

Authorities Bar Leading Russian Evangelist From Entering Homeland

Citing no legal reason, Russia arrested and deported Alexei Ledyaev, who directs a network of 150 churches

One of the former Soviet Union's leading charismatic preachers, Alexei Ledyaev, has been barred from entering Russia in what religious freedom lawyers here see as part of a pattern to stifle the growth of Protestantism in the predominantly Orthodox Christian country.

In a bizarre March 14 incident at Moscow's Sheremetyevoy international airport, border guards arrested Ledyaev as he arrived on a flight from Riga, Latvia, the former Soviet republic and the base of Ledyaev's New Generation movement of 150 charismatic churches scattered across six countries.

"They told me I could not cross the border. I asked for a reason. They said, 'We are deporting you,'" Ledyaev told Charisma by telephone from Riga, the Latvian capital. "I sat in a jail cell for eight hours. No water. No food. It was like in a prison camp. There was a stool attached to the floor. A bed secured to the floor and a little window."

Eventually, the border guards put the 46-year-old Ledyaev on an evening flight to Vilnius, Lithuania, which borders Latvia. The guards gave Ledyaev's passport to a flight attendant, who returned it to him after the plane touched down in Lithuania.

"I opened my passport in Vilnius and was surprised to see no changes at all," said Ledyaev, explaining that he had expected

the border guards to seize his Russian visa or otherwise change his passport to prevent future entry into Russia.

As a result of being barred entry to Russia, Ledyaeв missed a conference with 100 pastors from New Generation churches throughout the former Soviet Union. He plans to make another attempt in early summer to enter Russia, for which he still holds a valid multi-entry visa.

A spokesman for the Russian Border Guard Service told the respected Moscow daily, Izvestia, that the airport border guards were just following orders in barring Ledyaeв entry. Ledyaeв's Moscow lawyer, Anatoly Pchelintsev, was similarly given no explanation.

Pchelintsev said he plans to write letters of complaint to President Putin and to Russia's human rights ombudsman, as well as possibly sue the individual border guards who arrested the pastor.

"He broke no law," said Pchelintsev, co-director of Moscow's Slavic Center for Law and Justice. "You have to understand that under international law they have the right to not let him in. If they explained his rights and said, 'We are not letting you in by such and such a reason,' then that would have been no problem. But him and put him in a cell without any explanation."

Ledyaeв said he knew of at least three other high-profile Protestant leaders similarly denied entry into Russia in the last year. In at least two separate cases—involving the Salvation Army and a Jesuit priest—longtime foreign religious workers have been denied visa renewals by Russian authorities,

again without explanation.

Asked if the powerful 80 million-member Russian Orthodox Church played a role in Ledyaev's arrest, spokesman Viktor Malukhin said: "Of course not. That sounds like someone's fantasy."

—Frank Brown in Moscow