

Russia Proposes Law to Ban Evangelism in the Nation

“Preaching to the choir” is an idiom which means you are trying to make believers out of people who already believe, or convince people who are already convinced. For the most part, it’s another phrasing for ineffective messaging.

When the Federation Council, the upper house of Russia’s parliament, approved a package of anti-terror bills this week, that is what could become the reality for gospel work in Russia.

Seems innocuous until you realize how much snuck through without public comment, and how much it could change gospel work in Russia.

Slavic Gospel Association’s Joel Griffith says, “From what we’re able to understand from all the sources, if the bill is signed and it stands as is without change, it looks like missionary activity would be off-limits to anybody but representatives of the registered organizations or groups, or individuals who have entered into formal agreements with such bodies.”

Plus, the new anti-terror legislation cracks down on anything that is interpreted as a violation of public security and order—extremist actions, coercion into ruining families, and encroachments on the freedom of the person and the rights and freedoms of citizens.

One way that could be read, explains Griffith, is “they’re saying every missionary has to carry documents with specific information proving their connection to a registered religious group, and it looks like they’re wanting to try to ban any missionary activity in residential areas except for certain things like prayer services or ceremonies.”

A ban is also imposed on missionary activities aimed at inducing suicide, at creating obstructions to getting compulsory education, and at persuasion of individuals to refuse to perform their legally binding civic duties. How it could be enforced: "Foreign missionaries would only be able to operate where their inviting organizations are registered."

The broad strokes being used to curb extremism often have a chilling effect on other groups, like SGA, too. Christian leaders haven't been taking it silently.

President Alexei Smirnov, of the Russian Baptist Union, wrote a formal letter to President Putin to express his disagreement and concern over the bill in its current form.

"President Smirnov, in his letter says, 'The draft law is anti-constitutional, as it violates the basic rights of its citizens and does not coincide with the current Constitution of the Russian Federation,'" says Griffith, noting Smirnov's other concern that "the bill was not discussed with the Duma Committee on Public and Religious Organizations. There was no public discussion of the draft law. In such a way, religious organizations lacked even the opportunity to express their opinion."

The package has landed on President Vladimir Putin's desk for his signature. SGA is praying that, "Mr. Putin will heed the concerns, not only of the churches, but also those in Parliament who are concerned about freedom of religion, that this law would not be signed, ultimately."

Yet, even if the bill gets signed into law, there's still hope.

The churches SGA has served over in Russia, in the whole Commonwealth of Independent States, the former Soviet Union, have operated under very difficult conditions before. "They've survived atheistic Communism and the persecution they endured there. So, they know what it's like to pay a price for their

faith. They're going to continue on with their ministry, regardless of what happens."

To that end, their purpose remains unchanged. The Great Commission, says Griffith, has not been rescinded. "Our desire, as their helpers at Slavic Gospel Association, we exist to serve the churches. Our prayer is that we'll continue to have an open door to serve them in what they need." {eo}

This article originally appeared on Mission Network News.