

Truth Stumbles in the Street

Christian Democratic Activism in Belarus

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Abstract: Few are aware that prominent figures in the Belarusian opposition movement are motivated by Christian conviction. In this article, the author traces how President Alexander Lukashenko’s restriction of religious freedom has prompted Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants to turn toward democratic activism; it also discusses their rediscovery of religious freedom as a long-standing core value of Belarusian identity. The author’s findings draw on interviews conducted in Minsk in the aftermath of the December 2010 presidential election, including those with Christian opposition activists who were subsequently jailed.

Keywords: Belarus, democracy, freedom, religion

Once a dictatorial regime has muzzled civil society’s more cantankerous elements—rival political parties and the independent media—a stage is reached at which faith groups, even if faltering, join the vanguard in the struggle for freedom and justice. In 1980s Communist Poland, the Catholic Church offered a vital moral platform for mass dissent by the Solidarity movement. Prayer meetings at a Leipzig Lutheran church formed the nucleus of protest by hundreds of thousands of East Germans in the weeks before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Might faith-inspired opposition similarly prove a catalyst for political change in Belarus, dubbed “the last true dictatorship in the center of Europe” by United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2005?¹ The prospects

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do not look good. Belarusians have no Karol Wojtyła, behind whose charismatic papacy Polish Catholics could rally against Communist dictatorship. They do not even have a unifying national church. Although commonly regarded as Orthodox, Belarus straddles Europe's fault line between Eastern and Western Christianity. Recent centuries have seen Latin, then Eastern-rite Catholicism, then Orthodoxy, in the ascendant over what would finally become independent Belarusian territory in 1991. Yet none has sustained a majority faith tradition; all were trumped by the Soviet atheist order that replaced the institutional Orthodoxy of the Russian Empire after World War I. Belarusians are today officially labeled 82 percent Orthodox and 12–13 percent Catholic,² but most are indifferent to faith and nation. Those who are active Christians are just as likely to be Catholic or Protestant as Orthodox.

A faith-inspired “velvet revolution” in Belarus further appears unlikely because—while undoubtedly oppressive—President Alexander Lukashenko's 18-year regime has not (yet) matched the grimly totalitarian conditions of 1980s Eastern Europe. These forced even the non-devout into Catholic and Protestant activity in Poland and East Germany: the modicum of freedom grudgingly afforded those Churches made them the only public spaces open to the mobilization of dissent.

Christian democratic activism thus does not currently pose a threat to Lukashenko's authoritarian rule. Yet my survey of this hitherto overlooked phenomenon indicates that it forms a significant and rapidly evolving element within the opposition movement, even if it does not define it. Familiarity with the origins, protagonists, and aspirations of Christian democratic activism in Belarus is therefore essential for a rounded assessment of the nation's democratic prospects.

Beginnings

As with Christian objections to Communist dictatorship, Belarus's faith-based opposition originates in moves to restrict religious freedom. In October 2002, seeking to neuter a potential challenge from religious believers, Lukashenko amended Belarus's 1992 law on freedom of conscience, subjecting all communal religious activity to government approval. The most active Protestant communities were refused permission to rent, renovate or build; police and ideology officials raided their Bible study groups in private homes.³ The Protestant mainstream hoped it could evade similar censure by remaining within the narrow confines of the new legislation—a stance justified as rendering Caesar's unto Caesar.

Minsk subdued the Catholic Church, another potential foe, by alternately dangling the carrot of a concordat agreement (still unsigned) and regularly applying the stick of clergy deportations. Over 160 Catholic priests and nuns serving in Belarus are Polish citizens whose annual work permits are subject to government approval; at least two dozen—reputedly particularly socially engaged—have been denied extensions or expelled since 2005.⁴ Already tamed by Soviet rule, the Belarusian Orthodox Church was easily consoled by state patronage—even the crumbs offered by self-proclaimed “Orthodox atheist” Lukashenko. Other key faiths, including Jews and Muslims, are insufficiently numerous to influence government policy.

Yet there were soon stirrings of resistance within the web of restriction created by the 2002 legislation. Despite Belarus's onerous regulations on all forms of organizing and publishing, the Minsk-based civic initiative For Religious Freedom—comprising individual Jews, Orthodox and Protestants—produced anthologies and bulletins detailing mounting

violations of believers' rights. The Evangelical Belarus Information Center supplemented with email reports gleaned from its Protestant network across the country. In July 2003—when some public protest was still tolerated—5,000 Protestants demonstrated in Minsk against government curtailment of religious freedom.⁵

Momentum stepped up a gear in the spring of 2006, as Lukashenko further tightened the screws on civil society to ensure his election to a third presidential term. Handed down Belarus's first post-Soviet sentences for religious activity, Baptist pastor Heorhi Vyazowski and religious rights lawyer Syarhei Shawtsow were each jailed for 10 days for organizing private religious gatherings without government permission.⁶ That October, a long-simmering dispute spilled over when New Life, a 1,000-strong Minsk charismatic Pentecostal congregation denied permission to use its own church, faced the prospect of that property being confiscated due to its consequently unlawful use. As a bulldozer neared the building, protesters inside went on hunger strike, eliciting messages of support from around the world and visits from concerned foreign diplomats. The city authorities were forced into retreat. While the situation remains in stalemate, such defiance demonstrated—not least to the hunger strikers themselves—that religious believers could make formidable adversaries. Today New Life Church is, as local Pentecostal pastor Anton Bokun notes, “the only territory in the country where Belarusian laws don't operate.”⁷

As oppression stiffened, some faith representatives took a public stand. When Pastor Bokun was himself briefly jailed in 2007 following a police raid on technically illegal Sunday worship at his own Minsk home, thousands filled the grounds of one of the city's few fully legally established Pentecostal churches to hear Adventist, Baptist and Pentecostal leaders condemn his arrest. Belarus's largest Pentecostal union subsequently called upon its 50,000 members nationwide to observe three days of fasting and prayer for religious freedom.⁸

2007 also saw the boldest such initiative yet. Despite arrests and police searches, individual Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants gathered over 50,000 signatures for a constitutional review of the draconian 2002 religion law. The petition's organizers knew from the outset that Belarus's constitutional court would likely ignore their plea (as it did). Yet a key aim was to challenge the Sovietized perception of the state as omnipotent. Petition leaflets told the public of the existence of inalienable, God-given rights, including religious freedom: “The state does not give us these rights, so it has no right to take them away.”⁹ The campaign for religious freedom thus blossomed into one for broader civic awareness.

This development was not automatic. With Orthodox and Catholic Churches largely pacified, Protestants might have been expected to take the lead. Belarusian Protestant churches are steeped in Anabaptist disdain for politicking, however, taking their cue from the New Testament letter of Paul to the Romans: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.”¹⁰ Yet the further that Belarusian authorities encroached upon believers' consciences—particularly by eroding freedom of conscience—the more uneasy those consciences became. By stifling religious freedom, Lukashenko inadvertently precipitated a seismic shift in Belarusian Protestant thinking.

Instances of Christian democratic activism had already appeared in response to the March 2006 presidential election, criticized as flawed by international monitors. Thus, after Lukashenko's victory was announced, marchers carried banners through Minsk

streets proclaiming different Biblical sentiment: “Blessed are they who thirst after righteousness”¹¹ and “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”¹² One protester recalled that when prayers were said for Belarus at the main post-election opposition rally, over half the crowd raised their hands to indicate participation; the following evening, almost everyone did so.¹³

How did this change occur? Individual Protestants describe being spurred into civic action on reaching a point when they could no longer compromise with the regime without compromising their inner selves. Pavel Kharlanchuk, a young Pentecostal and actor at Minsk’s Yanka Kupala Belarusian-language theater, spent ten days in prison for joining the unsanctioned March 2006 demonstration. He protested because he believes changing the Belarusian constitution to permit Lukashenko further presidential terms was wrong: “At that moment I couldn’t walk on by. If I hadn’t gone, I would have lied to myself.”

For Pentecostal Tatstsyana Kim, the turning point came as she was strolling through Minsk one sunny day in 2008 as her son Andrei, a pro-democracy activist, sat in jail: “I was thinking about how everything looked so beautiful, when—people in the West might not think about this anymore—I suddenly understood that I could not be completely happy unless I knew I was protected by the law.” Andrei’s imprisonment had made plain the absence in Belarus of presumption of innocence, Kim explains; when her son’s pre-trial investigation was still ongoing, a procuracy official told her he was a criminal who would certainly go to jail.

A long-standing member of a Minsk charismatic Pentecostal church, Anatol Kisel attempted to run in the 2004 parliamentary election in the small town of Baranovichi, which has a sizeable Protestant community. Although his independent candidacy was disqualified in dubious circumstances, Belarus’s top electoral commissioner Lidziya Yarmoshyna contemptuously dismissed his formal complaint by suggesting he had fabricated the evidence to support it. That experience convinced Kisel of the need for Christian democratic activism in Belarus: “God cannot stand falsehood, but the idea that He is a conjuror and will suddenly produce freedom for us out of a hat is an illusion.”

“God Doesn’t Listen to Kings”

On December 19, 2010—the night of Lukashenko’s fourth presidential victory—riot police brutally crushed a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration on Minsk’s Independence Square; Kisel defines this as the watershed beyond which no Belarusian Christian could remain neutral. Days after those events—and himself at risk of arrest—they move him to recite verses from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah: “Righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets ... The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice ... He was appalled that there was no one to intervene.”¹⁴

In the new Belarusian Protestant understanding, Christians are the ones who must intervene on the side of truth. As Kisel explains:

God won’t implant notions of what is just and what is unjust in our minds if we don’t see it ourselves. If they oppress us, won’t allow us to have a church building, take away our building, ban us from meeting, stop foreign missionaries from visiting ... then where is justice? And this is beginning in churches. People are beginning to ask, “So where is truth?”

Kisel further argues that “He deposes kings and raises up others”¹⁵—another Old Testament verse conventionally understood by Belarusian Protestants as prescribing

submission to temporal rulers—does not in fact indicate that such rulers enjoy divine support:

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. And "deposes" also has foundation—if the people say they don't like a king, then God removes him. God doesn't listen to kings.

Belarusian Catholics and Orthodox possess many more government-approved houses of worship than Protestants, and are thus less affected by the 2002 law restricting religious freedom. Even as their hierarchs publicly endorse Lukashenko, however,

individual priests and parishioners are navigating a path toward civic activism similar to the Protestant one. Emboldened by New Life's example, more than 100 Catholics from Our Lady of Ostrobroma parish in the western city of Hrodna threatened their own hunger strike for permission to build a church in late 2006. Others organized a petition against the state's decision that year to bar 12 Polish priests and nuns from working in Hrodna diocese.¹⁶

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For Mikalai Artsyukhow, civic activism is simply actualization of Catholic tradition. As a practicing Catholic, he explains, he feels responsible for himself, his family and country, "and so I will take every measure possible for these three subjects of society to take on ideal characteristics." Artsyukhow rejects the notion that the Catholic Church may remain apolitical in Belarus, saying that "it is engaging in arch-politics by being silent about human rights violations and not calling upon the authorities to respect those God-given rights."

While ruing the acquiescence of his own Orthodox hierarchy, leading Christian democrat Pavai Sevyarynets also expected more of the Catholic Church. In a July 2009 open letter to Belarusian Catholic leader Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, he points to the Second Vatican Council's support for Catholics' political engagement "against any form of injustice and tyranny," as well as the Church's role in liberating Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia from Communist dictatorship.¹⁷ In Belarus, he notes, the regime has expelled Catholic clergy, blocked Catholic church construction and disrupted Catholic-sponsored events—yet Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone told a June 2008 Minsk press conference that Belarus's law restricting religious freedom is "a good law which reflects the need to protect and respect the rights of the five major confessions traditional to Belarus." "If Christians are afraid to speak the truth," asks Sevyarynets, "then what changes?"¹⁸

In a blow to Christian democracy's prospects in Belarus, the stances of Catholic and Orthodox leaders remain unchanged, even after the late 2010 post-election crackdown on pro-democracy activists. On December 22, 2010, Russian Orthodox patriarch Kirill—whose jurisdiction extends to Belarus—congratulated Lukashenko on his reelection when there was no political obligation to do so; Russian President Dmitry Medvedev had already pointedly declined either to welcome or condemn developments in Minsk.¹⁹

On December 27, Belarusian state television news broadcast Archbishop Kondrusiewicz giving the regime a welcome boost by receiving an amber-encrusted icon of the Virgin Mary from Lukashenko himself. The Catholic leader could not hide his unease when reminded in a separate Belarusian television interview that the papal nuncio to Minsk had congratulated Lukashenko on his election victory, however: “If he did, then he did. We always congratulate on holidays, some kinds of events. It’s quite natural.”²⁰

Yet all is not bleak. Among Christian democratic activists, a very different consensus of outlook toward the regime is so complete that it might appear unremarkable. Regarding the violent police action against demonstrators on December 19, 2010, Protestant Anatol Kisel remarks, “The authorities have by this ceased, from God’s perspective, to be the authorities.” During canvassing several months earlier, opposition presidential candidate Vital Rymashewski—a practicing Orthodox Christian—offered an identical interpretation of Romans 13 when asked how far Christians may defy their rulers:

For a Christian there is no power except from God, so one should submit only to what does not contradict His will, Gospel principles. Representatives of authority who violate those principles or do what is contrary to them do not represent authority for a Christian.²¹

Such apparently effortless unanimity in fact involves surmounting significant doctrinal division, even within Protestantism. Here, ironically, Lukashenko’s pressure on religious communities has welded Christian solidarity. Soon after Pastor Vyazowski’s brief imprisonment in 2006, a member of his Reformed Baptist church recalled that when the authorities had earlier harassed non-Reformed Pastor Ernest Sabila, “some people in our church asked, ‘Why defend him?’ He was the ‘wrong kind’ of Baptist. I answered, ‘Today it’s Sabila, tomorrow it will be us.’ And it was.”²²

“Christians, Poles and Believers”

Still, unlike broadly Catholic anti-Communist resistance in 1980s Poland and Lithuania, Belarusians have no single national Church around which to coalesce. Notwithstanding Lukashenko’s Orthodox overtures, this non-equation between Belarusian and a particular religious identity is acknowledged at an official level. Belarus observes both “Catholic” (December 25) and “Orthodox” (January 7) Christmases as non-working holidays. No confession predominates: according to 2009 government statistics for registered religious organizations, there are some 1,500 Orthodox, 500 Catholic, and 1,000 Protestant communities.²⁴ While polls determining religiosity are rare, a 2000 Belarusian sociological survey found 37 percent self-identifying as Orthodox, around 4 percent as Catholic, and just over 6 percent—the majority surely Protestant—adhering to other denominations. A 2006 Belarusian public opinion survey further recorded 66, 37 and 17 percent trusting the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Churches respectively (some respondents evidently approved of more than one).²³ Allowing for barriers to registration experienced by new Catholic and especially Protestant congregations, however—as well as a tendency toward nominal identification as Catholic or, in particular, Orthodox—active Christians divide nearer evenly between the three major denominations. This accords with Pavai Sevyarynets’ statistics for Christian democratic activists: 45 percent Orthodox, 22 percent Catholic, 33 percent Protestant.²⁴

A corresponding sense of Christian solidarity, while amorphous, runs deep in Belarus. After successive historical periods in which rulers backed Orthodoxy, Western- or

Eastern-rite Catholicism as the preferred faith, explains Eastern-rite Catholic priest Ihar Kandratsew, “our Belarusian mindset says that God is one.”²⁵ Warily guarding the entrance to an Orthodox church in the grounds of Brest Fortress, an elderly woman declares, “Orthodox may enter”—but, on hearing the foreign accent of this author, adds, “And non-Orthodox. All souls are God’s. God is one.” Young Pentecostal democratic activist Kasya Dalidovich similarly characterizes Belarus as a “multifaceted, multipolar” nation, incorporating Jewish and Tatar Muslim elements. “We don’t much distinguish whether you belong to one confession or another,” she concludes, “God is one.”

This stance is crucial to the ability of Belarusians of different denominations to cooperate with one another in civic activism. Its non-differentiation does not erase religious categories, however. Rather, Belarusian society is popularly perceived as inherently pluralistic. Pentecostal pastor Anton Bokun recalls an elderly inhabitant of Brest Voblasts proudly telling him that all denominations—“Christians, Poles and believers” (*khristyane, polyaki i veruyushchie*)—were represented in her village: “She meant Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants!”²⁶

By embracing this attitude, Belarusian Christian democratic initiatives to mobilize dissent bypass the need for a unifying national Church. Mass prayer appeals for Belarus are typically issued jointly, as from Baptist pastor Ernest Sabila, Western-, and Eastern-rite Catholic clergy in April 2007. While calling for prayer at a particular time of the week, these also respect theological difference; rather than announcing an ecumenical event at one physical location, Belarusians are asked to pray wherever they are in accordance with the practice of their particular denomination.²⁷ Doctrinal difference thus defers to common aspiration for freedom and justice. “We shouldn’t look at what is right or wrong in a confession, as this is secondary,” insists Protestant Anatol Kisel, “I feel I must worship God singing ‘Alleluia, alleluia!’ while a grandmother in another church might feel she should worship on her knees.” On this point, both he and Orthodox activist Sevyarynets independently cite a Christian quotation of uncertain provenance: “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, love.”²⁸

Indeed, early exponents of post-Soviet Belarusian identity regarded religious plurality as a necessary condition of Belarusian nationhood. One is Zyanon Paznyak, a convinced Catholic who—while now politically marginal—came third in the 1994 presidential election that brought Lukashenko to power.²⁹ The 1999 manifesto of Paznyak’s Conservative Christian Party, BNF (Belarusian Popular Front), notes that “the state-forming foundation of Belarus is nationality, not denomination. Therefore ... confessional tolerance is a necessity from which our national unity flows.”³⁰ Another authority for today’s Christian democrats is Belarusian philosopher Syamyon Padokshyn, who argued that a pluralist religious model historically consolidated Belarusian national unity, whereas a unitary model—exemplified by the imposed merger of Orthodox faithful with the Catholic Church under the 1596 Union of Brest—undermined it.³¹ *E pluribus unum* might also be a motto for Belarus.

“We Who are Different in Faith Will Preserve Peace Between Ourselves”

Today’s Christian democratic activists’ specific affirmation of religious freedom as a precondition of Belarusian nationhood and interconfessional solidarity owes more to their embrace of another historical precedent, however. In a further ironic twist, its rediscovery was also prompted by Lukashenko’s repressive 2002 religion law, whose preamble recognized the definitive role of the Orthodox Church in the historical

formation and development of the spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people; the spiritual, cultural and historical role of the Catholic Church on the territory of Belarus; and the inseparability from the common history of the people of Belarus of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Judaism and Islam.

Lutheranism was indeed historically present on Belarusian territory among urban ethnic Germans. But the 2002 law's preamble neglected to mention a greater Protestant presence: Calvinism. This indicated to today's Protestants that it bore political rather than historical significance, and piqued their interest in what had been airbrushed out. As Pastor Anton Bokun recalls, "The very fact that the preamble turned to history encouraged people to

look for historical arguments."

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Bokun and others were thus steered toward closer examination of the impact of the Reformation upon Belarus. Weeks after the law's adoption, the inaugural meeting of their Organizational Committee of the Year of Reformation drew up plans to mark 450 years of the Reformation in Belarus in 2003.³² Incorporating several conferences and the website <http://www.bel-reform.org>, these might appear innocuous. Yet Minsk's notorious religious affairs official Ala Ryabitsewa vowed

to block the international theological conference; the Evangelical Reformed Church in Belarus, its host organization, was barred from renting public premises in the city. At the last moment, Reformed Baptist pastor Vyazowski offered use of his house church;³³ this is thought to be the underlying reason for his imprisonment in 2006.

The 2003 initiative's organizers dated 450 years of Reformation in Belarus back to 1553, when Mikalai Radzivil the Black made a public profession of Calvinist Protestantism in the city of Brest, now in western Belarus. Radzivil was the most powerful person in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania—the Belarusian proto-state—after Grand Duke Sigismund Augustus, who was simultaneously King of Poland. The two were close; Mikalai was raised in the Polish royal court, Sigismund was happily married to his sister, Barbara Radzivil.

Following his conversion, Mikalai Radzivil established chapels of the new faith across his vast landholdings;³⁴ John Calvin dedicated one of his works to him.³⁵ The Grand Duchy soon became renowned across Europe as a place of refuge for Protestants: in 1557, English Duchess Catherine Willoughby of Suffolk and her husband Richard Bertie found asylum there at Radzivil's invitation. In 1563, Mikalai secured the opening of government positions to non-Catholics.³⁶ At the 1569 Lublin Sejm (parliament), which further bound the two states of Poland and the Grand Duchy in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, most of the Duchy's representatives were Protestant.

Reformist thinking had in fact long penetrated the Grand Duchy. Five thousand of its troops were dispatched to assist followers of Jan Hus in 1420; many of those who returned from the Czech lands—as well as Belarusians who later studied at Prague University—disseminated Hussite ideas at home. While he did not identify with any specific denomination, Frantsysk Skaryna (whose name graced Minsk's main street until 2005) engaged in

Reformation practice by printing the New Testament in his native Old Belarusian in 1517, the same year Martin Luther pronounced his Ninety-Five Theses.³⁷

Pivotal to the Grand Duchy's tolerance of Protestantism, however, were the personal attitudes of Sigismund II Augustus and his predecessor Sigismund I the Old, both of whom remained Catholic. Sigismund I (1506–1548) made little attempt to enforce his own anti-Protestant edicts;³⁸ when a prominent adversary of Luther urged him to persecute Protestants as heretics, he responded that he wished to be “monarch equally of sheep and goats.” Sigismund II (1548–1572) furthered this line. By 1552, as émigré 19th-century Polish Protestant historian Count Valerian Krasinski relates, “the Catholic Church could judge whether a doctrine was heretical but could not apply any temporal punishment to those whose creed it condemned. This decision, which established religious liberty in Poland, excited the greatest anger of the Catholic bishops. They made a solemn protestation against such an enactment, left the hall of the senate, and threatened to resign their senatorial dignities. But as these threats were disregarded, and no effort was made either to retain or to recall them to the senate, whose deliberations proceeded in the usual manner during their absence, they resumed their seats.”³⁹

Thanks to Mikalai Radzivil the Black, the situation was even more favorable to Protestants in the Grand Duchy, as Pope Paul IV indicated in his irate 1556 letter to Sigismund II:

You favour heretics, you assist at their sermons, you listen to their conversations ... you do not forbid the heretical assemblies, conventicles and preachings ... the palatine of Vilna [Mikalai the Black], a heretic, the defender and chief of heresy, is endowed by you with the first dignities of his country. He is chancellor of [the Grand Duchy of] Lithuania, palatine of Vilna, the most intimate friend of the king, in private and in public, and may be considered in some measure as the co-regent of the kingdom and the second monarch. You have abolished the jurisdiction of the [Catholic] church, and you have allowed, by an enactment of the Diet [parliament], every one to have such preachers and such worship as he may choose.⁴⁰

When Sigismund II died heirless in 1572, concern to protect this very freedom led the nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to ensure its codification in the 1573 Warsaw Confederation. Again due to pressure from Belarusian Protestants in the Grand Duchy—particularly Mikalai the Black's successor as chancellor, his cousin Mikalai Radzivil the Red—the 1573 Confederation incorporated a landmark provision for religious freedom:

Since there is no small variation in the Christian faith in our Commonwealth and warning that no form of hostility should arise between people for this reason, which we clearly see is taking place in other states, we pledge under oath, in faith, honour and conscience, for ourselves and our descendants for all time, that we who are different in faith will preserve peace between ourselves and not, on account of variation or differences in faith, shed blood in the churches or punish anyone by depriving them of property or social standing, or through imprisonment or banishment, and that we will not assist any authorities or government in such actions.⁴¹

According to Timothy Snyder, an authority on Central and Eastern European history at Yale University, this provision “had no parallel in the Europe of the time.”⁴²

Indeed, Western Europe at the time was wracked by religious conflict, and the Commonwealth Protestants who demanded religious toleration were particularly seeking to avoid a repeat on their territory of the recent St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of thousands

of Calvinist Huguenots in Paris. When Polish nobles elected Henry of Valois—brother of Charles IX, king of France at the time of the 1572 massacre—to succeed Sigismund II, they ensured that the 1573 Confederation’s affirmation of religious toleration was included in his coronation oaths.⁴³ Sure enough, Henry tried to omit the provision at his 1575 coronation in Krakow, but Mikalai the Red halted the ceremony until he pronounced it. Another condition for Henry’s accession demanded by Commonwealth nobility directly benefited French Protestants: Charles IX was obliged to curtail persecution of the Huguenots and restore their property and social standing.⁴⁴

For Christian democratic activists in today’s Belarus, this is not dead history. Gleaned from Krasinski, Snyder and other historians, their sixteenth-century ancestors’ pioneering demands for religious freedom inspire their same struggle for democratic change, including the right to worship without restriction. The 1573 Confederation’s toleration pledge, reiterated in the 1588 Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, heads bulletins published by the For Religious Freedom initiative.⁴⁵ *The Golden Age of Belarus*, a 2005 illustrated book produced by Pastor Bokun, popularizes the key historical developments traced here.⁴⁶

This position clearly involves historical cherry picking, with later Catholic- and Orthodox- dominated periods passed over in favor of the “Golden Age” of Belarusian tolerance. Here, however, the relevance of the sixteenth century lies not in its objective impact—the religious impact of earlier historical periods upon Soviet and post-Soviet generations is minor—but in its potential as a model that is both indigenous and broadly inclusive. For opposition activists, whose spectrum spans teenage Belarusian-speaking atheists and middle-aged Russian-speaking Protestants, its appeal is considerable.

So far, awareness of the Reformist legacy has naturally percolated furthest into the Protestant community. Asked why an accommodating attitude toward different denominations persists in Belarus, Pentecostal actor Kharlanchuk replies:

In the history of our country there was a serious period talked about now in our church, the Reformation, which was the Golden Age of Belarus, when there were many leaders, economists, writers—a period of renewal. In short, one of the Radzivils—the Black, I think—said it doesn’t matter what confession you belong to, Orthodox or Catholic or Protestant—the main thing is that you serve your homeland for God.

Interviewed in July 2006, a teenage member of a Minsk Charismatic church recounted how her ninth-grade history textbook negatively characterized Protestantism’s impact on sixteenth-century Belarus “when everyone regards it as a Golden Age.” The young Protestant decided to complain to her teacher, who reportedly agreed and noted that she was not the first pupil to raise the issue.

“Shine the Rays of Your Favor on Quiet and Friendly Belarus”

While remaining an undercurrent, Christian democratic ideas are nevertheless proving powerful enough to influence the mainstream Belarusian opposition, particularly the youngest generation of pro-democracy activists. And while the majority might not be religious, agrees one, Andrei Kim, “a lot of influential people either became Christian or were already Christian and became influential.”⁴⁷ Kim certainly counts among the latter.

As he tells a *New York Times* journalist at a January 2011 Moscow press conference about the mass arrests—including his own—that followed Lukashenko’s fourth

presidential victory, Kim, with his jean jacket and tousled hair, may seem like any other Belarusian youth activist. Three years earlier, at age 21, he was arrested following an unsanctioned Minsk demonstration against restrictions on small businesses and sentenced to 18 months in prison; Amnesty International declared him a prisoner of conscience. Kim is renowned for initiatives such as Pashtouka (Postcard), a 2011 internet appeal for postcards to be sent to jailed anti-Lukashenko protesters that enlisted support from local media celebrities such as Russian rock star Yuri Shevchuk.⁴⁸ Yet the less public foundation of Kim's activism is his Protestant faith:

I was in church from age seven, grew up with knowledge of what's good and bad—"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them [Eph. 5:11]." That's the only reason why I haven't left the country, although it would be much better for me if I had, I could have a better life in Europe. God has blessed me to work for an awakening in my country, so that everything there will be based upon Christian principles. My aim is for everything I do in political and civic activism to come from God.

Although just eight years old when Lukashenko came to power, Kim sensed that things were taking an ominous turn. Like other children, he loved stories of knights battling against dark forces—but now Belarus's crest of a white knight on a red shield, "our beautiful, historical and Christian symbol," was being taken down from above the blackboard in his classroom (Lukashenko secured the symbol's abolition in 1995).⁴⁹ Christian fables containing chivalric motifs continue to infuse Kim's dedication to the cause of freedom. Released from jail after international pressure resulted in a presidential amnesty seven months into his 2008 sentence, he rues not being given enough time to collect his work on a translation into Belarusian of his favorite book, C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.⁵⁰ In place of a biography on Kim's blog, a passage from another Lewis novel encapsulates his rejection of the Lukashenko state:

Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself ... Then all I can say is, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. ... That's why I'm going to stand by the play-world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can, even if there isn't any Narnia.⁵¹

Kim considers Paval Sevyarynets—also declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International—to be the foremost Belarusian Christian democrat. From August 2005, Sevyarynets served a two-year correctional labor sentence for organizing protests against the 2004 national referendum that abolished the Belarusian constitution's two-term presidency limit.⁵² Before embarking upon his most recent correctional labor sentence in mid-2011, he recounted to this author how, raised in a non-religious family, he converted to Christianity while being held in detention for several months in 1998: "It was just an inner revelation, very strong. I just understood that God was acting in that way, more than I could understand, even."

Formally baptized Orthodox in 2001, Sevyarynets was already renowned as a founder and then leader of the Young Front (Malady Front), formed in 1997 as the youth wing of Zyanon Paznyak's Belarusian Popular Front. According to the 2006 European Commission-sponsored publication *Prospects for Democracy in Belarus*, the Young Front is among Lukashenko's top targets.⁵³ Yet the movement's commitment to

Christian values is scarcely noted outside Belarus. Following his conversion to Christianity, Sevyarynets drew up a new manifesto, *A Christian Choice for the Young Front*, which the movement adopted in 2000. The Front's current slogans include "National idea – Christian principles" and "We have one road – Belarus for God!" ("*U nas adna daroga – Belarus' za Boga!*").⁵⁴

The Young Front identifies with the same national symbols that are embraced by the broader Belarusian opposition, while emphasizing their Christian significance. One is Kim's treasured Pahonia, the red crest of the charging white knight bearing a shield emblazoned with the cross of St. Euphrosyne of Polatsk. Another is the alternative Belarusian national anthem—also a Christian hymn—"Magutny Bozha" ("Almighty God"):

Almighty God! Lord of the worlds
Of great suns and small hearts
Shine the rays of your favor
On quiet and friendly Belarus

A third is the white-red-white national flag (currently outlawed in Belarus), scarves of which were worn by European Parliamentarians in January 2011 in solidarity with detained Minsk protesters.⁵⁵ Both Kim and Sevyarynets interpret this flag as a symbol of Jesus's burial shroud: a blood-red stripe left by his resurrected body along the center of a white cloth.⁵⁶

Sevyarynets is far from the only key member of the Young Front to have been inspired toward civic activism by Christian faith or to have found such faith through the movement. Its current leader Zmitser Dashkevich is a long-active Pentecostal, also recognized as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International; in 2006 he was handed down an 18-month jail sentence for heading the Front without registration, withheld by the state authorities.⁵⁷ While still a teenager, Zmitser Khvedaruk headed the Front during Dashkevich's imprisonment; he is also a Pentecostal.

One of 10 recipients of the US State Department's 2011 International Women of Courage Award, Nasta Palazhanka is a vice-chair of the Young Front. In the wake of her detention by the Belarusian KGB in early 2011, she told this author how she had recently accepted Protestant baptism as a consequence of the Front's "deeper, Christian orientation." After joining the movement in 2004, Palazhanka watched its activists refuse to abandon their mission even as the legal consequences of involvement grew more severe. She concluded that "consistency is possible only for people who understand that their activity might serve God in this country."

Previously the Front's press secretary, 23-year-old independent radio journalist Barys Garetski also became a Pentecostal through the movement. While canvassing for an opposition presidential candidate on New Year's Eve 2005, he and Zmitser Dashkevich were detained by police, Garetski recalls: "We spent the night in prison and the next day was a Sunday. I was invited to church and I went and have been here ever since."

"A Person by Nature Inclines Toward Freedom"

Christian democratic aspiration has also generated more formal political organization. Reaching their late twenties by 2004, Sevyarynets and another prominent Young Front member, Pentecostal Alyaksei Shein, decided to leave that movement in order to found

the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party. In this they were joined by Orthodox Christian Rymashewski, Catholic Artsyukhow and Heorhi Dzmitruk, an older businessman from western Belarus raised in an underground Pentecostal church founded by his parents in 1954. Dzmitruk stood as an independent candidate in the 2000 and 2004 parliamentary elections, but became disillusioned after encountering artificial obstacles: “When the idea to start Christian Democracy appeared, I was the first to run to it. I said, ‘Guys, we should have done this a long time ago.’ Because before that I ran as an independent candidate in two elections, but there was complete falsification.”

The Party’s leaders are able to draw on further local historical precedent to popularize their agenda. Artsyukhow is striving “to put in their rightful place people like Stankevich and Gadlewski. Those people did a lot for the Belarusian people, and what they did is what I think we are doing and will do, and it is within the framework of the Lord’s teaching.”

Adam Stankevich and Vintsent Gadlewski were Belarusian Catholic priests who convened the founding meeting of the first Belarusian Christian Democracy movement in Minsk Catholic Cathedral in May 1917. Albeit less inclusive than today’s equivalent, this soon switched from being a purely Catholic initiative. Citing copious correspondence received from Orthodox Christians, a January 1926 issue of the movement’s *Bielaruskaja Krynica* (*Belarusian Source*) newspaper announced that it will “everywhere intercede also for Belarusian Orthodox” when defending Catholic interests, “respecting both as parts of one Belarusian people.”⁵⁸ The movement’s August 1926 manifesto further affirmed separation of Church and state “so that the authorities cannot use religion for political purposes, or support one religion against another.”⁵⁹ Like today’s Christian Democracy Party (whose bulletin is similarly named *Krynitsa*), a November 1929 issue of *Bielaruskaja Krynica* celebrates “full freedom of faith in the Belarusian-Lithuanian state [the 16th-century Grand Duchy].”

The original Belarusian Christian Democracy movement flourished in western Belarus, then part of Poland, until World War II, after which the whole of Belarusian territory fell under Soviet control. Gadlewski was shot by the Gestapo on the outskirts of Minsk in 1942; Stankevich was arrested by the Bolsheviks in 1944 and died soon after commencing a 25-year Gulag sentence in Siberia.⁶⁰ The eradication of what was primarily a Catholic clerical initiative inevitably diluted the civic activist spirit among subsequent generations of Belarusian Catholics.

Today’s Belarusian Christian Democrats can identify a direct, if fragile, link between themselves and the original movement, however. Another of its active members was Catholic Yanka Paznyak, shot by the Soviet secret police in 1939 and grandfather to Zyanon Paznyak, who returned Christian principles to the political arena in the late 1980s and remains an inspiration to Pavel Sevyarynets and others.⁶¹ Despite intense KGB pressure, Paznyak and a handful of original Christian Democrats who survived Stalinist repression—such as Catholic Adolf Klimovich—maintained contact during the post-War period, including via samizdat publications. Another survivor is Baptist pastor Ernest Sabila, who opened the founding congress of Paznyak’s Belarusian Popular Front in 1988. Originally due to be shot for anti-Soviet propaganda, Sabila served 13 years of a 25-year Gulag sentence before his release in 1964:

I expressed my thoughts openly, both civic and religious, among pupils—I was still at school. After school I entered medical institute and was arrested at the end of the first year. And they taunted me during interrogations and at the end they tried me. There was nothing very serious—what is anti-state about the word of God?⁶²

Now a pensioner, Sabila continues to defy state restrictions by refusing to pay occasional fines for leading his unregistered Belarusian Evangelical Church. As recorded by Belarusian historian Bachyshcha, Pastor Sabila also advised the leaders of Belarusian Christian Democracy's new incarnation at one of their first meetings:

The first thing you need to do is look for Christ; if you find Him, then you have some kind of future, chance. And then, with this deep faith in your heart, coming and falling on your knees before God, say, "Lord here I am before you, I feel this calling to be a politician, to be active in the political sphere." Then ask God to open this to you.

Colored by 20th-century experiences such as Sabila's, principled opposition to Sovietization—seen as perpetuated by the Lukashenko regime—is another thread binding the Belarusian Christian democratic tradition. In 1988, Zyanon Paznyak publicized evidence of mass shootings by the Soviet secret police from 1937–1941 that he had uncovered at Kurapaty on the outskirts of Minsk; 200,000 people are now estimated to have been executed there.⁶³ The site remains contentious under Lukashenko, who resists its investigation and commemoration as a symbol of Stalinist repression. Only stubborn popular protest at Kurapaty by the Young Front and others prevented the destruction of a sizeable section of cross-marked graves by road construction in 2001, and KGB officers continue to monitor visitors.⁶⁴ Awareness of this Soviet legacy is broadening, however, through Christian democratic initiatives such as the website Pakayanne (Repentance).⁶⁵

Soviet denigration of religious belief is in turn a further argument advanced by Belarusian Christian democrats in their affirmation of religious freedom. This was the case even before the worst persecutions: a February 1926 issue of *Bielaruskaja Krynica* rejected the desirability of Soviet rule then established on eastern Belarusian territory, remarking that "it is clearly very hard for a person to bear such bondage, as a person is by nature religious and inclines toward freedom."⁶⁶ Recently, Belarusian Christian Democracy Party co-chair Alyaksei Shein has highlighted Soviet persecution of Protestants in his documentary *Forbidden Christ*. This was withdrawn from a 2010 Belarusian Christian film festival after top religious affairs official Leanid Gulyak threatened the event's director; the film was later referred for assessment by the Belarusian KGB.⁶⁷ Belarusian Christian Democracy Party presidential candidate Vital Rymashewski's defence of religious freedom in response to criticism of his co-operation with non-Orthodox also found recourse to lessons from the Soviet past in late 2010: "Such people [Communists] let believers of all confessions rot in concentration camps without distinction—Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants—simply for belief in Christ. Let's at least defend the right to freedom of confession in remembrance of these martyrs."⁶⁸

"Need to Survive This Somehow"

The rise of Christian involvement in the Belarusian pro-democracy movement is starkly illustrated by the fact that seven of the protagonists introduced here—Zmitser Dashkevich, Zmitser Khvedaruk, Andrei Kim, Nasta Palazhanka, Vital Rymashewski, Paval Sevyarynets, and Alyaksei Shein—were behind bars following Lukashenko's December 2010 crackdown.

Those developments lent a new sense of gravity to their struggle. With the Young Front's main leaders Dashkevich and Palazhanka in detention and others effectively under

house arrest, it fell to 15-year-old Front activist Viktoriya Ladzis to liaise with Amnesty International and coordinate food parcels. At a December 27, 2010 press conference, the sole Belarusian Christian Democracy Party co-chair still at liberty, Heorhi Dzmitruk, somberly addressed journalists alongside relatives of those held by the KGB. Curtains at the Party's headquarters remained drawn; its office stood bare of computer equipment, most chairs and even cups after a recent KGB raid.

Shortly after spending the night of December 19 in custody, Tatstsyana Kim counted herself lucky only to be fined—ostensibly for shouting slogans (unspecified) and not obeying police orders. She had been singing “Magutny Bozhe” with a church group as riot police began clearing Independence Square:

Three of them began beating up a boy of about 16; he wasn't even on the Square but waiting at a bus stop, they were just looking for people. He was scared and tried to run away, but they caught him; they were beating him so hard that they ended up hitting each other. And I just cried out, and one said, “Take that old woman too!” Then there was a father and son standing nearby. They took the son, the father said, “Where are you taking him?” and they took him as well. And so we were all taken.

Like the hundreds of protesters then arrested, Zmitser Khvedaruk, Andrei Kim and Alyaksei Shein were sentenced to 10–12 days' detention. They had been standing together on Independence Square when riot police began encircling the crowd. As Kim later recalled:

We tried to break through the cordon, but a lot of people fell on some steps and I was detained as I tried to help them. Their aim was clearly to beat people—as we were herded down a corridor of OMON [riot police], they beat people with truncheons and carried on when people fell down. So there were a lot of bloody faces, head wounds and broken arms in the police vans.

Once inside a Minsk detention center, Kim received a Bible after a few days; the December 24, 2010 issue of opposition newspaper *Nasha Niva* featuring a sermon by young Belarusian Catholic priest Yuri Barok also got through to the prisoners. Barok had participated in the revival of the Belarusian Christian Democracy movement; although not wishing to leave Belarus, he was transferred by his bishop to Israel in November 2010.⁶⁹ The *Nasha Niva* address was read out at a makeshift Christmas Day service in Kim's cell; in it, Barok told all those detained that he would be celebrating Christmas Mass in Bethlehem “for those who were beaten, humiliated and imprisoned on that Bloody Sunday in Minsk.”⁷⁰ Kim then gave a reading from his Bible, “and then we heard—we could even see candles—people coming to the prison and singing carols. It was really cool, a real Christmas.”⁷¹

Due to their formal prominence in the opposition movement, Nasta Palazhanka and Vital Rymashewski were detained at Minsk's KGB prison after the December 19 demonstration.⁷² Palazhanka was held for two months, Rymashewski for two weeks; he believes his lenient treatment was due to suffering a head wound on election night. He and Palazhanka were handed down suspended sentences of two years and one year respectively on May 20, 2011. Amnesty International declared both prisoners of conscience.

Zmitser Dashkevich and Pavel Sevyarynets have likewise been declared prisoners of conscience.⁷³ Sevyarynets spent five months in KGB detention from December 19; this counts as 10 months of a three-year correctional labor sentence handed down to him on May 16, 2011. Dashkevich's predicament is more severe. Detained by police on the eve

of the presidential election for allegedly beating up two men in the street with a fellow activist, he was sentenced to two years' ordinary regime prison for "hooliganism" on March 24, 2011. Dashkevich insists that he and his friend were in fact attacked.⁷⁴

Held at length in a prison punishment block, Dashkevich urgently asked to see his lawyer in a September 19 message that alarmed his friends: "I do not hope to find a way out ... need to survive this somehow—but how? ... For him it was simple: he walked to Golgotha in half a day!"⁷⁵ Following a subsequent prison transfer, his condition is believed to have improved.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Does the rise of Christian democratic activism in Belarus over the past decade mean that Belarusian Christians will effect democratic change, including long-sought religious freedom?

Lukashenko's reluctance (so far) to crush religious communities with the same indiscriminate force as other elements of civil society suggests that he for one recognizes the potential of a faith-based opposition and is anxious not to stir up religious resentment. His only viable option, pursued with relative success, has been to minimize that threat by targeted application of the 2002 religion law. This still renders the regime vulnerable in the long term, however. For as in 1980s Eastern Europe, the small but nevertheless greater degree of leniency over the rest of civil society afforded to churches has allowed them to function as incubators of democratic ideas.

Lukashenko is thus now beginning to face a greater challenge: how to deal with a phenomenon that does not play by the rules of post-Soviet politics. Belarusian Christian pro-democracy activists are not driven by material interest or personal ambition (to which the 2003 and 2005 Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively, proved susceptible) and are therefore harder to manipulate. Their aspirations also resonate with moral and cultural values that Lukashenko is incapable of projecting authentically; these both galvanize the existing Christian democracy movement and convey legitimacy to potential sympathizers in a way that is impervious to administrative countermeasures.

Faith-based democratic activism is still far from being the defining opposition force in Belarus. By misreading religion's true role in Belarusian culture, however, foreign analysts usually underestimate its potential for underscoring democratic change. While rightly noting Ukraine's East-West division into pro-Moscow (Orthodox) and pro-West (Catholic) identities, even Polish sociologist of religion Irena Borowik overlooks Belarus's legacy of religious pluralism. Claiming that Byzantine rather than Western influence shaped Belarusian culture and nationhood, she suggests that Belarusians are consequently "building their identity by orienting themselves toward Russia."⁷⁷ Those whose purview is confined to secular affairs are yet more prone to conflate Belarusian with Russian political culture—and to conclude that democratic aspirations are therefore impossibly weak in Belarus. Writing in May 2011, Matthew Rojansky, a Russia expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, suggested that if a popular uprising succeeded in toppling the Lukashenko regime, "then the real problems would set in, because there simply is not an effective substitute for authoritarianism in Belarus today ... Belarusian society itself is not prepared to participate in, support and sustain effective democratic governance."⁷⁸

While the prospects are certainly not rosy, such extreme pessimism is not supported by the facts. Even in the flawed 2010 Belarusian presidential election, pro-democracy opposition candidates together polled some 11 percent, approximately four times that of equivalent parties in the 2007 Russian parliamentary election. In recent years opposition demonstrations in Moscow—a city ten times the size of Minsk—have pulled crowds of a few hundred, a far cry from the tens of thousands who marched to Independence Square on December 19, 2010. The many tens of thousands who took to the streets in Moscow and across Russia on December 10, 2011, demanding fair elections are illustration that foreign analysts' previous diagnosis of abject political apathy among Russians was also overly pessimistic.⁷⁹

Belarusians' backing of formal Christian Democratic structures is admittedly low: between December 2010 and September 2011, Belarusian Christian Democratic Party presidential candidate Rymashewski's rating remained at just 1–2 percent. The ratings of the other presidential opposition candidates are similar, however, and sooner indicate general disillusionment with the organized political process under Lukashenko, whose own rating fell from 53 to 20.5 percent over the same period.⁸⁰ Informal support for Christian democratic values is a greater potential source of active dissent: the tens of thousands who demonstrated or petitioned for religious freedom will likely join broader protest initiatives as moral indignation at the Lukashenko regime increases.

Only by overlooking the faith-based democratic aspirations presented here is it possible to view Belarus so readily as an indistinct appendage of Russia. Belarusians' far higher degree of religiosity continues to indicate a clear difference: polled in 2006, around 25 percent of Belarusians said they attend church at least once a month.⁸¹ The equivalent Russian figure is only 11 percent, and Russia has approximately half as many registered religious organizations per head of population as Belarus.⁸² As with the wider Eastern Bloc, the later Soviet annexation of western Belarusian territory is of crucial importance here. In Soviet eastern Belarus, public religious life was all but annihilated in the wake of the 1917 October Revolution. In Polish-controlled western Belarus, by contrast, Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants each had approximately 500 functioning churches before 1939.⁸³ When the Soviet system collapsed some 50 years later, freely operating Christian communities, and the original Belarusian Christian Democracy movement, were thus well within living memory.

In 1993, Jan Zaprudnik recalled Belarusian philosopher Padokshyn's argument that, while geostrategic and economic realities tie Belarus to Russia, dominant "Western" features in the popular mindset—including religious tolerance and the rule of law—provide a political rationale for the Western orientation of a Belarusian state.⁸⁴ Nearly 20 years on, this mindset is still more pronounced among those Belarusians who were children or teenagers as Zaprudnik was writing, and these generations drive today's Christian democracy movement. Within the past three years they have embraced new media, particularly social networking websites, as a rapid and effective strategizing tool. This has even occasioned direct reference to the opposition experience of 1980s Eastern Europe. During a Facebook discussion of the 2011 flash-mob demonstrations in which Belarusians stood in silence or clapped, one user praised a protest method which the Polish Communist authorities had found similarly difficult to prosecute: that of going out for a walk during propagandistic evening news broadcasts to demonstrate that televisions were not being watched.

As with the demise of Communist Poland, quickly evolving circumstances mean that it is not easy to gauge precisely how and when democracy will come to Belarus. Much remains Sovietized, and unlike 1980s Eastern Europe, free travel and communication serve as a pressure release valve for the regime even as they admit influence from outside. Rather than religion *per se*, factors such as the creativity and coherence of protest—and especially the nose-diving economy—will prove overriding in the advent of democratic change. Yet the pro-freedom campaigning of hundreds of thousands of Christians in Belarus, a phenomenon absent from neighboring Russia, can only assist in ushering in that change.

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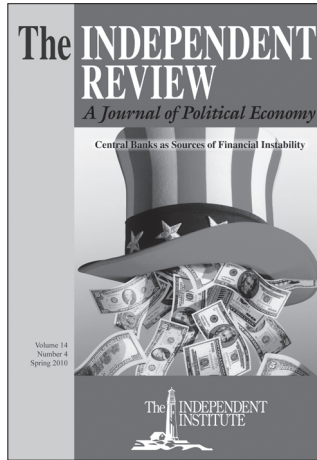
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