

This Ex-Soviet Union Nation Seems Primed for Revival

It may take you a moment to find Belarus on a map, but it's a European country you'll likely be hearing a lot more about. That's because of its strategic position between Russia and the West.

As the U.S. government works to improve relations between the countries, American Christians are working to change the hearts of the nation's top leaders.

'Last Dictator of Europe'

When you drive into the Belorussian capital of Minsk, it's hard to imagine the modern city was once part of the Soviet Union.

It's practically been rebuilt after just one neighborhood survived the ravages of WWII. In fact, Belarus lost more of its people in the war per capita than any other country.

However, remnants of its communist past remain.

A statue of Vladimir Lenin stands guard in front of Parliament, and Belarus is the only former Soviet country to keep the name of the the KGB, the world's most notorious security machine.

The nation is ruled by Alexander Lukashenko, who's been called the "Last Dictator of Europe." Nearly a decade ago, he kicked out the U.S. ambassador.

While the relationship between the countries remains tense, there are signs that Lukashenko, motivated by Russia's aggressions in nearby Ukraine, is warming to the West.

Evangelical Diplomacy

In May, members of the U.S. military marched past Lukashenko alongside Belorussia's military to commemorate the Nazi surrender to the Soviet Union in WWII. It was a public show of unity just weeks before a U.S. congressman made history by accepting an invitation to speak to Parliament.

"I think what we're doing here today is checking each other out to see if there is a potential for a relationship," Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., said in a speech to the Belorussian Senate.

The Republican's congressional credentials cleared the way for him to deliver his speech. But for Pearce, his visit to Parliament was a missions trip.

"I go to churches many times and I tell them, 'My friends, you have locked the doors and we have been inside singing hymns and praises to each other. The problems are outside the locked doors. If you want your faith to grow, then go out there and work with the problems,'" Pearce told CBN News in an exclusive interview.

Winning the Hearts of Parliament

In Washington, Pearce attends weekly Bible studies hosted by Ralph and Danielle Drollinger, the founders of Capitol Ministries.

The Drollingers are Californians who nearly 20 years ago determined that the best way to change policy is to win the hearts of lawmakers for Christ. Since then, they've started Christian ministries in 40 state capitals and Washington.

"If we can teach men and women who hold public office, who are the lawmakers, who will chart the trajectory of any culture, if we can teach them Bible precepts and principles and hopefully win their hearts to Christ so they have the Holy Spirit that leads them into truth, they're going to think biblically," Ralph Drollinger told CBN News.

The Drollingers pushed to get Pearce into Parliament to spark a flame they pray turns into a regular Bible study. It's radical because Belarus has a poor record when it comes to religious freedom.

Despite the nation's Christian Orthodox roots, Pearce's reading of scripture before Parliament was a first.

When the Wicked Rule

"'When the godly are in authority the people rejoice, but when the wicked are in power they groan,'" Pearce read.

The Belarussian constitution protects religious freedom, but other laws restrict it and those are the ones the government tends to enforce. That causes problems for evangelicals or really any religious group outside the Belorussian Orthodox Church.

Oleg Rachkovski is a Belorussian Baptist preacher, one of a small number of evangelicals in the country.

"We have to register with the government, basically get permission to meet as a church," he explained.

Rachkovski grew up under communism and despite watching his preacher father face intense persecution, he is undeterred.

"I remember the days when I was a little child and the KGB people would come to my house to arrest my dad," he recalled. "And I remember I was hiding under the table and my mom and all the little children were on their knees for hours for our dad to come back."

"My dad was not a criminal; all he did was share God's love with people," he said.

Rachkovski is one of four pastors hoping to start a Bible study in Parliament following Pearce's speech, under the guidance of Capitol Ministries.

The Drollingers aren't stopping there though. They're also pushing the Belorussian education minister to adopt a curriculum that teaches the Bible as literature to high school students.

It's an interactive program designed by the Museum of the Bible, complete with iPad apps that bring scripture to life.

A Breakthrough?

One day after their presentation, the Drollingers received a letter saying the Lukashenko administration is very interested.

"They want to see if we're trying to lead them down the evangelical road or a certain religion and it's really not. It's really written from the perspective of literature," Danielle Drollinger explained.

"We do share the thoughts that the Bible is the first book and it's a very important book that should be taught at any age and the people should be able to read it – not just once but many times," Deputy Education Minister Raisa Stanislavovna told CBN News.

Despite the country's record of religious intimidation, they're words would be radical in American education these days.

By capitalizing on biblical values shared by Americans and Belorussians, the Drollingers and Rep. Pearce hope to change hearts and minds in this spiritually void and politically strategic part of Europe.

"What other country is able to be friends with Russia and the United States?" Rep. Pearce asked. "What other nation has been able to get some peaceful solution in Ukraine?"

"And so I think they sit here in a very important position," he concluded.

“We want to spend the rest of our lives, Lord willing, seeing just a revival amongst the political people of our world,” Danielle said.