

Professor Viktor Kryvoi – an obituary

Viktor Ivanovich Kryvoi was born in Kazakhstan into a working-class family of Belarusian and Russian settlers. Educated in St Petersburg and Moscow, he shaped the laws of independent Belarus and unhesitatingly spoke the truth to those in power.

This obituary provides a glimpse into the full and productive life of Viktor Kryvoi. It serves as a remarkable example of an individual who combined in himself a first-class civil servant, a legal scholar who leaves behind an impressive legacy of both theoretical and practical works and commentaries, as well as a manager and entrepreneur.

From the oilfields of Siberia to the newly independent Belarus

Viktor Kryvoi's legal career began when, as a 16 year old young man, born in the Kustanai region of the Kazakh Soviet Republic, he successfully entered one of the most elite education establishments of the Soviet Union and prior to that of the Russian empire – the Law Faculty of the Saint Petersburg State University (Lenin, Medvedev and Putin number among its graduates).

He showed himself an extraordinary man in many ways. When given a choice where to work upon graduation he chose not St Petersburg or Moscow, where most people wanted to settle, but Siberia in the far north of the Soviet Union. The prosperity of the Soviet Union depended to a large extent on its oil and gas reserves, much of it from the newly explored fields of

western Siberia. He started his career as an in-house lawyer working for a major oil and gas enterprise in Urengoy in western Siberia, around 30 miles from the Arctic Circle.

While working full-time, Viktor Kryvoi also wrote his PhD dissertation and fathered two sons, which would have been impossible without the faithful support of his wife Halina. His [dissertation](#) focused on labour regulation of individuals working on a rotational basis and was based on empirical evidence collected in Siberia. Shortly after defending his dissertation in Moscow he had a brief stint as a senior lecturer in law at Tyumen State University. Tyumen served as the main hub among the oil and gas fields of Siberia.

Although he started his PhD as a student of public international law, he soon switched to labour law. The Soviet Union was based on the concept of full employment, with unemployment virtually non-existent, and labour law held a prestige unmatched by any other legal discipline. It probably guaranteed better career prospects than international law.

Three years before the collapse of the Soviet Union he moved to Belarus, then a Soviet Republic, where his mother and wife come from. Belarus, at that time one of the most prosperous regions in the Soviet Union, had a large industrial sector built following the Second World War and labour lawyers were definitely in great demand.

Shaping the legal system of Belarus

When Belarus became independent in 1991, it faced an enormous task of building its own political and legal system. Viktor Kryvoi was in the centre of this process when appointed as head of a key department in the Ministry of Labour, putting him in charge of new laws and regulations.

In the early 1990s, Viktor Kryvoi headed working groups responsible for drafting several major laws in Belarus, including the Code of Labour Law, the Law on Employment and On Collective Agreements and Accords. At that time Belarus was open to the world and he worked closely with experts from the World Bank and the International Labour Organisation. He was one of the few civil servants who had a working knowledge of English and he regularly travelled to Geneva to represent Belarus at international events.

In the 1990s Belarus functioned as a multi-party democracy with a vibrant political life and the Parliament was at the centre on politics. After 1994 Viktor Kryvoi worked in the Parliament and quickly rose to the highest legal expert position in the country – the head of the Legal Directorate of the Parliament. At that point, every draft law in the country required his signature before being finalised.

During that period, Belarus became one of the most progressive countries in the area of labour law and its Labour Code [served a model of best practices](#). In 1996 Viktor Kryvoi defended his habilitation thesis in St Petersburg, which focused on the [codification of labour law of Belarus](#).

In 1990 he established one of the first small state enterprises in Belarus, Belarusian Staff Centre “Professional,” which specialised in publishing commentaries by leading Belarusian economists and lawyers on the new laws of Belarus. After leaving state service, he served as head of the department of civil disciplines of a major university and as rector of a training institute in Minsk.

Legacy

Professor Kryvoi was always busy writing. Most of [his publications](#) focused on Belarusian and comparative labour law. In later years he developed an interest in conceptualising

[the moral foundations of Christianity in Labour Law](#) and Leo Tolstoy's understanding of [Christian and human values of labour](#). Many of his publications were co-authored with Belarusian and Russian colleagues, with whom he kept strong professional and personal links.

His positions included the deputy chair of the Union of Lawyers of Belarus, an expert at the World Bank and the Economic Court of the Commonwealth of the Independent States, and a member of a number of consultative bodies of the Supreme Court, the Parliament and other institutions. He played a key role in establishing the Community of Labour Law, which is now a vibrant hub of labour law experts and he even ran his own parliamentary campaign in 1996.

Despite his past as a top civil servant, Professor Kryvoi was also [a vocal critic of governmental policies](#) depriving Belarusian workers of basic rights protected by international law. He criticised the switching of all workers to short-term contracts or imposing severe restrictions on independent trade unions.

Viktor Kryvoi propelled himself from a humble working family in northern Kazakhstan to the top legal jobs in the newly independent Belarus. As a self-made man, he had a difficult character and unlike many of his compatriots, did not hesitate to speak the truth and to defend his principles to those in power, even when it was detrimental to him personally. But like many men in Belarus he died early, on 1 July 2019, aged 63. He is survived by two sons and four grandchildren.

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