenant is broken, and so the family stops functioning.
7. Christ is Lord, not an earthly president. Christians sometimes have to call everyone to repentance—not only those below them, but those above them, including presidents.
8. God is just, righteous, and loving, and the state should reflect this. If it does not, it loses its legitimacy and even necessity, because society does not need institutions of oppression and pain.
9. Through their participation in earthly life, Christians are called to transform their state and the society around them.

I was able to state the essence of this at my court hearing. I said that the state is God’s design, and while I must submit to the state, this is only in so far as it is in line with God’s purposes. What was happening on Belarusian streets—what was being done by the Belarusian government—went against God’s design. Lying goes against God’s design. When people are beaten or otherwise treated without dignity or respect, this goes against God’s design. When people are being killed, this goes against God’s design. It is therefore my duty as a pastor to call the state authorities to repentance, to stop what they are doing and turn back to God’s design.

**Is this position held widely within Belarusian churches?**

There are some like-minded church circles, but frankly only a minority of Evangelical communities raise their voice openly against the regime. Yet this is not a position they have

*(continued on page 4)*



**Pastor Telkovsky’s father, Andrei Telkovsky**  
 (Source: T. TELKOVSKY)

## Telkovsky Interview *(continued from page 3)*

thought through theologically, or a deep conviction nurtured out of their study of Scripture. Mainly, this conviction has come about out of a fear of government persecution.

Most pastors quote Romans 13: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” But if you listen to them carefully, in their minds and hearts it is the state that has absolute power, while God has secondary power. From a purely exegetical perspective, I am not sure whether they have interpreted this passage correctly, for it is a misreading that all power belongs to the state, and that you should therefore totally submit to the state. If Roman 13 teaches something clearly, it is that all power belongs to God, not to the earthly state.

Many Belarusian pastors also emphasize free will: that your salvation depends upon your decision of whether or not to accept God. If you accept God, you are saved; if you reject Him, you are doomed. But when it comes to the earthly state, they are suggesting that there is total determinism: there is no free will, and you cannot influence anything. It is amazing—you can reject God easily, but when it comes to earthly powers, you should totally submit to them. This is such a wrong understanding of Scripture.

As a consequence of this, such pastors have trained not free thinkers, but people with a slave mentality of simply submitting and not asking questions, no matter what the government does. Partly, this indifference is driven by their eschatology. They read in 2 Peter that, “the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up” [2 Peter 3:10], and conclude that there is no point in trying to get involved in



**Campus Crusade for Christ conference focused on “Responsibility” in Kyiv, Ukraine, February 2022**  
(Source: T. TELKOVSKY)

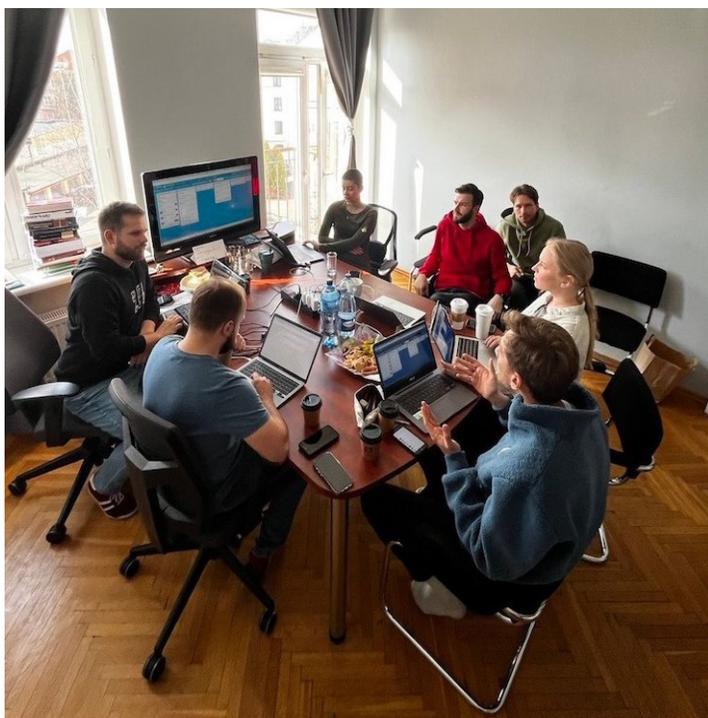
this world as God is going to destroy it and build something from scratch. This is not only a very unhealthy eschatological perspective, it is also new to Christian thinking. It appeared in the 20th century in some fundamentalist circles in America as a response to the liberalist movement, and it makes people absolutely indifferent. When there is moral conflict in society, believers should be salt and light, bring clarity, and call things by their proper names. Yet here they are neutral—they say that drinking alcohol and smoking is evil and sinful, but if your president kills people on the street, things are not so clearcut. As Dante is meant to have said, “The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in time of moral crisis preserve their neutrality.”

**Do you think this neutral attitude has anything to do with the Soviet authorities’ infiltration of religious communities over the years?**

A great deal. Stalin told different churches that they could either register and start working with the KGB or go straight to the concentration camps. This has influenced generations, and it has gotten to the point where a generation has grown up with a perspective that is not biblical. They have been trained in this slavish submission to the state.

**As we speak we have recently entered a major moral and political crisis—a week ago Russian armed forces invaded Ukraine. You were in Ukraine just a few days before the war started. What was the atmosphere like?**

I was invited to a conference in Kyiv organized by Campus Crusade for Christ. I gave some talks on responsibility—that was the theme of the conference. Even when I landed at the airport, I could sense that people were nervous, but trying to suppress it. They were trying to convince themselves that such a thing [an invasion] could not happen in the 21st century. Some of the young people at the conference were discussing where to find the nearest bomb shelter, but there was also a lot of laughter. Everything was going on as normal, but at the same time there was a horrible possibility of war coming. So people were experiencing a cocktail of feelings.



**Pastor Telkovsky with some of his volunteer team in Warsaw, Poland**  
(Source: T. TELKOVSKY)

## What has happened since to the church communities you know in Ukraine?

Many churches mobilized themselves and are trying to provide as much help as possible. I know a few pastors who are in Kharkiv in the eastern part of Ukraine. That city is being bombed, and some of those pastors have said that they are not going to leave—that if they die, then they die. Another young pastor I know in Kyiv has joined the groups for territorial defense. Most people I know are trying to provide humanitarian aid. Others are concentrating on bringing spiritual and moral relief and trying to comfort people as much as possible.

As soon as the bombing began, people over here in Poland started asking me if I could help with shelter, so I started to connect them with as many people as possible. When housing could not be found, I tried to find money to rent Airbnb accommodations where fleeing families could stay. I know quite a few Belarusians here who I thought might be willing to join me in helping Ukrainian refugees, and so we quickly gathered a team of 15 people to co-ordinate this. Most are political refugees like me. A few work in IT, so they have helped us to create a clear structure. People fill in online forms they have designed—“I can help” or “I need help”—that make it easy to connect those in need with those who are able to assist. When we started getting requests from within Ukraine itself, we partnered with a team in Ukraine that is providing assistance, including with evacuation, to those who are still there. We have also started to think about how we might help in the long term, because sooner or later immediate humanitarian needs will be covered. It is not easy. The greatest influx of refugees has been into Poland: a quarter of a million are here already, including around 150,000 in Warsaw.

## How many people do you think you have helped so far?

Probably hundreds, if you include consultation, help with housing, and transportation. We stopped counting—it has been overwhelming. We are trying to offer as much humanitarian relief as possible, but no one can cope with the number of requests, even government organizations. So there is a need for a lot of small groups of people providing help alongside government initiatives.

## Does your team have a name?

No. Most of us are Christians, but people who just want to help have also started joining us. I openly say that we are a Christian initiative; that I read Scripture and pray when we meet at the office. I tell people that if they are not comfortable with being part of a Christian initiative then they should find a secular one. There are plenty of places where one can use one's gifts.

## As the political crackdown in Belarus was worsening last year, you wrote “in the big picture, things are getting clearer, evil won't last.” Do you still feel that in the current circumstances?

Definitely. Of course, I have days of doubt, when it seems this is going to last for many years, and I might never return to Belarus. But then I remind myself of the greater narrative to which I belong. I do not think we are driven by pure facts, but by interpretation of the facts. I can either interpret what is happening right now in Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, and Russia from a pragmatic, political perspective or from a theological perspective. As I am a believer, I try to interpret from my theological standpoint: An empty grave. Jesus is risen. God is coming back. He will restore this creation. All evil will eventually lose its grip on this world. ♦

*Readers wishing to assist Pastor Telkovsky's humanitarian initiative in Warsaw may contact him via Facebook: [www.facebook.com/taras.telkovsky](https://www.facebook.com/taras.telkovsky).*



**Pastor Telkovsky completing his 2017 Skaryna Run (Source: T. TELKOVSKY)**

# “Right now, God is in Belarus”: A Journal

SERGIY MELYANETS

*Sergiy Melyanets is a Baptist who lives in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, with his wife and seven children. When street demonstrations began following disputed national elections on 9 August 2020—following which incumbent Aleksandr Lukashenko claimed a sixth presidential term—Melyanets and his brothers were violently detained despite not being among the protesters. He shared his subsequent experience—including further repression—on social media, accompanied by his own poetry, pertinent Bible verses, and reflections by moral thinkers. Below are dated extracts spanning the year since Melyanets’ initial detention, abridged and translated from the original Russian with his permission.*



Sergiy Melyanets on Freedom Square, Minsk  
(Source: S. MELYANETS)

## 11 August 2020

I will now tell what I personally saw and experienced in Minsk yesterday, 10 August 2020, the day after the elections in Belarus.

I was seized by riot police at around 7 p.m. near Minsk Concert Hall. I was with my two brothers. I was sitting in a car parked in the street. I just wanted to be close to the city center and pray for the situation in Belarus.

I was dragged out of the car and my head, back, and stomach were pounded with truncheons. I shouted that I was a believer, and that I was only there to pray for Belarus. They did not believe it. They cursed, threatened, and beat me. They took my phone. Then they threw me into a blue minibus. They ordered me to lie in the aisle face down. There were already two people lying there, so I had to lie on top. A riot policeman began to torture me with a taser near to my heart. He asked me who I was with and who the organizer was. He was not satisfied with my answers. He constantly threatened, taunted, and tasered me. On discovering I was a Baptist, he asked me what prayers I knew. I answered that I pray to God in my own words and know the Lord’s Prayer. The riot police who were in the minibus did not react to the torture and did not try to defend me.

We were driven to some place, unloaded, and forced to stand against a police van with our legs spread apart. At the slightest movement or attempt to speak we were beaten with truncheons. One riot policeman held my bent arm behind my back, even though there was no need to do so. Their conversations with each other were full of threats and hatred. It

was scary. One of them said loudly: “If it was up to me, I would burn you all!”

With more swearing and blows they then loaded us into a different, gray police van. It had the so-called “glasses”—small compartments that barely seat three people. I found it difficult to breathe as there was not enough oxygen. Also with me was a student who had been on his way home—he suffered from diabetes and had difficulty breathing—and a guy who had been out driving with a friend. He had simply stopped to ask a policeman whether he could turn onto the main street. He was grabbed and dragged across the asphalt so that the skin was stripped from his knees.

When the paddy wagon set off it became somewhat easier—a little air came in to us from a hole in the roof. I tried to ration breaths in order to conserve the oxygen. If we had got stuck in a traffic jam I do not know how I would have survived that trip. At least there was no taser.

We were driven to an area behind a high fence topped with barbed wire. There they unloaded us into a building like an empty warehouse, again while swearing at us—there was just a concrete floor and bare walls. They made us stand facing the wall and forbade us from speaking. We stood like that for two hours. Everyone was interrogated and had their personal details taken down. Then they started to bind our hands behind our backs with construction ties.

I started to feel really ill. My heart hurt, and there was not enough oxygen. I used to have heart problems—I was even not accepted into the army because of it. I asked for an ambulance. It turned out that there was already one there, and I was seen at once: tachycardia, a panic attack, angina, cramp, insufficient oxygen, confusion, numb limbs.

I think all this was the impact of being tasered in the heart area, repeated beatings, exhaustion, and extreme thirst. No one was given water. For half an hour I lay in the ambulance on a drip and was given some tablets. Then they decided to take me to a hospital.

The doctors there were appalled by what they saw and what we told them. However, they did not say anything to the riot police and did not try to defend us. Several doctors cursed and were indifferent.

When I was loaded into the ambulance my phone was returned to me in a trash bag. The riot police threw the belongings of everyone they seized into separate, named trash bags.

In the hospital I was tested and analyzed over the course of four hours. I could see many beaten up and traumatized people being admitted. One person had pieces of flesh the size of a fist missing in three places where he had been hit by rubber bullets. Another—who had been going home from work—had been beaten about the head by riot police. He was taken to the hospital covered in blood. A third was beaten in the face so hard that the bleeding could not be stopped. A fourth had his arm broken. A fifth had his arm dislocated when he was dragged into a police van. A sixth was covered in striped bruises from truncheon blows and had an injured leg. A seventh lost consciousness several times from blows to the head.

Finally I was told that I no longer needed urgent care. There was no space. The hospitals were full of injured and beaten people. I was discharged from the hospital close to 3 a.m. My phone was nearly dead, and I had no money. For half an hour I tried to flag down cars at a bus stop, but no one stopped. I could not get through to call a taxi. At the bus stop a woman came up to me. She had 10 rubles [approximately \$4] and was going in my direction. We were finally able to find a taxi. A kind person agreed to take us home. I finally reached home around 4 a.m.!

All this time I prayed to God constantly for the people who were abused and beaten, for myself, and my brothers. For our country. For the authorities, that God might open their eyes and speak to their consciences. What is happening now in our country is lawlessness and insanity.

My brothers Mikola and Aleksey are not responding to calls. We do not know where they are. I also do not know what will happen to me next. I request intense prayer for those people abducted in the street. For my two brothers and for me. For our Belarus.

#### **Update 1:**

After almost two days I have finally been informed that my brothers are in prison in Zhodino. My sister-in-law has just gone there.

#### **Update 2:**

After four days my brothers have finally been released. They were beaten up but have not been seriously injured. God preserved them. My father and sisters-in-law lived in a car alongside the prison for several days. Thank you to everyone for your support and prayers.

*For an independent report detailing experiences of police brutality in addition to Melyanets’—including detainees forced to pray during beatings—see Timofei Rozhansky, Lyubov Chizhova, and Michael Scollon, “How Can This Be Our Country?: Claims Of Torture Abound As Belarusian Jails Swell,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 13 August 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/how-can-this-be-our-country-claims-of-torture-abound-as-belarusian-jails-swell/30782196.html>.*

### **20 August 2020**

I can’t sleep. I’m reading the Bible: A story from the life of the Prophet Elisha.

2 Kings 6:15-17: “When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. ‘Oh no, my lord!



**Freedom Square, Minsk (S. MELYANETS)**

What shall we do?’ the servant asked.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ the prophet answered. ‘Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ And Elisha prayed, ‘Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.’ Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

It turns out that even with our eyes open we can fail to see many things. As well as physical reality, there is the reality of the spiritual realm. And war is also being waged there.

Question: Who am I in this story? The enemy soldier who has chosen the dark side? Or the one who sees the whole picture? Spiritual, as well as physical, reality... The one who is on the side of light, the side of the victors. After all, “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

I pray that the Lord will open my eyes. I want to see the whole picture. For Belarusians to see the light. To keep calm and not be afraid. Even when the enemy surrounds us on all sides.

### **22 August 2020**

“Cowardice asks the question, ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ And Vanity comes along and asks the question, ‘Is it popular?’ But Conscience asks the question ‘Is it right?’

And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right.”

– Martin Luther King

### **21 September 2020**

At 1 p.m. every day, people of various viewpoints and confessions are meeting to pray for Belarus on Freedom Square next to Minsk Town Hall. I invite anyone who wishes to join us.

### **19 October 2020**

After our prayer [in central Minsk] yesterday, some Christians were attacked by masked riot police while walking along Partisan Avenue. From an eyewitness account:

We were attacked after prayers as we were going to an opposition march. We were trying to catch up with the

*(continued on page 8)*

main procession, but riot police ambushed us. There were around 200 other people with us but they all ran away. We believers were the only ones left—we had all gotten to know one another at the prayer meeting by the Town Hall. Even those who could have run away and saved themselves came back for our sake and stood by us, both guys and girls. We were saved by a local couple who lifted me off the asphalt, let all the girls shower, gave us tea and candy, and called us an ambulance.

Another interesting detail: When we were looking for our guys at the local police station, a girl outside recognized us. She said, “Weren’t you the ones they thrashed? On Partisan? Where the riot police were using truncheons and gas?” We told her that that was us. She replied, “We were standing not two meters away from you but they didn’t touch us—neither guys, nor girls. I was so shocked at what they did to you! Just two meters away from me the riot police were like wild animals tormenting people! But only you.” It was as if they knew that we were Christians and were deliberately and hatefully mocking and beating us in particular.



**Memorial crosses at Kurapaty near Minsk (G. FAGAN)**

*Annually on 29 October pro-democracy activists—including many Christians—gather at Kurapaty, a Soviet mass execution site on the outskirts of Minsk, to commemorate members of the Belarusian intelligentsia who were murdered there. This event is known as the Night of Executed Poets [see East-West Church Report, vol. 29, no. 4, 1-5.]*

### **30 October 2020**

Yesterday evening will forever remain in my memory and my heart: the Night of Executed Poets at Kurapaty. People came to remember, to commemorate, to pray.

Night. Pines. Candles. Crosses. Texts. Songs. Words. People. Eyes. Pastors. “Our Father.”

Thanks to Hanna Seviarynets [sister of leading fellow Christian pro-democracy activist Pavel Seviarynets, see *East-West Church Report*, vol. 29, no. 4, 6-10] for the opportunity to share a poem about my great-grandfather, who was shot in 1938 for his belief in God. Here is the text:

A picture from the past. 1938.  
If I forget, I will not be myself.  
A chamber. Three sit at a table.  
One of them writes something with a pen.

Silently sitting on a chair opposite is  
A man without boots. Exhausted. Beaten up.  
“Good” people were found. They filed a report.  
They could break his body, but not his spirit.

Slowly, the judge reads out some lines:  
“Clearly, this is Article 72.  
You believe in God. You are definitely evil.  
You have become an enemy to the Soviet people.”

“We will take away everything you have built up in life:  
We will confiscate your property, and then we will kill you.  
You can’t run away from us anymore.”  
Death penalty. Date. Signature. Seal.

The verdict was handed down quickly and on time.  
The Soviet people have been taught a lesson.  
You can only walk straight and in a row,  
Into the red, bloody sunset.

Twenty-second of March. Spring.  
Forest. Kurapaty. Pit. Moon.  
A shot in the back of the head. A drunk executioner.  
You went to God, for death is not the end.

This was my great-grandfather. Dear great-grandpapa.  
He is a true hero to me.  
I know that his surname was Kupriyan.  
Forenames: Martynovich, Bardian.

*Footage of Sergiy Melyanets reading the original Russian version of his poem at the 2020 Night of Executed Poets may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEqRBy4kEc8>, at approximately 2.15.30.*



**Sergiy Melyanets at Kurapaty near Minsk  
(Source: S. MELYANETS)**

## 15 November 2020

Two T-shirts. Two pairs of socks. Warm pants. Jacket. Coat. Water bottle. Olive oil. New Testament. I am ready to make the trip to prayers in the center of Minsk, always with an eye on the possibility that I will not return.

*In answer to a friend's question about taking olive oil:*

Two reasons: it is the best remedy for pepper spray if it gets into your eyes.

Second reason—James 5:13-15: “Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.”



The disputed blinds (S. MELYANETS)

## 17 December 2020

On Tuesday we were paid a visit. Our “guests” said they were from the police, but they refused to show ID. The purpose of the visit was our blinds... at the start of August I hung blinds in the colors of the white-red-white national flag [banned in Belarus] in our street-facing windows.

In brief, we were “advised” to take them down, or things would get worse. Our family is stressed out. What to do? Take them down? But that seems like betrayal. And why on earth should I listen to some random guys about what kind of blinds I should have in my own home?!

But I am not looking for a fight, or to be fined, searched, or jailed... so we had a brainstorming session.

I had an idea. We took some large sheets of paper. We cut circles out of the middle of two of the sheets and painted red circles on another two. We ended up with two Japanese flags and another two when the blinds are lowered. They look particularly beautiful at night, when the light is on in the room. The land of the rising sun—how symbolic. We believe that the Sun of righteousness, peace, and love also rises over our land. And the colors of the Japanese flag are like ours! In addition, we

decided to add some Japanese characters. We chose: freedom, justice, the way of the Samurai, immortality.

We also discovered that in Japanese the words for justice and order have the same character. It appears that for them these words are synonyms. If you think about it, that is correct. After all, you can wash every blade of grass, clean the sidewalks, and paint all the houses. But if there is no justice, there is disarray, disorder...

Malachi 4:2-3: “‘But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. ... Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

*Two days prior to the police visit, Melyanets was indicted under Article 23.34 of the Belarusian Administrative Violations Code for staging a one-man picket without government permission by publicly displaying white-red-white flags. A court hearing followed at which Melyanets argued that the blinds were an expression of his Christian worldview: white symbolizing sanctification received by believers thanks to the blood shed for humanity by Jesus Christ on the cross, symbolized with red.*

## 21 January 2021

First of all the court was presented with documentation pertaining to our children, state registration of our home, and an attestation that I won second place in the Lecturer of the Year competition... the task of such lecturers is to put on different events in schools, colleges, and institutions of higher education promoting a healthy lifestyle and moral values. I have been doing this in my free time for eight years. In this way I decided to demonstrate my “positive character” to the court. It made no difference, though...

[Judge] Viktor Shevtsov declared to everyone present in the courtroom that he had “done his own research and had not found any evidence that white and red are symbols of the ‘Christian religion’.” I responded that these colors are found in the texts of Holy Scripture and began to recite by heart an extract from the Prophet Isaiah. The judge interrupted me. This is a transcript of my exchange with him:

Judge: ... That is clear. I would like to hear a reference.

Me: These colors symbolize certain aspects of Christian doctrine.

Judge: So they are not symbols of Christianity?

Me: There are many symbols—the cross...

Judge [interrupting]: I understand. I would like to continue with the colors. I would like to be persuaded of where my knowledge is lacking; to be given information on where it says that these are the colors of the Christian religion. Briefly.

Me: Fine. Just one text from the Bible, if you would allow me...

Judge [interrupting]: It is probably not worth your quoting the Bible... I wanted to ask a quick question and this is some kind of discussion. That was not part of our plans, mine in particular. There is really no need to quote the Bible. If

*(continued on page 10)*

a Christian symbol is mentioned succinctly or described somewhere...

Me: I understand. I can only quote the Bible because my faith is based on the Bible.

Judge: You don't need to quote the Bible.

Me: Why not? You would like to know where these colors are found...

Judge: [interrupting] No, it is UNDERSTOOD that these colors are found in the Bible.

Me: Specifically, in a certain text...

Judge: I want to know whether they are symbols.

[Voice from the courtroom: "They are!"]

Judge: Whoever speaks to me will be sent out into the corridor!

Me: Please allow me to read one text. Literally just a couple of words!

Judge: We will just be wasting time, you see... anything can be quoted, but...

Me: I will quote what my faith is based upon!

Judge: Just name the chapter...

Me: It is written in the Prophet Isaiah—there the Lord specifically tells the people of Israel, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" [Isaiah 1:18]. On the basis of this text I see that white symbolizes God's purification of our sins...

Judge: [Interrupting] This is clear. Individually, I understood everything. I was interested in the combination...

Me: Scarlet is red!

Judge: Well, a combination with red, which has never been found anywhere; well, such a specific combination, as symbols of the Christian religion, DOES NOT EXIST, IT APPEARS...

Me: I just quoted you a specific text...

Judge: Understood. Thank you. Sit down.

I hope this extract from the court hearing has succeeded in immersing you in the unforgettable atmosphere of "justice Belarusian-style". The judge read out the verdict immediately afterwards. That is, this verdict was prepared and printed BEFORE the court hearing. The court ruled to find me guilty on the basis of Part 1 of Article 23.34 and to issue me an administrative punishment in the form of a fine of 870 Belarusian rubles, or \$350. I am obliged to give this sum to the state for the blinds on the windows in my own bedroom...

## 2 February 2021

This evening we decided to modernize our blinds further. We took into account the fact that our Japanese-style windows did not provoke either the "agreement or disagreement, approval or disapproval, support or opposition" of the Embassy of Japan in Minsk. It was therefore decided to remove the rising sun from our windows and to change it to symbolism more comprehensible to Belarusians.

The children were keen on the idea; there was no stopping them. They grabbed their colors and drew, suggested their ideas. I barely managed to persuade them to go to bed. In the morning, before school, we hung their designs on the windows. These are the Christian symbols that decorate our windows now: A cross, a fish, an anchor, A and Ω—Alpha and Omega—and finally, OUR dear sun, which symbolizes the Sun of Righteousness—God.

Malachi 4:2 "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays."

I hope that this version of the blinds brings joy to everyone walking and driving past our building as much as the previous ones.



The blinds with Japanese symbols (S. MELYANETS)

## 3 February 2021

Uninvited "guests" once again, this time from the two schools where my children study. Assistant Directors of Educational Work, no less! Come to check up on us.

The schools had received papers from the Department for Internal Affairs of Minsk District Executive Committee. These said that I had been indicted under Article 23.34 for participation in "unsanctioned mass events on the territory of Minsk District." It had also been determined that a large number of minors are among my dependents (I can't deny that). A conclusion followed:

"In view of the fact that committing administrative offenses negatively impacts the upbringing and material welfare of minors, you [i.e. the schools] are requested to conduct preventative measures on the family in question in accordance with Belarusian law."

No less than a vice-chair of the Department of Internal Affairs of Minsk District Executive Committee, the head of the public safety police (there is such a thing?!) had signed it. Comrade Sergei Leonidovich Udodov. This man was concerned about my family.

I would like to say that the main things which "negatively impact the upbringing and material welfare of minors", first and foremost, are:

- illegal kidnapping
- beating

- electric shock torture
- and causing a heart attack to the FATHER of these children!!!

Also:

- Indictments for non-existent mass meetings
- Being dragged before the courts
- Fines
- Putting various social services onto our family.

Sergei Leonidovich Udodov, allow me to report. BEFORE you came along, everything was just fine with us. I hope that AFTER you have gone, with God's help, everything will also be fine with us. Just don't touch us, please!

The women who came from the school were more or less reasonable, however. They came and looked everywhere. We even let them examine the dog's basket. Ours is good and comfortable. The children made an effort. They even made clay models. But for some reason the women weren't much interested in them. They drew up an "Act of Investigation into the Living Conditions and Upbringing of Minors." Everything satisfied them, but they didn't want a cup of tea. They said they don't drink while they are at work.

A meeting of the Preventative Measures Council has been scheduled for 13th February. Next they will commission reports on us from the narcotics, alcohol, and other agencies. I am grateful to friends for prayer. I request that you continue to support us in this way. May the Sun of Truth rise over our Belarus!

Psalm 9:9: "The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble."

They also dropped thinly veiled hints that if my son's father did not calm down and a second report came, they would consider whether to expel my son from college.

I find it hard to describe the feelings that I experienced upon hearing my son's story. Let's just say, "I am not pleased."

My son has received instructions to call me in any similar situation, and to tell the teachers and assistant directors that Papa does not allow him to participate in such discussions unless he is present. I telephoned the group's co-ordinator—there was no answer. I'm sitting and thinking what to do next.

#### 4 February 2021

In the morning we went to my son's college. We were immediately summoned to the director's office. At first we did not understand why we were so honored, but then it turned out that my previous social media post had already been read by the college leadership.

We spoke. It turned out that the "social investigation conversation" (which for some reason resembled an interrogation) was initiated and conducted by the Assistant Director for Education and Ideological Work. And there were four(!!!) women in the office. And all this is supposedly "fine"—they always do this if they receive some kind of information that, in the opinion of the college administration, provides even a hint of a teenager having some kind of problem. First they ask questions and then they process this ideologically and describe "possible results" (veiled threats?), all while being too shy to tell the pupil that he or she has the opportunity:

- Not to answer questions
- To leave
- To call his or her parents (legal representatives).

In the end, the director agreed that in my son's case there had been "excesses" on the part of the college administration: "I am sorry that it turned out that way, but we acted within the law." Considering that the verdict on Article 23.34 has not yet entered force and is being appealed, they have no grounds to begin an investigation and

"preventative" processing of our family. Even when the verdict does enter force (I have no hope that it will be overturned), Article 23.34 has nothing to do with special educational needs. This means that there is obviously a political subtext to these events.

#### 6 February 2021

Yesterday my second son was summoned to see a psychologist in school, under the auspices of "social investigation". He was given different tests and questions for more than an hour.

Incidentally, everyone also recommended to me that I go to see a psychologist after everything that happened to me

*(continued on page 12)*



The blinds with Christian symbols (S. MELYANETS)

*Later the same day:*

My eldest son has just come home from college. I see that he doesn't seem happy. I ask him what has happened. It turns out that he was removed from the last lesson and escorted to the office of the Assistant Director for Education and Ideological Work. The class teacher and another woman were also there. The reason was my administrative offense. That is what they call the blinds hanging in our bedroom window.

They went on at my son, without parental consent, about how bad this was for a whole hour. They asked for details about our family. They asked if my son was happy with his father. They vowed to come and search our home. They told stories about the Germans and maintained that the white-red-white Belarusian flag was fascist.

and my brothers on 10th August. But I somehow had doubts. I gradually succeeded in resolving the problem with prayer and by reading the Bible, taking care of my family and the church, and spending time with good people.

Psalms 39:7: “But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.”

### **12 February 2021**

A troublesome business awaits our family tomorrow at 10 a.m.—the Preventative Measures Council. We have already done everything we can. We went to all kinds of institutions, talked to the leaders of the schools and college, gathered documents, bathed the children, brushed their hair, and dressed them smartly. Most of all, we prayed for God’s help and defense. We are following the words of Apostle Peter: “Cast all your anxiety on Him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

### **13 February 2021**

We entered a classroom where the desks were arranged in a square—little children’s stools for pupils of the younger classes. Well, there was nothing for it, we sat on these little stools and laid out our documents on the desks. Then we got down to business. Numerous documents from different sources were submitted. Confirmation from various authorities on alcoholism, narcotics, psychology and a bunch of other unpleasant places affirming that we had not been identified, disciplined, or otherwise been on their books. Then we moved on to payment of community taxes. The reports of all our children from school and college were also read out.

We supplemented this large pile of papers with character references we had gathered ourselves from clubs and music school. References on me and the family from Light of Truth Baptist Church, where we have served for almost 20 years. We added a photocopy of my wife’s “Certificate for the Award of the Order of Mother.” This is awarded by the state to those women who are raising five or more children in a thriving family.

Finally, we reached the deciding vote. Given that NOT A SINGLE negative fact about our family was heard at the Preventative Measures Council, it is not surprising that they voted unanimously to approve our family as absolutely thriving, so there is no need to continue “preventative measures.”

But as it turned out, it is too early to celebrate. For if another administrative case is brought against me, then the mechanism of “social investigation” will begin anew, and we will have to go through everything all over again.

### **17 February 2021**

I’m going to 72 Kovaleva Street [Editor’s note: the Minsk address of New Life, a charismatic Pentecostal church long targeted by the authorities]. Right now agents of the security forces are storming the church building there belonging to New Life. They are cutting through the doors. Please come down, whoever is able... People from the church are carrying things that have not been impounded out of the building and are taking them away to be stored.



**Eviction of New Life Church, Minsk, 17 February 2021  
(S. MELYANETS)**

### **23 February 2021**

Today my appeal was heard against the verdict that found me guilty of staging a picket in my own bedroom. How did I do that? Simply by putting a flag in my window (in actual fact it was white-red-white striped blinds.)

My lawyer prepared additional arguments for the judge. My seminary and Bible college diplomas were presented, as well as character references from my church. There was also an expert opinion on the white-red-white flag in Christianity. The judge looked at all these materials and documents, creating the impression that the facts of the case were being carefully investigated. I was permitted to speak. I said that I had chosen the colors of my blinds first and foremost because I like them, and also because they reflect my Christian worldview.

Like her colleague Viktor Shevtsov, this judge did not even try to hide the fact that the verdict was determined in advance. She took a printed sheet and read it out immediately after my attorney’s address. We remained in awkward silence. Then the judge said: “That is all! Please move to the exit. The next people are waiting.” I asked the judge her name.

“I told you at the beginning—Irina Leonidovna Maiko.”

“Well then, Irina Leonidovna, may God be your judge.”

P.S. Immediately after the hearing I went with well-wishers to Freedom Square, to the Town Hall, in order to pray.

Isaiah 59: 14-15: “So justice is driven back, 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.”

### **10 March 2021**

The authorities have finally evicted New Life from their building in Minsk. Yesterday they were forced to dismantle and remove all their property. I cannot look upon this calmly. I do not want to accept it and carry on. There has been a hostile takeover of a church building by the authorities of Belarus. What can I, as a Christian and citizen of Belarus, do to express my position as clearly as possible in this situation?

First of all, of course, I can pray. That God would help, save, and restore justice.

Second, I can offer maximum support (moral, physical, informational).

Thirdly—I can show love through solidarity. Every Sunday at noon New Life Church continues to gather next to their confiscated building, despite the cold and the lack of basic conditions, to conduct a service of worship. We can join them at this time, come to the parking lot alongside the church.

Another option demonstrating love, solidarity, and disagreement with the authorities' decision would be if churches that have their own buildings were to conduct their Sunday services outside, in front of their buildings. Words are important. But actions speak louder than words.

1 Peter 4:8: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."



Depiction of Sergiy Melyanets' family by Olga Yakubovskaya (Source: S. MELYANETS)

## 20 March 2021

What to do? No one wants to suffer, to be beaten up, to experience the falsehood of the judicial system, or to serve an undeserved sentence. Some have even been killed. Flowers do not save us from bullets and grenades. Umbrellas do not protect us from tear gas or the blows of truncheons and fists.

Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi, once said, "The correctness of a choice is often determined by the necessity of making it again even though the cost is already known."

Yes, Pythia, the choice has been made and the cost is known. I pray to God to save us.

Psalm 22:2,11: "My God... Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help."

## 22 March 2021

Some kind of déjà vu—blinds again. My younger brother and father of four, Aleksey Melyanets, was removed from his apartment by two guys wearing balaclavas and civilian clothing. The children saw how their father was taken away. He

was taken to Lenin District Police Station, the same one where I was taken in the police van in August. He was probably then taken to Akrestina Detention Center. There may be a court hearing tomorrow.

Someone filed a complaint about him. The guys in civilian clothes accused my brother—like me—of recently "staging pickets" on the balcony of his own apartment by hanging white-red-white blinds. They have been hanging there for several years.

My brother is a Christian. Pray, friends, that God strengthens Aleksey, his wife Tatyana, and his four children.

Psalm 34:19: "The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all."

## 23 March 2021

For a long time we were unable to find out what happened to my brother today. It was only around 5 p.m. before we determined that the "court" sat at 3.15 p.m. The sentence for a father of four for the blinds on his own balcony is 15 days' detention. This is his second term. On 10th August, when all three of us brothers were seized, Aleksey was beaten up and spent three days in a prison in Zhodino with my elder brother.

Today's judge was Anastasia Vasilyevna Achalova. She is clearly trying to demonstrate that she was not entrusted in vain with administering "justice" to the masses of unsuspecting Belarusian citizens. Here are just a few of her cases (there are dozens):

Journalist Aleksandr Kvitkevich—15 days' detention.

Pensioner Liudmila Bystrenko—fine of 870 rubles [\$340] (two months' pension).

Mother of two Valentina Kolesnikova—fine of 870 rubles for wearing clothes in the colors of the white-red-white flag.

Psalm 52:2-5: "You who practice deceit, your tongue plots destruction; it is like a sharpened razor. You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth. You love every harmful word, you deceitful tongue! Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin."

*Later the same day:*

Today prayers for Belarus again took place on Freedom Square. We contemplated the Feast of the Annunciation—the good news that Mary, and then Joseph, heard from the angel. The angel came to Joseph when he had decided to break off his engagement to Mary, and the first thing he heard was, "DO NOT BE AFRAID!" God's call is for us not to be afraid to act honestly, justly, correctly. He has special encouragement for us on this day. One of the names of the Son of God is Emmanuel. In translation this means "God is with us." Right now, God is in Belarus.

## 26 March 2021

[Russian Orthodox] Patriarch Tikhon's letter of 19 January 1918 gives the impression that it was written only a couple of days ago: "Christ's commandment to love our neighbor is forgotten and trampled upon. Every day we learn that innocent people, even including those lying sick in bed, are frightfully and brutally beaten..."

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#### 4 April 2021

New Life Church, Minsk—the church without walls, whose building was recently taken by the authorities—celebrated Easter today in a parking lot. The religious anthem “*Mahutny Bozha*” was sung [“Almighty God,” alternative Belarusian national anthem that is also a hymn.] A true celebration!: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=9jcb1ZKAui0> [approximately 20 minutes into the video].

#### 6 April 2021

My brother Aleksey has just been released from prison in Zhodino after 15 days. Alive, thinner, and smiling. He says that they beat him there, but not so hard as in August. The bullying was mostly not physical.

There are three shifts of prison guards there. One of them is alright, he says. The two others are rougher. There were good people in his cell, including Denis Urbanovich—leader of the Young Front [Belarusian youth opposition movement with a Christian ethos]. My brother says that Denis and some other guys were taken to the showers and beaten there.

He thanks everyone who prayed for him. He felt the support and God’s protection. The whole cell prayed the Lord’s Prayer together every day.

#### 10 April 2021

For nine months people have been coming every day at 1 p.m. to Freedom Square in Minsk with faith and hope in their hearts, with love for God and Belarus. They come to pray, to read the Word of God, and to strengthen one another. There is Someone Who remembers us, Who leads us out of slavery—just as happened to the people of Israel 3,500 years ago, Who is strong enough to save prisoners of conscience. We come to Him. We bring our needs and gratitude to Him, we praise Him for new horizons that are opening up for our country. Today is no exception. We will pray to God. Join us.

Psalm 145: 18-20: “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.”



Google search engine motif on St. George’s Day,  
23 April 2021 (Source: Google.com)

#### 23 April 2021

St. George defeats the dragon. Google knows that the white-red-white flag is the flag of victory of good over evil.

#### 17 May 2021

Easter is about how  
Truth was put under pressure  
An inconvenient God  
Came down to Earth.  
Nonsense.  
No God—no problem.  
We need to kill Him,  
Wall him up in a cave,  
Get drunk and forget.  
But at evil’s moment of triumph  
He defeated it—  
He arose.

Darkness cannot be defeated without losing.

#### 3 August 2021

The Russian writer, Second World War veteran, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1970), and scholar Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn died on this day 13 years ago. Forty-seven years have passed since the publication of his short essay, “Live Not by Lies,” yet it is still on the mark today:

Violence has nothing to cover itself with but lies, and lies can only persist through violence. And it is not every day and not on every shoulder that violence brings down its heavy hand: It demands of us only a submission to lies, a daily participation in deceit—and this suffices as our fealty.

And therein we find, neglected by us, the simplest, the most accessible key to our liberation: a *personal nonparticipation in lies!* Even if all is covered by lies, even if all is under their rule, let us resist in the smallest way: Let their rule hold *not through me!*

Ephesians 5:11: “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.”

#### 9 August 2021

A year ago on this day Belarusians expressed their desire to live in truth, justice, and light. A year has passed, and I see that this yearning has not disappeared. Quite the contrary, it has grown stronger.

Today we do not have the opportunity to go to the centers of our cities and towns with songs, chants, and flags. But we have hope—hope that the Sun of Truth will rise over Belarus, that those exhausted will be set free, those expelled will return home, and those wounded will receive aid and healing. ♦

*Editor’s note: The crackdown on Christians publicly expressing faith-motivated dissent from the authoritarian regime continues in Belarus. On 3 March 2022, riot police detained and questioned four mothers of soldiers for attending a prayer service for an end to the war in Ukraine—partly launched from Belarus—inside Minsk’s main Orthodox cathedral. (See Felix Corley, “BELARUS: Soldiers’ mothers detained for prayers for end to war on Ukraine,” Forum 18, 9 March 2022, [www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2724](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2724).)*

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Opening the Red Door: The Inside Story of Russia's First Christian Liberal Arts University* by John A. Bernbaum

Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 2019  
260 pp., \$14.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-830-85261-1

MARK R. ELLIOTT

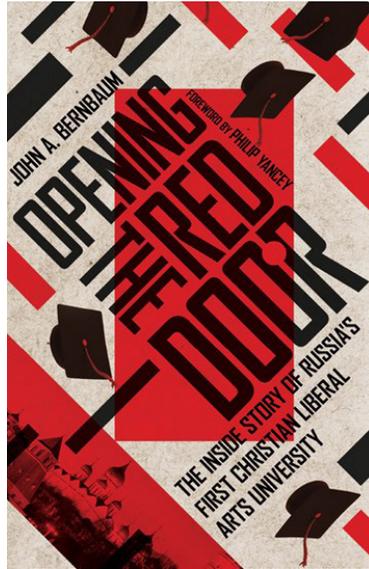
In 1995, I taught a non-credit night course in Russian church history for what would become the Russian-American Christian University (RACU). It was a memorable experience on multiple counts.

The class was held in rented space on the old campus of the Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University, where a larger-than-life bust of the school's namesake Congolese revolutionary martyr was on display in the lobby. Outside my classroom windows were the walls of the Donskoi Monastery, where the Bolsheviks imprisoned Russian Orthodox Patriarch Tikhon until his death in 1925. I team-taught in a stimulating partnership with a friend, Orthodox journalist and future priest Yakov Krotov. And I was teaching unusually attentive students as eager to learn as any I have ever encountered.

For a few short years, less than two decades (1996-2011), an American-style Christian liberal arts university sought to plant seeds in Moscow, where the soil would grow increasingly rocky and thorny. Explanations for RACU's demise are easy to come by. They include an Evangelical constituency limited in size and financial wherewithal, economic instability (including the 1998 ruble crisis and the 2008-09 recession), a political order devolving from pseudo-democracy to authoritarianism, deteriorating Russian-American relations, growing xenophobic nationalism, and a declining pool of college-age youth.

Above all, RACU could not overcome increasingly crippling state restrictions on private higher education and the lack of an established rule of law, which fueled (and was fueled by) pervasive corruption. Though the school was predominantly Evangelical, it made earnest efforts to develop positive relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, efforts that were successful with some hierarchs, but less so in the immediate neighborhood of its new building, which barely opened before pressures on all sides forced its closure and sale.

Taking into account the overwhelming odds against RACU, a key question comes to mind: How did the school manage to survive as long as 17 years and produce ten graduating classes? Part of the explanation for its endurance lies in the enthusiastic support it received from elements of the U.S. Christian college network, as well as generous contributions from Evangelical donors on and off its board. (Full disclosure: I was a member of that board.) But the chief reason for RACU's



resilience was the competence and character of its founding president, John Bernbaum, who writes about his experience in *Opening the Red Door: The Inside Story of Russia's First Christian Liberal Arts University*.

Bernbaum's preparation for the post included a Ph.D. in European history, work in the U.S. State Department, decades of teaching and administrative experience with the Washington-based Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, and a gift for networking and donor development. Just as critical to the enterprise were Bernbaum's abiding sense of God's leading and a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of energy, optimism, fortitude, and perseverance.

In the context of global Christianity, RACU was part of a rapid, multi-continent expansion of faith-based higher education

over the past half-century—a phenomenon ably documented in the 2014 volume *Christian Higher Education: A Global Reconnaissance*. Compared with Asian and African newcomers, RACU's imprint was quite modest, at least quantitatively. With a student body that never exceeded 200, it was dwarfed, for example, by the 3,500 students of South Korea's Handong Global University (founded one year before RACU) or the 10,000 students of Nigeria's Bowen University (founded in 2002).

So why write an entire book on a school with such a limited lifespan and a quite modest enrollment? For one, the saga of RACU's hard-fought, short-lived existence bears telling because it played out in Russia, a nation that rightly commands the world's attention, for good or ill. In addition, RACU's promise and plight serves as a cautionary tale demonstrating the obstacles confronting any institution struggling to prevail in an environment of widespread corruption, economic uncertainty, and the arbitrary exercise of power.

Bernbaum's account features constant combat with corruption and bribery. Refusing to grease palms meant protracted, energy-sapping delays in obtaining an educational license, accreditation, and construction permits, to mention just the most obvious hurdles in Moscow's bureaucratic mazes. RACU gave witness to its ethical integrity through a persistent refusal to engage in the commonplace bribery that marked Russian higher education. The school never traded precious admission spots for favors. It never doctored test scores, final

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## Bernbaum Review *(continued from page 15)*

grades, or transcripts. And it never sold diplomas, although one enterprising fraudster did advertise a bogus RACU diploma for the equivalent of \$500.

To date, it appears that RACU is one of only two Protestant higher education programs to have obtained Russian state accreditation (along with Zaoski Adventist University), a remarkable achievement given the partiality the state affords the Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, in 2009 the Ministry of Education abruptly changed a critical requirement for accreditation, ruling that doctorates issued by American universities were no longer valid in calculating the number of RACU faculty with higher degrees. This left the school with an albatross it could never shake.

Throughout its history, Russia has exhibited a love-hate relationship with the West, repeatedly alternating between periods of slavish imitation of Western ways and xenophobic rejection of all things foreign. The clash of Westernizers and Slavophiles in the 19th century is but one of many examples of this phenomenon.

RACU was born during the fleeting ascendancy of pro-Western, reform-minded, Yeltsin-era higher-education administrators. They were soon eclipsed by officials unsympathetic to private institutions, Protestants, and liberal-arts education. As a result, RACU's higher-education model—which stressed faith-based character formation and the creative stimulus of the liberal arts—has little purchase in Russia today. But that could well change if the country, in a post-Putin era, tamps down on nationalistic fervor and once again welcomes the influence of educational models from abroad. In its short existence, RACU's students came to appreciate the marketability of their new English-language and computer-science skills, but they also valued the school's spiritual stress on personal integrity, cross-cultural sensitivity, and lives lived for others. At some future date, the success of RACU's graduates could build momentum for a renewed experiment in a Christian liberal-arts education.

RACU's unsuccessful fight for long-term survival also serves as a case study for any institution determined to pursue a Christian mission in an unpredictable environment. To what extent should risk management inform decision-making? Was it prudent to invest so much time, effort, and money in a Christian university planted where the rule of law is lacking? Was it hopelessly naïve on the part of Bernbaum, his board, and his donors to paddle against the current? Certainly in rational, practical terms the odds against RACU were daunting. So to what extent are Christians to base their kingdom work upon rational, practical calculations?

For over a decade, I held a joint faculty-administrative appointment at a Christian college whose chief financial officer advised against short-term support for RACU, even as other Christian colleges with far smaller endowments proved willing to pitch in. I was told that the idea of a Christian college in Russia was too risky a venture. The irony is that this same American college never would have come into existence had its founder exercised a similar measure of caution and risk-aversion. To be sure, any Christian giving of consequence should involve the head and the heart alike, as Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert argued so eloquently in their book *When Helping Hurts*. And it's no surprise that a financial officer, looking at all the relevant factors, would advise against investing in something as improbable as RACU. On the other hand, should the school's stakeholders be faulted for taking risks to fund a Christian liberal-arts university in such a strategic location?

God willing, the day may come when forces of hope, liberty, and freedom of conscience regain ascendance in Russia. And in that day, something like the Russian-American Christian University, which performed so ably in its brief life, might flourish the way its founders intended. ♦

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