

Freedom of religion in Russia faces increased limits

by [Jonathan Luxmoore](#)

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November 9 (ENInews)--A veteran human rights campaigner has warned of growing restrictions on religious freedom in Russia, and urged Western governments and churches to do more to address the issue.

"Although the [officially atheist] Soviet Union collapsed 20 years ago ... religious believers still face serious problems," said the Rev. Michael Bourdeaux, president of the Oxford, U.K.-based Keston Institute, which studies religion in Russia and Eastern Europe. "What really worries me is that no one is holding Russia to account. The right and duty to monitor each country's human rights record, established in the 1970s, seem to have been forgotten," he said.

Russia's 1990 law on religious freedom was "probably the most liberal in world history," but it was replaced by "disgraceful legislation" in 1997, he told ENInews in an interview on 8 November. The 1997 law, the result of pressure from hardline politicians and the predominant Orthodox church, discriminates against religious associations judged "non-traditional."

Bourdeaux noted that "there were Lutheran churches in Russia in the early eighteenth century and Catholic communities in medieval [times], so to rule them non-traditional can't be justified by any legal logic."

Human rights groups have urged Russia to protect religious rights and comply with rulings by the European Court of Human Rights after a recent spate of arrests and house searches involving the Jehovah's Witnesses and other small religious groups.

Some of Russia's 3,500 registered Protestant associations, including Lutherans and Baptists, have also complained of police raids on allegedly unauthorized services, while Russia's 600,000-member Roman Catholic church protested when a Moscow charity house belonging to Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity was bulldozed in

September and a Catholic parish in Pskov barred from finishing its church because of "legal technicalities" in October.

In October, the director of the Brussels-based Human Rights Without Frontiers International, Willy Fautre, said another law, the 2002 law on fighting extremist activity was being "misused to target minority religious faiths." He added that pamphlets used by Jehovah's Witnesses and followers of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi had been placed on a "federal list of extremist materials" by the justice ministry, making their storing or distribution "liable to criminal prosecution."

Fautre, who will host a European Parliament hearing on religious freedom in Russia on 15 November, urged the country to revise the 1997 law and issue guidelines for the implementation of the criminal code on national, racial and religious incitement.

Bourdeaux said he believed pressure on religious minorities had been fuelled by restrictions on democracy, including the scrapping of direct elections for Russia's regional governors. He added that state officials routinely consulted their local Orthodox bishop when considering requests from Protestants and Roman Catholics to hire or purchase facilities for church worship, making minority faiths "dependent on Orthodox goodwill."

The U.S. State Department, in its Annual Report on Religious Freedom, published on 13 September, said the Russian government's "level of respect for religious freedom" had declined over the past year, with criminal cases brought for the first time against "individuals in possession of banned religious literature or associated with an illegal religious group."

Particular problems were experienced, the report said, in registration of religious organizations, access to places of worship and visas for foreign religious personnel, as well as in "government raids on religious organizations and detentions of individuals."

However, the report was dismissed as "half-baked and tendentious" on 16 September by a Foreign Ministry spokesman, Alexander Lukashevich, who told reporters the State Department's experts had not bothered "to explore the peculiarities of inter-confessional relations in the Russian Federation."

Meanwhile, a senior Russian Orthodox priest vowed that his church would continue to develop close relations with the state. "We live in a secular state, which is normal; but our society is largely made of Orthodox Christians. Therefore, the symphony of

the church, state and society is a natural thing -- it is a relationship within one body, not between things of differing nature," Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the department for church and society relations, said on 7 November, according to Russia's Interfax news agency.