

# Will Christian Values Unite the Belarusian Opposition?

In recent months, two political prisoners, Źmicier Daškievič and Paval Seviaryniec, completed their incarceration and compulsory labour terms. Both promote Christian politics and are going to keep on struggling with the regime in the upcoming 2014 and 2015 elections.

Belarus remains the least religious country of the former Soviet Union, with only 33% of its population reporting religion as important for them. Moreover, as Belarus remains a sovietized society in many aspects, the law on religious freedom remains quite restrictive.

In such conditions, building a political campaign on purely idealist values may be a challenging task. However, coupled with good social and economic program and smart usage of modern technology, such a campaign can prove successful.

## **Paval Seviaryniec: Time for a Moral Revolution**

Paval Seviaryniec is perhaps the most prominent activist of the younger generation of the Belarusian national movement. Born in 1976, he joined the Belarusian Popular Front in 1995 and in 1997 co-chaired the newly created oppositional youth organisation Malady Front. In 1997-2004 he served as one of the main organisers of mass street protests against Lukashenka's politics, and took part in numerous political and cultural projects. He was detained around 40 times.

In 2005, the authorities accused him for organising protests against the results of the 2004 referendum which allowed Lukashenka to serve more than two terms in office. Paval received three years of compulsory labour, which means living in a settlement in a remote areas of Belarus and working with

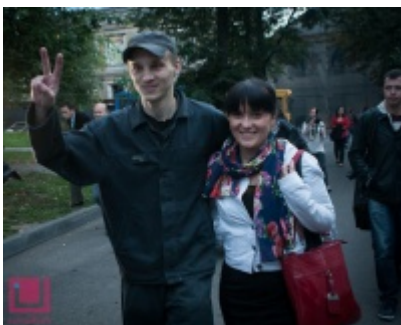
restricted travel rights. In 2010 he was arrested after a mass protest against the presidential elections results and sentenced to another three-year term of compulsory labour.

In an interview after his release, Seviarynets proclaimed the total defeat of the opposition and its marginal role in current politics. He thinks that today's leaders should prepare a moral revolution. Lukashenka will be gone sooner or later, and the opposition's leaders should prevent the persistence of norms which exist under Lukashenka regime – theft, lie, fear and threats. The opposition, in Paval's view, also does not fully stick to a moral way of life.

“We need thousands of people who set moral principles above all else. We should respond to hatred with love, to fear with belief, to lies with truth”, Paval said. He regards the church as the most important and crucial center for a moral revolution today, as it has the largest moral potential. The lawyers, economists and engineers who visit churches today can replace the hundred thousand Lukashenka bureaucrats.

### **Žmicier Daškievič: God, Family, Fatherland**

Žmicier Daškievič became another leader of the nation's youth in the 2010s. He served as co-chair of Malady Front in 2005 and took over its leadership in 2008. He took an active part in the 2006 presidential elections and supported the candidacy of Aliaksandr Milinkievič. After the elections he was one of the main organisers of the tent camp which was set up to protest against the election results.



In November 2006, the court found him guilty of acting on behalf of an unregistered organisation and sentenced him to a year and a half in prison. In 2010, before the notorious crackdown following presidential elections, security services provoked a fight with him in the

street and soon he received two years in prison for “hooliganism”.

Zmicier Daškievič, after his release, stated that he was not going to keep the position of Malady Front leader, although he would continue to support it. Zmicier, who married his girlfriend while in prison, now believes he has a responsibility to his family and therefore puts the values of God, family and fatherland above all else. He has to abandon his former revolutionary passion and fight using the word of God. “The day of regime change will come, because God has already decided upon it”, Zmicier says.

## **Religion and State in Belarus**

According to a 2009 Gallup poll, Belarus occupies 15th place in the list of least religious countries, with 57% reporting that religion is not important in their lives. Hence, Belarus presents the least religious country of the former Soviet Union. Indeed, the role of the church in modern Belarusian politics has been small in comparison to such religious neighbours of Belarus as Poland.

As Belarus remains a sovietized society in many aspects, the law on religious freedom appears quite restrictive here. All religious communities must obtain state registration, and all public expressions of belief must receive official permission



from the state. After the restrictive 2002 law came into force, Belarusian authorities faced a resistance to some religious communities, especially protestant, who are considered “not a traditional church” and are often met with more restrictions.

The Catholic Church in Belarus, having up to 1.5 million believers according to some estimates, also regularly experiences problems with the state. As representatives of

the west and potential “agents of influence”, catholic priests from abroad sometimes do not receive permission to work in Belarus and some of them already working in Belarus are forced out of the country. As evidence of such official policy, recently the Belarusian KGB detained catholic priest Uladzislaŭ Lazar and accused him of assisting a spy suspect.

The problems with restrictions on religious freedom in Belarus have even appeared in European Parliament resolution of 17 December 2009, where it urged Belarusian authorities to safeguard freedom of religion for religious denominations other than the Orthodox Church.

### **Will Christian Democracy Unite the Opposition?**

With only a third of citizens considering themselves believers and such restrictive politics towards religion, it would be hard for politicians like Paval Seviaryniec to mobilise society and build a new government based on Christian values. However, that very third of the population seems to be an active participant in Belarusian society, especially among Catholics and Protestants. The 2010 presidential elections showed that the candidate from the Christian Democrats Vital Rymašeŭski drew substantial attention from Christian voters.



Christian Democracy as a political subject emerged in Belarus in the late 2000s. In 2009, the founding congress of Belarusian Christian Democracy took place in Minsk. Unsurprisingly, the Ministry of Justice declined the application for the party's registration. Despite this, the party continues with its activities with its unofficial status. Its activists have faced constant pressure in carrying out their work, especially in the regions. However, today the party looks more viable than its colleagues among the “old” opposition, who became “professional oppositionists”.

Currently, the Belarusian opposition has formed two coalitions ahead of the 2014 local elections and 2015 presidential elections. While Žmicier Daškievič expresses skepticism to them and sees no way to challenge the regime at the moment, Paval Seviaryniec appears more optimistic. He suggests that Belarusian Christian Democracy become the link that unites the two coalitions to lead a joint campaign with a single candidate in 2015.

As a pragmatic nation with mostly materialistic interests and views, Belarusians will hardly follow a purely idealist political platform. However, coupled with a good social and economic program and a smart campaign, it can indeed yield successful results for Lukashenka's opponents.