

Russian Pentecostals have cautious view of Vladimir Putin

THE NEW LEADER HAS SHOWN FAVOR TO CHURCHES, BUT AN AIR OF MYSTERY SHROUDS THE EX-KGB OFFICER

Religious leaders here say it is too early to tell what kind of president Vladimir Putin will be for Russia's several hundred thousand Pentecostal and charismatic believers. But his KGB background as well as his membership in the Russian Orthodox Church have left many leaders pensive.

Putin was elected March 26 with a decisive 53 percent vote out of a field of 11 candidates. His past career as a colonel in the KGB, the Soviet-era secret police, could turn out to be a mixed blessing, said Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky, head of one of Russia's two largest Pentecostal associations.

"It is a difficult question. For us, Putin is a puzzle. His past very much worries us," said Ryakhovsky, whose association includes 1,200 congregations spread across the world's largest country.

"But Putin's past is also a plus in that he knows this great country much more thoroughly than most people," said the bishop, referring to the fact that KGB officers typically were much better informed and more pragmatic than the average communist functionary.

Ryakhovsky estimated that many of the people in his flock voted for Putin, while very few would have cast their ballots

for communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, who came in a distant second. In 70 years of communist rule, religious expression of all kinds was rigidly controlled, and thousands of Christians died or were imprisoned for their faith.

A key issue for charismatic communities throughout Russia is the ongoing registration of religious organizations as required under a controversial 1997 law on religion. Under Russian law, registration is necessary for religious groups to function as legal entities with the right to enter into contracts, open bank accounts and hire employees.

The deadline for registration had expired on Dec. 31, 1999, with

only 60 percent of the country's religious organizations having passed through the cumbersome process. On election day in March, Putin signed a law extending the deadline until the end of 2000.

Ryakhovsky estimated that 400 of his congregations didn't make the first deadline. Bishop Vladimir Murza, head of Russia's oldest Pentecostal union, said about half his congregations still require registration.

Especially in the provinces, Pentecostal congregations

have run into trouble winning registration from local bureaucrats who take issue with aspects of Pentecostal worship, such as speaking in tongues. Clerics from the politically powerful 1,000-year-old Russian Orthodox Church also sometimes pressure local governments to crack down on minority faiths, said Tatyana Tomayeva of the Moscow-based Slavic Center for Law and Justice.

Prominent charismatic leader Igor Nikitin, head of the 200-member Association of Christian Churches in Russia, estimated that a sizeable number of the groups he represents would opt not to get entangled with the government at all.

“It can get quite expensive,” said Nikitin, referring to Russian bureaucrats’ legendary appetite for paper. “You must report to the tax inspectorate once a month, for example. And even if you don’t owe any tax, you still need to hire an accountant just to fill in all the forms properly. For some of the smaller groups, this is just too much expense.”

God’s Family Church in Kostroma has endured persecution from local media and the government, pastor Andrey Danilov said. A local TV station secretly videotaped a service at the church, then paraded the report of it on their broadcast as an example of “sect and heresy.”

Danilov pleaded with the station managers to recant their report and letters to the public prosecutor, justice department and federal security service.

“Let all enemies of the church be scattered,” Danilov proclaimed. “Let the fear of God come down on every false witness. And let this situation turn into good and cause revival.”

Officials at the Keston Institute in Moscow, however, warn not to view Putin’s extension of the registration deadline for churches as a sign that he is supporting a new policy of tolerance toward religious minorities. Only time will tell which direction Putin will go when it comes to religion, they said.