

Missionaries Face Fines for Sharing Their Faith

03 December 2009

By Alexander Bratersky

Ordinary believers face fines for sharing their faith with strangers in the metro or on the street under amendments drafted by the Justice Ministry that are stirring worries among Protestant groups about a clampdown on religious freedom.

Under the proposed changes to the Law on Religious Activity, only leaders of registered religious groups and their officially authorized missionaries would be allowed to pass out religious literature, preach and talk about their faith in public, according to a draft of the amendments published in Kommersant on Wednesday.

Anyone else who shares their faith would face a fine of 2,000 rubles to 5,000 rubles (\$65 to \$170) for individuals and 5,000 rubles to 7,000 rubles (\$170 to \$230) for legal entities.

Currently, no permits are required for missionary activities.

The amendments are expected to benefit the dominant Russian Orthodox Church, which rarely engages in missionary work, to the detriment of other Christian groups, which it regularly accuses of poaching believers.

Some Protestant groups said Wednesday that the amendments were a violation of Jesus' call in Matthew 28:19 to "go and make disciples of all nations."

"Missionary activity is part of the Christian religion, and these proposals target not only our church but the Christian religion itself," said Elder Mikhail Fadin of the Moscow Central Church of Evangelical Christians-Baptists.

He said it would be "unrealistic to issue permits to preach" and the amendments contradicted the Constitution, which guarantees religious freedom.

Andrei Sobentsov, secretary of the governmental commission in charge of religious organizations, confirmed that the amendments violated the Constitution and called them "unacceptable," Kommersant reported Wednesday.

Justice Ministry officials were not available for comment after office hours late Wednesday.

No date has been set for the bill to be submitted to the State Duma, but it has a high chance of being passed because it faced no opposition from within the political establishment, said Alexander Soldatov, head of the Credo.ru religious news wire.

In fact, the Russian Orthodox Church, which enjoys a cozy relationship with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev, is one of the forces behind the bill, Soldatov told The Moscow Times.

"The Russian Orthodox Church is among the initiators of this bill because it sees a danger for itself from other faiths," Soldatov said.

The church, which counts about 70 percent of the Russian population as members, makes no effort to win new members through missionary activities, he said. Instead, the church considers most Russians as Orthodox believers “by default,” seeing those not active in performing religious duties as people who “haven’t realized their faith,” he said.

Russian Orthodox officials offered no comment about any church role in the bill, but they welcomed it as a way to prevent people from masquerading as Orthodox priests.

“A person might be dressed as an Orthodox priest but be a con artist,” said Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the department for church and society affairs in the Moscow Patriarchate.

“Every missionary activity should be within the framework of law,” he said in a telephone interview. “People should have the right to know who a priest represents.”

The bill defines missionary work for the first time as an “activity among nonbelievers and nonmembers of a religious organization aimed at bringing them into the religious organization.”

It also expressly bans preaching near religious centers belonging to other faiths without the written approval of the religious group that controls the center.

The number of religious groups working in Russia exploded after the 1991 Soviet collapse, and the government granted a privileged status to four faiths under a 1997 law — Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. Religious experts estimate that about 20,000 Protestant groups are currently active in Russia.

Members of some religious groups fear that the new bill could be used to stifle activities other than traditional missionary work.

“If the authorities don’t like something about us at a certain moment in time, they might call it a missionary activity. And if people come to us in order to help others, will it be called a missionary activity if we pray together with them?” said Vadim Khurin, deputy head of the St. Petersburg branch of the Salvation Army, an evangelical movement known for its charitable work.

Khurin noted that his organization has a good relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church. “They often call us and ask us to pick up things for the needy,” he said.

While the bill favors the Orthodox Church, it could hurt it as well, said Remir Lopatkin, an expert on state-church relations at the Russian Academy of State Service.

“There are missionaries among the Orthodox churches, even radical ones,” he said, citing as an example Priest Daniil Sysoyev, who was shot dead last week in his church in southern Moscow.

Sysoyev often publicly clashed with Muslims and neo-pagans, calling on them to turn to the Orthodox Church.