Draft Law on Missionary Work Opens the Way to Soviet-Style Repression, Religious Groups Say - Blog

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A draft law prepared by the Russian justice ministry placing new restrictions on missionary activity not only threatens Protestant and Islamic groups that Moscow opposes but opens the way to Soviet-style restrictions on religious activity and thus must be opposed, religious and human rights activists say.

The Moscow newspaper Kommersant reported today that it has in its possession the text of a set of draft changes in the law “On freedom of conscience and religious organizations” and that the changes, which primarily involve missionary activity, have already sparked “protests from religious organizations”.

The paper points out that the latest proposed changes have a long history. Roman Lunkin, the director of the Moscow Institute of Religion and Law, said that “the idea of [such] a bill was born in 2000 after the adoption of the conception of national security of the Russian Federation.”

That concept paper, Lunkin noted, highlighted what it said was “the need to regulate missionary activity,” especially on the part of “foreign missionaries” (generally Protestant Christians) and “Islamic extremist Wahhabis.” And in 2006, the government proposed a draft, but it was sent back to the government by the Duma for reworking.

This fall, however, the justice ministry has prepared a new draft, which among other things defines “missionary activity in Russia” for the first time. Missionary work, the draft says, includes “activity among persons who are not members, participants or followers of a given religious group with the goal of including them in a religious organization.”

Such activities, the draft continues, include both those conducted “by individuals authorized by these organizations directly and publically” or publically with the help of the mass media or other lawful means,” a definition sufficiently broad to include almost any contacts between members of one religious group with those outside it if the former talk about their faith.

The justice ministry proposal specifies, Kommersant says, that “the right to profess [religious ideas] is given only to leaders of religious organizations or to persons having special trust from the leadership of their church. All others are prohibited from propagandizing religious ideas, even though today for this no permissions are required.”

In addition, the draft prohibits any propaganda of a faith “by individuals who have been convicted of spreading inter-ethnic and inter-ethnic hostility or other crimes of an extremist character” and missionary activities near religious places “which belong to another religious group without the written agreement” of the latter.

Moreover, the draft bans proselytism “in government buildings, hospitals, children’s homes, and orphanages without the approval of the administration.” And perhaps most disturbingly – because of the way it could be applied by the powers that be – the draft prohibits conducting missionary activity among young people without the prior approval of their parents.

In regard to young people, the draft specifies that missionaries “must not invite children
and youths into a religious institution, conduct theological conversations [with them] or give them printed or audio and video materials” on religious subjects, without prior approval from their parents.

Anyone who violates these provisions, the draft law suggests, will be punished with a fine of 2000 to 5000 rubles (60 to 160 US dollars) in the case of individuals and from 5,000 to 7,000 rubles (160 to 230 US dollars) for legal persons such as registered churches for each violation, amounts that could cripple many groups.

Not surprisingly, many religious groups are appalled. The Evangelical Christian-Baptist Church in Moscow has sent a letter to President Dmitry Medvedev saying that the proposed provisions would limit the rights of Christians to follow the injunctions of Christ and lead to repressions. Indeed, Vitaly Vlasenko, the head of the Evangelical Baptist Church’s department for external relations, said, “we have concerns that all this is being done in order to liquidate non-traditional groups in Russia”, that is, all except Russian Orthodox Churches subordinate to the Patriarchate, registered Muslim groups, Jewish groups, and “the traditional” Buddhists.

Nafigulla Ashirov, the co-president of the Council of Muftis of Russia (SMR), agrees. The draft, he told Kommersant, is “a ban on words.” As a result, if it is adopted, “ordinary citizens, talking about religion on a train, for example, could suffer” because officials could interpret such conversations as missionary activity.

As Kommersant noted, the Russian Orthodox Church was more “restrained” in its reaction, perhaps because its leaders assume that the intention of the law is to punish others. But even officials of the Patriarchate indicated that the draft needed to be modified, especially regarding efforts to reach out to young people.

Human and religious rights activists were most outspoken. Lunkin, for example, said that “all the limitations on missionary activity proposed by the Russian justice ministry are a violation of the right to the distribution of an individual’s convictions,” something that as he said “violates the Constitution of the Russian Federation.”

The ministry may have decided to float this idea now because of public outrage about the murder of Father Daniil Sysoyev, a death that many ascribe to his missionary activity among Muslims. But as a result of the opposition already expressed, the Russian government appears to be backing away from pushing this draft.

The justice ministry itself, for example, told Kommersant it would have a written response to all these concerns this week. And Andrey Sebentsov, who oversees religious affairs for the government, even told the paper that the draft would not survive if any of its provisions contradicted the Constitution.