

Churches resist restraints on evangelism in Russia

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Several U.S.-based religious denominations remain defiant in the face of new laws that would ban them from proselytizing in Russia.

The so-called “Yarovaya laws” forbid preaching, proselytizing or distributing religious materials outside of specially designated places. The laws also give the Russian government wide scope to monitor and record electronic messages and phone calls.

The Russian Duma, or parliament, passed the legislation, billed as anti-terrorism measures, June 24. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed them into law July 7.

Religious freedom panel decries the measures

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan government panel that makes policy recommendations, condemned the new laws.

“These deeply flawed anti-terrorism measures will buttress the Russian government’s war against human rights and religious freedom,” said Thomas J. Reese, a Jesuit priest and chair of the commission.

“They will make it easier for Russian authorities to repress religious communities, stifle peaceful dissent, and detain and imprison people.”

House churches banned

The new laws require a government permit to engage in proselytizing

activities and ban those activities outside any registered religious organization, such as a church. Russia has numerous house churches, which are illegal under the new law.

Violations will result in fines of \$780 for an individual and upward of \$15,000 for an organization, and they can lead to deportation.

Religious organizations directly affected by the new laws are those with strong evangelization programs in Russia—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists and other Protestant organizations with Baptist, Pentecostal and independent Christian roots.

Russian Orthodoxy a ‘bulwark of Russian nationalism’

Only about 1 percent of the Russian population is Protestant; the majority religion is Russian Orthodox Christian.

“The Russian Orthodox church is part of a bulwark of Russian nationalism stirred up by Vladimir Putin,” David Aikman, author of *One Nation Without God*, told *Christianity Today*. “Everything that undermines that action is a real threat, whether that’s evangelical Protestant missionaries or anything else.”

An LDS spokesman said the 15.6 million-member church has no plans to recall about 30 missionaries currently assigned in seven Russian locations—a low number of Mormon missions for a country Russia’s size.

Members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses have 2,500 congregations in Russia. The Russian government has shut down several Witness organizations since the beginning of the year, most recently shuttering the church’s administrative center in St. Petersburg.

The new law effectively bans the Witnesses’ practice of going door-to-door

to preach and hand out tracts.

Witness officials have called the Russian government's focus on its activities "a deliberate misapplication of Russia's law on extremist activity."

Eric Baxter, senior counsel for the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, described the law as "very restrictive on its face." Baxter served on a mission for the LDS church in St. Petersburg from 1992 to 1994.

"Despite decades of enforced atheism under the USSR, in my experience the Russian people are people of deep faith," he said. "Religion inspired their art, their literature and their music, and I think that the natural human instinct to share their faith will prevail and Russians will find the freedom to live their faith."