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William Yoder

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## **A PARTNERSHIP WITH A DIFFERENCE THE BAPTISTS OF SERBIA AND RUSSIA ARE DEVELOPING A PARTNERSHIP**

**By William Yoder<sup>1</sup>**

William Yoder, Ph.D. was a member of the Advisory Board of Editors of *Religion in Eastern Europe*. Previously he was stationed in Berlin and sent a number of reports to *REE*. Currently he writes occasional journalistic releases from Moscow and other locations in Russia and Eastern Europe. This is from one of those journalistic releases funded by “Presbyterian News Service”, Louisville/USA, “[www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org)”. It is informational in character and does not express any official position of PNS.

M o s c o w – The Baptists of Serbia and Russia are developing a partnership with a difference: a partnership between two Slavic countries. That desire was made public by the presence of Vitaly Vlasenko (Moscow), Director of External Church Relations for the “Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists” (RUECB) in the South Serbian city of Niš on 30 April and 1 May. On those days, the “Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of Serbia (Serbia South)” commemorated the 1700th anniversary of the Edict of Milan. Honor guests also included John Upton (Richmond/Virginia), President of the Baptist World Alliance, and Ákos Bukovsky (Budapest) representing Hungary’s Baptist union. President of the South Serbian union is Čedo Ralević; 60 persons attended the two-day event.

Russia and Serbia have been “comrades in arms” for centuries, with Russia repeatedly going to bat for Serbia against the aggressive advances of its Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian neighbors. A special relationship exists for similar reasons between Russians and Bulgarians – another Slavic and Orthodox nation.

Roman emperor Constantine the Great (or Constantine I) was born in Naissus within the present-day city of Niš, Serbia, around 272 A.D. After several centuries of brutal persecution for Christians, he and the rival Roman emperor Licinius engineered a major political about-face by passing the Edict of Milan in 313. This radical agreement legalized the Christian faith as well as all other faiths present within the empire. Constantine’s baptism shortly before his death in 337 made him the first officially Christian emperor. Yet the new law was not a perfect fit for later-day Anabaptists or the free-church evangelicals of today. Constantine lapsed into state preference and patronage of a single religion. Such “Constantinianism” remains very much a problem in today’s Serbia and Eastern Europe.

This commemoration can be described as a cry for help by the tiny 700-member, 14-congregation-strong Baptist union of Southern Serbia. In 2006, “non-traditional” faiths such as the Baptists and Seventh-Day Adventists lost their tax-free status and official recognition as religious organizations. Both had been present in Serbia for more than a century. “Non-traditional” faiths have occasionally been subjected to physical violence by criminal groups. Relations worsened further when Tomislav Nikolić, a former leader in accused war criminal Vojislav Šešelj’s radical nationalist party, became president in May

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<sup>1</sup> Release #13-09, reprinted by permission of the author. “[rea.org@mail.ru](mailto:rea.org@mail.ru)” or [kant50@gmx.de](mailto:kant50@gmx.de) Webpage: „[rea-moskva.org](http://rea-moskva.org)“ or [www.baptistrelations.org](http://www.baptistrelations.org)

2012. Yet Serbia, an official candidate to join the European Union, will need to modify its legislation on religion if it is ever to become a member.

Serbs view Roman Catholics as Croats or Slovenes. True to their reputation, Croatian Catholics held prayer vigils and struggled for the release of Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač, two Croatian generals sentenced to long prison terms by the war crimes tribunal [International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia] in The Hague. After being absolved of all guilt and released on 16 November 2012, they returned home to a hero's welcome in Zagreb. The reaction across Serbia was one of disgust and despair.

Free-church Protestants are of course much smaller "fish" – they tend to be regarded as the small-scale agents of pro-NATO Western governments. Serb Baptists therefore demand to be accepted as a legitimate and genuine Christian confession by their compatriots. In a statement immediately following the Niš commemoration, the South Serbian leadership wrote: "Generally, the Edict of Milan still needs to be fully realized. . . . We Baptists hope . . . that we as a minority of the minority can be understood and regarded as a church which proclaims the Lord Jesus Christ as the only true God and Savior."

In Moscow, Vlasenko reported that a coming Russian-Serb partnership should include efforts for mediation and reconciliation in a region torn by war and ethnic strife. These would include pressure on Western and Kosovo governments to create documentation and pay compensation to the thousands of Serb refugees driven from their homes in Kosovo by ethnic cleansing beginning in 1999. The department head noted that relations between the Baptists of Albania and Serbia are also in need of improvement. Russian Baptists are experienced in top-level negotiations with the Orthodox and could help develop relations with the Serbian Orthodox. One of the few Baptist-Orthodox meetings during this commemoration occurred when foreign participants met the long-time, European-minded Orthodox journalist and confidant of patriarchs, Živica Tucić, in Belgrade.

Even Baptist-Baptist relations within Serbia are in need of improvement. The larger "Union of Baptist Churches in Serbia (Serbia North)" consists of 69 congregations with roughly 1,983 members. Its support base is located in Belgrade and the northern region of Vojvodina. Between 1699 and 1918, the multi-ethnic Vojvodina region was part of the Austrian Hapsburg empire. Vitaly Vlasenko insisted: "We will relate to both unions – we do not view them as separated. We do not differentiate between Serbians and citizens of Serbia." The president of the Northern Baptists, Ondrej Franka (Bački Petrovac) for example, is an ethnic Slovak. Serbian and Russian Baptists also have no desire to have their partnership directed against the West. One possible program proposed by John Upton, a summer English camp attended by Russians and residents of Serbia, would most likely be taught by North Americans.

A census in 2002 tallied 80,837 Protestants within Serbia's borders, excluding Kosovo. That amounts to 1.08% of the total population – a proportion very similar to the Russian one. The majority of these Protestants are ethnic-Slovak Lutherans in the Vojvodina region. The Reformed living in that region are usually Hungarian.

Smolensk, 24 May 2013

## Commentary

### One Ukrainian ex-Prime Minister Jailed in the US – Another in Ukraine

Caution: Politics

During April and May 2013, virtually all Ukrainian churches – except for the all-powerful “Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate” – signed petitions demanding immediate release of the imprisoned former Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko. Vyacheslav Nesteruk, President of Ukraine’s primary Baptist union, was among the church leaders who signed a petition published on 4 May.

Over the past decade, Baptist support for Timoshenko had reached nearly 100%; her pro-Western foreign policy and support of religious pluralism endeared her to the nation’s Protestants. At least four Baptists and a Pentecostal sat in parliament for the “Bloc Yulia Timoshenko”. Baptist Alexander (or Oleksandr) Turchinov had been a close associate of Timoshenko since 1993 and served as First Deputy Prime Minister during her final term as the country’s Prime Minister. Former Baptist youth director Pavel Unguryan joined parliament in 2007, specialising in social and family issues. Unguryan cited a simple reason for Baptist support when asked in 2009: “It would be better if Baptists were active in different political parties. But unfortunately, only one political force is willing to accept Baptists. The other parties do not have Baptists and do not want any.”

German journalist Frank Schumann makes several points in his book “Die Gauklerin. Der Fall Timoschenko”, released in late 2012. Criminal proceedings opened against Timoshenko in 2001 were shelved when she was named Prime Minister for the first time in 2005. I believe the restart of proceedings against her in May 2010 following her election defeat certainly looks like selective justice – as does the halt of the initial proceedings in 2005. One could claim that the court case was simply put on ice for an interim period because of her time in public office. (Her second term as Prime Minister ran from December 2007 to March 2010.)

Schumann also points out that oligarch Pavlo Lazarenko, Prime Minister of Ukraine 1996-97, was sentenced by a California court in 2006 to nine years in prison for money laundering, extortion and fraud. Yet Timoshenko was sentenced “only” to seven. (Lazarenko was released in November 2012 and remains in the US.) “Wikipedia” claims Lazarenko had “looted” \$200 million from Ukrainian state coffers and placed 8th on “Transparency International’s” list of the world's most corrupt leaders in 2004.

At least until 1999, Lazarenko was a close associate of Yulia Timoshenko. Both belonged to the infamous Dnepropetrovsk clan responsible for the execution of oligarch Yevhen (or Yevgeny) Shcherban and three others on the tarmac of Donetsk airport in November 1996. Shcherban headed the rival Donetsk clan. Both are accused of being co-responsible for

Shcherban's murder and Timoshenko was officially named a suspect in the case this past January.

Available evidence allows one to conclude that Yulia Timoshenko was at least involved in serious financial wrongdoing during the 1990s. The argument used for her release – that she is “no more guilty than others” – is probably true. Yet such “absolution” is far less than moral or legal innocence and no reason to give her one's vote. Ukrainian Protestants would be well advised to cloak their support for Timoshenko in great modesty and caution.

William Yoder, Ph.D.