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Religio. 2023, vol. 31, iss. 2, pp. [353]-355

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2023-2-9>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79293>

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Access Date: 02. 12. 2024

Version: 20240122

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The international conference “New and Minority Religions, Crises, and Resilience: Overcoming Inner and External Obstacles”, held in Vilnius in June 2023

MILDA ALIŠAUSKIENĖ

From June 20 to 23, 2023, an international conference entitled “New and Minority Religions, Crises, and Resilience: Overcoming Inner and External Obstacles” took place in Vilnius, Lithuania. The conference was organized by the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), the International Society for the Study of New Religions (ISSNR), the Religions Research and Information Centre (Lithuania), the Lithuanian Society for the Study of Religions, and Vilnius University’s Institute of International Relations and Political Science. Widely known as the CESNUR international conference, this is an annual interdisciplinary academic event dedicated to researching new and minority religions worldwide. The conference returned to Vilnius 20 years after the first conference took place there in 2003.

In their call for papers, the conference organizers stated that new religions have always been in the vanguard of societal innovation in various areas, from religious teachings and everyday activities to legal contributions with new cases relating to religious freedom. They noted that the COVID-19 virus shut down the planet for over two years, forcing new religions to adapt to the new reality and transfer their activities online. They also reminded us that religion may be both a source of comfort and a source of dispute in times of hardship and that religious groups may also become scapegoats in the process of forging societal cohesion in the aftermath of an emergency.

The location of this annual CESNUR conference, which was close to Ukraine, also became a springboard for discussion of the consequences of



Religio: Revue pro religionistiku 31/2, 2023, 353-355.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2023-2-9>

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the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and occupation of its territory for new and minority religions. As freedom of religion in the Russian Federation is restricted, its present invasion of Ukraine and the illegal annexation of four partially occupied regions potentially threatens the religious groups that exist there. The conference organizers noted that after-crisis periods are typically used for adaptation, reflection on previous experiences, and fresh beginnings, and invited speakers to reflect on how the crisis period may yield insights into the future of new and minority religions in a post-COVID-19 and post-war world.

The CESNUR conference lasted for three days and consisted of fifteen sessions, including five plenary and ten parallel sessions. Fifty-four speakers from various countries presented their research during the conference, these representing various scholarly approaches to new and minority religions – historical, sociological, anthropological, and the study of religions.

The first plenary session entitled 'New and Minority Religions, Political Religions, Crisis, and Resilience in Different Contexts' consisted of three papers, one discussing the reactions of new and minority religions to challenges (Eileen Barker), another analyzing the case of the Worldwide Church of God as a case study of a global religion reacting to challenges (J. Gordon Melton), and one that was a thought-provoking attempt to analyze the China Communist Party as a new religion (Edward Irons). The second plenary session was dedicated to discussions about recent developments in the field of spirituality in Africa, and included four presentations exploring the Revelation Spiritual Home group, its teachings and practices, as well as its links to the spirituality milieu.

The third plenary session was dedicated to a discussion of anti-Jehovah's Witnesses campaigns around the globe, focusing on the cases of Nordic countries (Peter Åkerbäck), Lithuania (Milda Ališauskienė), Ukraine and Russia (Rosita Šorytė), and Japan (Massimo Introvigne). The discussed cases illustrated how Jehovah's Witnesses find themselves amidst a moral panic and as a scapegoat in various countries in the context of social unrest, whether arising from the assassination of Shinzo Abe in Japan, for example, or Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The fourth plenary session discussed new and minority religions in the Baltic region. Three papers addressed cases illustrating the inner diversity of the spirituality milieu in Lithuania, and one presentation approached the case of Old Believers in Latvia.

The fifth plenary session addressed the case of the Ancient Baltic religious association Romuva and discussed its pathway towards securing the group's right to freedom of religion in light of the implementation of the European Court of Human Rights decision of June 8, 2021. The plenary session included one presentation on Romuva by Eva Arnaszus and a dis-



cussion with the association's leader, priestess Inija Trinkūnienė; parliament member Arūnas Valinskas; and scholars who have researched the group – namely, Eglė Aleknaitė, Milda Ališauskienė, Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson, and Michael Strmiska. Romuva's case, as the discussion concluded, continues to be a challenge for the political and religious elites in a young democracy like Lithuania, which still learns to accept and live with the country's widening religious diversity.

The conference ended with a field trip, during which two places relevant to the conference subject were visited. The conference participants visited the Pyramid of Merkinė, located in the southern part of Lithuania, which since 2002 has been one of the most popular places of spiritual pilgrimages in the country, and a minority religion – the Karaim community, which exists in Lithuania for more than six centuries.