

Old Belief in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland after 1990

Grigory Potashenko, Dr. hist.

Assistant Professor, Lithuanian Institute of History, University of Vilnius

Translated by Valeri Kalabugin

The history of priestless Old Belief in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland after 1990 (as well as in the period that started from the second half of the 17th century) is an inseparable part of history of Christianity in these countries. Although Old Belief has always been a minority religion here, its importance far exceeds the limits statistics would suggest. What counted was not the number of believers but their deep and surprisingly multifaceted influence of on religious and cultural life of Baltic societies. Their centuries-old creative activities have made Old Belief an integral part of the Baltic religious and cultural heritage owing.

In religious, historical and cultural sense, Old Believers constitute a rather uniform community in the Baltic countries. Regrettably, so far their history has not been thoroughly studied. This paper is an attempt to trace the history of Old Believers after 1990 and to outline their present situation in the Baltic countries and Poland.

Restoration of independence and the Old Believers

After the restitution of sovereign Poland in 1989–1990 and the restoration of independence of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia in 1990–1991, all the three countries adopted new constitutions¹ and legislations that secured the right of citizens to freedom of conscience and creed and defined the legal status of religious organisations. These states fundamentally embarked on the road of harmonising relations with the Church and cooperating to the benefit of the society. Those articles of the law that restricted the rights of believers and religious organisations were abrogated. The main achievement in this area was establishing a legal frame for activities of religious organisations: they obtained the same status as nongovernmental organisations and were recognised as juridical persons (since mid-1980s in Poland, and since November 1989 in Lithuania).

Cooperation of the State with churches in Poland and the Baltic states has allowed the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church to continue or resume the activities of its central bodies. In the

new political conditions after 1989, the Supreme Council of the Eastern Old Rite Church in Poland² was officially restored in 1983 and elected in 1984, and now is continuing its activities in Suwałki.

In February 1989, at the constituent congress of Latvian Old Believers, the Central Council of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church of Latvia was elected (Podmazovs 2001, pp. 155–156).

On 22 November 1990, at a general meeting held by the Supreme Council of Old Believers and the Ecclesiastical Commission in Vilnius, the statutes of the Pomorian Old-Rite (Old-Orthodox) Church of Lithuania were updated (their statutes had no legal force under the Soviet regime). According to the new statutes, the Supreme Council of Old Believers became the supreme body of the Church between convocations. When the Law on Religious Communities and Associations was adopted in 1995, the Government of Lithuania officially recognised the Supreme Council, and in early 2000s the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church of Lithuania was legally registered (Potashenko 2004).

In 1995, the Estonian Union of Old Believers' Congregations disbanded as far back as in 1940 was restored. (Ponomareva, Shor 2006, p. 49). In 2004 the congregations were re-registered.

In all these countries, churches are separated from the state and no confession is given priority by the law.

In the Baltics countries, notwithstanding that churches are separated from the state, governments render financial support in various forms to the church of Old Belief. In all four countries school is separated from the church and the public educational system has secular character. However, in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania children of Old Believers are taught lessons in religion at comprehensive schools and these lessons are financed from the treasury.

Improvement in relations between the state and the church in the Baltic countries and Poland has contributed to a rise in religious life of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church and to development of its structures. Religion is becoming part of the spiritual culture of society in these countries. However, churches have not become as influential after the disintegration of the USSR as they and other groups in these countries might have hoped.

For example, relations between the state and the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church in Lithuania and Latvia have gone through many trials in 1995–2006. The Department of Religious

¹ The constitutions were adopted: in Lithuania on 25 October 1992, in Estonia in June 1992, in Latvia in May 1991 (actually in July 1993, with subsequent changes and amendments), and in Poland in April 1997.

² The present name of the church is Old Orthodox Pomeranian Church of the Polish Republic. (*Translator's note*)

Affairs of the Ministry of Justice of Lithuania and the Board of Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Justice of Latvia, among other functions, are registering religious organisations. Judging by the recent experience, however, attempts of these bodies to mediate in frictions and conflicts between Old Belief congregations were sometimes inefficient and did not always bring conciliation (cf. Balodis 2001). Discords among Old Believers in some large congregations or in central institutions of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church, contradictory practice of public administration and absence of adequate legal regulation sometimes resulted in hearing of church conflicts in national courts which passed rather implausible judgements.

These problems have largely lost their heat for the time being, yet in essence they remain unsolved. Old Believers in Lithuania and Latvia are now consolidating. An important step in improvement of relations between the State and the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church was made on 8 June 2004 when the Government of Latvian signed agreements with seven traditional religious confessions, including this church. On 31 May 2007, the Saeima (Parliament) passed the Law on the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church of Latvia; it was immediately approved by the President and entered into force on 1 May 2008 (Zeile 2006; for the text of the law, see *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 98 (3674) of 20 June 2007; see also *Pomorskiy Vestnik* No. 20, June/July 2007, pp. 16–18). In recent years the Supreme Council of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church of Lithuania repeatedly proposed a draft agreement with the State but the Seimas (Parliament) and the government drag heels because of a lack of political will.

Spiritual centres and the religious life

The years 1990–2008 have been a rather successful period in religious life of the Baltic and Polish Old Believers. It can be compared with the so-called ‘golden years’ of 1905 to 1914 or the ‘trouble-free’ period of 1920s–1930s praised frequently by modern Old Believers. Yet, for the local Old Believers the period after 1990 has several important dissimilarities with the ‘happy years’ of the first half of the 20th century. The joy of regaining freedom and religious liberties was clouded by conflicts in large congregations and central institutions of the Old-Orthodox church in Lithuania and Latvia (since 1994–1995), and by an unprecedented economic recession of the 1990s. The initial euphoria has given place to concerns of practical kind: how to retain the tradition of old orthodoxy in the conditions of a new society captivated by democratisation, development of capitalism, materialism, individualism and ‘the spiritual crisis’?

In the independent Baltic countries and Poland, the Pomorian line has now become absolutely prevailing in Old Belief. In all the four countries there are currently (in 2006) 139 registered Pomorian congregations and three Fedoseyev congregations: in Rimši (Latvia), in Rajaküla and in Väike-Kolkja (Estonia); the total strength of Old Believers' population in these countries is between 101,5 and 131,5 thousand (not counting their descendants)³. The largest of these old-rite communities, considering numbers of their congregations and parishioners, is the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church in Latvia.

After 1989–1990, like in the 1920s, Pomorians started to consolidate and established their spiritual centres in all the four countries. The Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church was actually never strictly centralised. Today, Pomorians have the following spiritual centres in Poland and the Baltics states (listed in the order of the date of primary registration):

- 1) Supreme Council of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church of Lithuania (from 1943 to 2002, Supreme Council of Old Believers), residing in Vilnius; Chairman Grigory Boyarov (since February 2007), Chairman of the Ecclesiastical Commission Rev. Alexander Kudryashov (Aleksandrs Kudrjašovs) (since February 2007); an umbrella for 61 congregations and 42 to 47 thousand Pomorians (according to the 2001 Lithuanian population census, over 27 thousand; see Potashenko 2005);
- 2) Supreme Council of the Eastern Old Rite Church, Poland (before 1993, Supreme Council of Old Believers; functioned 1925 to 1939 and since 1983), residing in Suwałki; has no clerical hierarchy; an umbrella for four congregations and up to two thousand Pomorians (Potashenko 2005a);
- 3) Central Council of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church of Latvia (since 1989), residing in Daugavpils; Chairman Rev. Aleksij (Aliksijs) Žilko (since July 2006), Chairman of the Ecclesiastical Commission Rev. Nikanor Zubkov; represents 70 to 80 thousand Pomorians in Latvia;
- 4) Estonian Union of Old Believers' Congregations (since 1995; in 1929–1941, Central Council of Old Believers); Chairman Pavel Varunin (since 1998); an umbrella for 10 congregations, including one of the Fedoseyev line in Väike-Kolkja, and 2,5 thousand Old Believers. (According to various sources, the total number of Old Believers and their descendants in Estonia is up to 5 thousand or even around 15 thousand; see: Congresses of Old Believers 2006.) The Fedoseyev congregation in Rajaküla village has not joined the Union (Ponomareva, Shor 2006, p. 49).

³ This number does not include a small group of Popovtsy ('priested' Old Believers who belong to the Russian

The religious rise of Old Belief became possible owing to the restoration of independence of the Baltic countries and Poland. In general, however, a revival in church life started already at the end of 1980s. Church centres and congregations became active in all areas, including spiritual and cultural life, education, economy and publishing. The Pomorians began to convene their convocations and congresses more regularly and frequently. In the first half of the 1990s the numbers of baptised and church service attenders considerably increased, particularly at main feasts, and by the end of the 1990s the numbers of hearers and the church rites stabilised. Dozens of Pomorian congregations opened Sunday schools and chant groups. In May 1993, the Old Believers' amateur choir *Grezn* that is frequently touring in Latvia, Estonia and Poland under direction of M. Selušinskaja, had its first rehearsal in Riga. In 1997, the Old Believers' youth choir *Voskreseniye* (The Revival), the winner of many international song festivals, was established by the Daugavpils congregation. In 1990s, congregations revived the old tradition of arranging mass festivals at saints days (cf. Ponomareva, Shor 2006, p. 25).

When Pomorian old-rite churches in the Baltic states obtained in 1989–1992 the status of a juridical persons, this allowed their congregations to return their confiscated immovable property or to acquire new property. Economic life of Old Belief communities began to revive. Reconstruction of old temples and building of new ones was started. In 1990, the 164 feet high belfry was restored in Rajaküla, Estonia. At least fifteen new churches and church premises were consecrated from 1990 to 2006 in Lithuania and Latvia: in Utene (1991), Zarasai (1992), Šiauliai (1993), Voitiški (1996), Preili (1996), Riga (2001, the Bogoyavlenskaya church), Ventspils (May 2007), etc. Some new Pomorian congregations were founded in Latvia and Lithuania, and those that had been recently closed were restored.

Training of Pomorian pastors and acolytes after 1990 is mostly individual, as before. Among the forty or fifty Pomorian pastors in the Baltic countries and Poland, only few obtained systematic clerical education at the Moscow Theological Academy of the Russian Orthodox Church (before 1990) or at the Riga Old Belief Ecclesiastical School (1989–1994; two-year course, 32 students enrolled, only 10 graduated). Establishing such an institution was viewed by the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church as one of its major objectives; therefore in October 2006 the Grebenschchikov Old-Rite Congregation of Riga reopened its school (the Grebenschchikov School of Theology; Chairman of the Board of Trustees Nikolajs Ivanovs).

The Pomorians' church life of in Latvia and Lithuania was seriously harmed by internal disagreements that blazed up in mid-1990s. Rather small Old-Belief communities in Estonia and Poland, however, were spared from the adverse processes⁴.

After 2001, the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church of Latvia managed to restore its organisational unity to some extent. Conflicts among the Latvian Old Believers were mostly reconciled⁵. At the convocation in Daugavpils on 24–25 July 2006, a new Central Council headed by Rev. A. Žilko was elected and the new church statutes were approved. The church now unites 41 of the 67 congregations registered at the State Board of Religion of Latvia. Five more, including the Grebenschikov congregation, the Rēzekne congregation, etc., joined the Central Council as associated members. (See: Novostroyenski convocation 2006).

Currently, Pomorians of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are holding close canonical contacts between their churches in these states as well as with Pomorian churches in other countries, above all in Russia and Belarus⁶.

The modern religiosity and public activity of Pomorians

The Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church does not have the three-rank hierarchy, consisting of autonomous congregations. Relations between these communities reveal the history and the peculiarities of the present situation of the Pomorian Old-Orthodoxy in the Baltic countries and Poland. It is important that, while all Pomorian congregations recognise the church's canonical unity in these countries, some congregations in Latvia and Lithuania refuse to be administratively subordinated to a single spiritual centre in their country. In each country there are own reasons

⁴ Division among the Pomorians in Latvia first took place in the Grebenschikov Old-Rite Congregation of Riga (in 1993–1995) when A. Karataev, chairman of the congregation council and religious teacher, began administrating single-handedly and engaged in business activities, which resulted in 'gross material and moral damage' to the congregation (Podmazovs 2001, p. 207). Later (in 1995–2001), a conflict arose in the Central Council of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church when since 1995 there were two rival central councils simultaneously functioning in Latvia. The Latvian Old Believers became divided into two camps whose central councils were limited and not always constructive in their actions. In 2001 I. Mirolyubov resigned from his post of chairman of the central council (elected in 1997) and informed of the withdrawal of the Grebenschikov congregation from that council. At the convocation of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church in Daugavpils in September 2001, a new Central Council chaired by A. Mihailov was elected. A conflict of doctrinal character occurred in the Grebenschikov congregation in 2002 when senior teacher I. Mirolyubov started taking steps to 'reestablish the priesthood'. He was released from his position (see: Chronicle of events 2003).

⁵ In 2006, however, the situation was complicated in the Jekabpils congregation. The acting teacher V. Volkov was ordained as parson of the Brailov metropolitanate of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church (of the Belya Kryniča hierarchy). He returned to his former congregation and, together with a group of supporters, laid claims to the Pomorian prayer house in Jekabpils (see: Statement of the Central Council 2006).

for this. In Latvia, the absence of a national clerical centre in 1935–1989 had its effect, as well as excessive adherence to autonomy and a decline in influence of the Central Council of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church in 1995–2001 when there were two competing spiritual centres. In Lithuania, those were rather personal interests and ambitions of leaders of some congregations, as well as a decline in influence of the Supreme Council of Old Believers and fear of the supposed centralisation of the church. All this does not relate to Poland and Estonia whose Pomorians congregations are united into church associations. The number of these congregations is small: four in Poland and nine in Estonia.

Urbanisation in 1950s–1980s has considerably changed the social shape and strength of many congregations. Approximately 60 to 80 per cent of Old Believers, first of all in Latvia and Lithuania, now reside in towns. The situation is different in Estonia where seven out of nine Pomorian congregations (the exceptions are rather small communities in Tartu and Tallinn) and both Fedoseyev congregations are in small villages.

The urban congregations in Latvia, Lithuania and partly in Poland (its largest urban congregation is located in Suwałki) are historical centres of the Baltic Old Belief, and most of Old Believers in these countries are concentrated there. Urban congregations, particularly in large cities, are and most probably will remain the nucleus of the modern Old Belief. The rural way of life and the traditional forms of religious practices give way to a new emerging urban Old Belief religiosity.

The present rise of Old Belief in the Baltic countries and Poland is characterised by the lively and diverse religious and public activity of Pomorians. This may be considered as manifestation of modern religiosity by Old Believers, first of all by the group that might be called ‘tradition passing believers’. They constitute the most socially active and clearly most educated part of believers aged 25 to 55, representatives of humanitarian and technical intellectuals setting the keynote among them. Being highly educated is an important distinction of modern Old Belief activists from those of the early 20th century and the 1920–1930s.

In the four countries, Old Believers have at least nine cultural and educational organisations and NGOs⁷. There are also church youth groups and song groups at congregations and museums. Of the most active organisations of Old Believers it is worth to mention the Old Belief Society of Latvia (since 1994) and the Zavoloko Old Belief Society in Riga, the Centre of

⁶ The Grebenschchikov Old-Rite Congregation of Riga, the Vilnius Congregation, the 1st Daugavpils Congregation (Novostroyenskaya), and the Rēzekne Congregation are the largest and most influential Pomorian communities. The Grebenschchikov Congregation is the largest Pomorian community in the world.

⁷ In December 2007, the Daugava Cultural Society was registered at the Daugavpils municipal branch of the Register of Companies. It is already the sixth nongovernmental organisation of Old Believers in Latvia.

Russian Culture (in the house of M. Kallistratov) in Daugavpils (since 1994; frequently carries out religious events as well), the South Latvian Old Belief Foundation for Culture and Education ‘Belovodye’ in Jekabpils (since 2000), the Estonian Old Believers’ Society for Culture and Development, and the Old Belief Society in Poland (since 2003).

In Latvia and Estonia, Old Belief household museums have been opened. In Latvia they can be found in Daugavpils and its vicinities; another one should be opened in 2008 in Rēzekne. In Estonia, such museums are in Kolkja⁸, Varnja⁹ and Mustvee¹⁰.

Since mid-1990s, Pomorians organise and actively participate in academic and research conferences on Old Belief in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In Latvia, conferences with interesting programmes are held almost every year in Riga, Rēzekne, Daugavpils, Preili and elsewhere. In the latest years, the Estonian Old Believers’ Society for Culture and Development chaired by Pavel Varunin has begun particularly actively working in this direction.

In all the four countries, literature of religious, reference, educational and academic character on various issues of Old Belief is published.

Mass media

For a long time (1954–1995), the annual official printed publication of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church was its *Old Belief Church Calendar* issued in Riga. From 1996 to 2001, the 1st Daugavpils Congregation published its own Calendar under the same title. At last, in 2002 the United Council of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church started publishing in Moscow *The Calendar of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church* jointly edited by both staffs in Moscow and Daugavpils. The edition is distributed in all countries where Pomorians live. As well, the annual publication of a calendar in Riga was resumed in 2008 under the title *The Old-Orthodox Calendar*. This time, however, it is not published by the Grebenshchikov Old-Rite Congregation but by a united staff headed by editor Pyotr Alekseyev and six co-editors including the Supreme Council of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church of Lithuania, the Estonian Union of Old Believers’ Congregations, the Riga Bogoyavlenskaya Pomorian Old Belief Congregation and other organisations.

⁸ The Russian Museum of Old Believers in Kolkja was founded in 1999 at the initiative of Nina Baranina, mayor of the Peipsi district.

⁹ The Varnja Museum of History was founded in 2002 at the decision of the Varnja Family Society. Since 2005 the same house hosts the Museum of Fishery.

¹⁰ The Mustvee Museum of Old Believers is functioning at the Mustvee Russian Grammar School.

Today the Latvian Pomorians have quite a few publications of their own. Since 1999 the Riga-based Old Belief Society of Latvia has published each year three to four issues of *Pomorskiy Vestnik* (The Pomorian Messenger), a newspaper of religious, cultural and educational orientation (chief editor Illarion Ivanov). During the last two years, however, it has been printed irregularly. The last 21st issue was dated the spring of 2008.

The foundation ‘Belovodye’ (chairman Valeri Plotnikov) has started a large cultural and informational web site (<http://www.belovodije.com>).

The 1st Daugavpils Congregation (Novostroyenskaya), besides participating in *The Calendar of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church*, has its Internet home page (<http://www.staroverec.lv>). From 2000 to around 2006 it also published *The Shield Of Faith*, a nonperiodical for young acolytes (chief editor A. Žilko).

The Riga-based Zavoloko Old Belief Society publishes a nonperiodical newspaper in Russian for Old Believers *The Sword of the Spirit* (since September 2000; editor Pyotr Alekseyev); for example, its 23rd issue was printed in spring 2007. This popular newspaper covers issues of Old Belief ideology, as well as the history and the current religious and social life of Old Believers in the Baltics and in Russia. The society has also its web site (<http://www.starover-pomorec.lv>).

At present, Old Believers in Lithuania, Poland and Estonia have no periodicals. They read, and publish their materials in, Pomorian publications printed in Russia and Latvia. An exception was the illustrated magazine *Kitezh-Grad* published in Vilnius in 1990 (Nos. 1 to 3) by the Supreme Council of Lithuanian Old Believers. The Estonian Old Believers have a web site (<http://www.starover.ee>) that covers their history and culture and publishes materials of the Estonian Union of Old Believers’ Congregations. They are currently developing a new site titled *The Museum of Old Belief* (<http://starover.eu>).

Names of organisations and publications

- 1st Daugavpils Congregation (Novostroyenskaya) – 1-я Даугавпилсская (Новостроенская) община
- Central Council of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church – Центральный Совет Древлеправославной поморской церкви
- Daugava Cultural Society – Даунское культурное общество
- Ecclesiastical Commission – Духовная комиссия (ДК)
- Estonian Old Believers’ Society for Culture and Development – Общество культуры и развития староверов Эстонии
- Estonian Union of Old Believers’ Congregations – Союз старообрядческих общин Эстонии
- Fedoseyev congregation – Федосеевская община
- Grebenshchikov Old-Rite Congregation of Riga – Рижская Гребенщиковская старообрядческая община (РГСО)
- Grebenshchikov School of Theology – Гребенщиковское духовное училище
- Moscow Theological Academy of the Russian Orthodox Church – Московская духовная семинария РПЦ

Old Belief Society in Poland – Старообрядческое общество в Польше
 Old Belief Society of Latvia – Старообрядческое общество Латвии
 Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church – Древлеправославная поморская церковь (ДПЦ)
 Pomorian Old-Rite Church – Старообрядческая Поморская Церковь (СПЦ)
 Riga Old Belief Ecclesiastical School – Рижское духовное старообрядческое училище
 South Latvian Old Belief Foundation for Culture and Education ‘Belovodye’ – Южнолатвийский старообрядческий культурно-просветительский фонд “Беловодье”
 Supreme Council of Old Believers – Высший старообрядческий совет (BCC)
The Calendar of the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church – “Календарь Древлеправославной поморской церкви” (“Календарь ДПЦ”)
The Old Belief Church Calendar – “Старообрядческий церковный календарь”
The Old-Orthodox Calendar – “Древлеправославный календарь”
The Sword of the Spirit – “Меч духовный”
 Zavoloko Old Belief Society – Старообрядческое общество имени И. Заволоко

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