

TESTIMONY OF LAWRENCE A. UZZELL
U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING ON UNREGISTERED RELIGIOUS
GROUPS IN RUSSIA
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Of all the many times that I have given testimony and informal briefings to this Commission, today's hearing gives me the most satisfaction. I believe that this is the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union that a Capitol Hill hearing has focused specifically on the unregistered religious bodies in Russia. It's especially welcome that you are including testimony from a representative of Russia's unregistered Baptists. Simply by holding today's hearing you are helping to correct a serious imbalance in the U.S. government's work on religious freedom in Russia.

One of the defining moments in the campaign for international religious freedom in Washington came in the 1996, when the U.S. ambassador to China was asked about persecution of China's unregistered house churches. It turned out that despite his briefings from the State Department he didn't know what a "house church" was. That episode dramatically revealed one of the blank spots in State Department thinking that so many of the people in this room have worked to correct.

Unfortunately, too many Americans still don't realize that Russia has unregistered house churches of its own. Russian Baptists, in particular, are divided between the registered and the unregistered, each with hundreds of local congregations. The unregistered Baptists or "initsiativniki" split off from the registered Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in 1961 after the leaders of that group agreed to make certain concessions under pressure from the Soviet regime. For example, the registered Baptists agreed to cut back on missionary activities, to discourage baptisms of anyone under age 30, and to stop teaching religion to children. Many Baptists found these concessions to be morally unacceptable. They formed an "initsiativnaya gruppa" or "initiative group," which ultimately became a separate denomination—now known as the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, represented here today by Andrew Okhotin. As a matter of principle, these "initsiativniki" still refuse even to apply for state registration in Russia.

Let me stress that I am here today to speak out for the unregistered Baptists, not to denounce the registered Baptists. We Americans who have never lived under a totalitarian regime should be charitable in judging Russians who faced pressures that we can barely imagine. The registered Baptists often saw themselves as trying their best to practice their faith in a tragic situation, even if they made compromises that they now regret. As defenders of religious freedom, we should be committed to defending both the registered and the unregistered Baptists from oppression. But that's precisely the problem. The U.S. government does not give the unregistered Baptists nearly as much attention as it should, just as it does not give nearly enough attention to the Old Believers, the True Orthodox Church, or other indigenous Russian religions that do not have well-organized lobbies in Washington or partnerships with well-connected American denominations.

Last week I phoned two leaders of the unregistered Baptists in Russia—including the pastor whose congregation was harassed and whose house church in Lyubuchany, just south of Moscow, was torched last fall under extremely suspicious circumstances. I asked if anyone from the U.S. Embassy, or from any other part of the U.S. government, had contacted them or any of their fellow pastors to find out more about their situation. The answer was No.

Recently I reviewed the State Department's last four annual reports on international religious freedom. Over those four years, the section on Russia has included a cumulative total of 6 references to the unregistered Baptists, 7 to the Old Believers, and 5 to the True Orthodox Church. On the other hand it has included a cumulative 65 references to the Mormons—who are far less numerous in Russia than the unregistered Baptists, and clearly less oppressed. The 2004 report was more balanced than those of previous years, but still had as many references to the Mormons as to the other three groups combined.

Let me stress that I do *not* think that religions new to Russia, such as the Mormons, are getting too much attention from Washington's human-rights advocates. As a journalist I have never found the Mormons' claims of repression in Russia to be inaccurate; if I were writing the State Department report I would not omit any of its passages about the Mormons. The problem is that the report gives too *little* attention to religious bodies that do not have well-funded, media-savvy offices in places like Washington or close links with western denominations that do have such offices. It also fails to go beyond listing individual abuses, to analyze adequately the forces at work in those abuses; all too often the report catalogues the trees but misses the forest.

One example of this weakness is the State Department's flawed discussion of Russia's 1997 law which restored state control over religious life. Its latest annual report on religious freedom states twice that the 1997 law discriminates against religions that are "new to the country." That is true, but it is not the whole truth or even the most important part of the truth. Key provisions of the 1997 law target not only religions new to Russia such as the Mormons or Hare Krishnas, but also certain religions that are deeply rooted in Russian history. For example, if the law's notorious 15-year rule were strictly enforced it would deny major elements of religious freedom to Old Believer and underground Orthodox Christian groups that have traditions going back for centuries in Russia, but were not registered under the Soviet regime. (For more detail on this, see the excellent statement by Geraldine Fagan of the Forum 18 News Service which she provided in writing for today's hearing record. You can also learn more about these and related issues from the website of my own organization, www.irfw.org.)

The 15-year rule was diabolically clever in that it drew a base line in the early 1980s, making that base line the standard for distinguishing between religions today. By adopting that standard the 1997 law artificially favored those religious bodies that were on good terms with the Soviet regime 15 years earlier—which of course was before the Gorbachev reforms—and artificially disfavored those that were on bad terms with that regime. Despite all the conservative, patriotic rhetoric that accompanied the law's

enactment, calling for the defense of Russia's unique spiritual traditions against novel imports from abroad, in large measure what the law really did was to revive Soviet standards of church-state relations—the standards of an explicitly atheist, totalitarian state. What the drafters and defenders of the 1997 law really fear is not novel religions, but heroic religions that refuse to collaborate with tyrants. That is why they favor not just some religions over others, but some factions over others within the same religion.

The State Department's weaknesses in discussing these issues are even more important than you might think. It's not just a matter of failing to speak up for the underdog, failing to defend the weakest of the oppressed as well as those with the strongest legal and public-relations machines. In today's Russia there is a widespread perception that American rhetoric about human rights is simply a hypocritical cover for American cultural and political imperialism. You would be amazed at how many Russian scholars and government officials are knowledgeable about the history of European missionaries in the 19th century, especially about those missionaries' roles in British and French colonialism, and at how they see today's American missionaries as a direct extension of that history. A few years ago an influential Moscow specialist on religious studies, Nikolai Trofimchuk, wrote an entire book on that theme, called *Expansion*. Among other things he argued that American Protestant missionaries are in Russia's Far East as agents of a U.S. government plot to seize control of that region and transfer it from Russian to American sovereignty. That may seem like nonsense to you and me, but Trofimchuk's work has been widely circulated among Russian federal and provincial bureaucrats specializing in church-state relations. Perhaps it is no accident that American missionaries in the Far East seem to have had more difficulties with visas and the like than those in any other part of Russia.

The easiest way to prove that Trofimchuk is wrong is to do what the U.S. government should be doing anyway. Washington should be going out of its way to monitor and speak out against threats to those faiths that are totally indigenous, not Russian branches of American denominations. We Americans should be making it clear that our goal is genuine rule of law with enforceable rights for all faiths in Russia, not just for those that have large numbers of adherents in America or joint programs with American missionary organizations. In recent years the State Department reports have paid far more attention than in the 1990s to the repression of Muslims in Russia; they need to show similar progress in their coverage of the less well-known Christian minorities.

During the last five years I have had two experiences which I hope never to have again. In the summer of 2000 I visited the ruins of what had been a Seventh-Day Adventist church in the capital of Turkmenistan before the city authorities sent in bulldozers to tear it down in broad daylight. In September 2004 I visited the ruins of the unregistered Baptists' house church in Lyubuchany, just a few days after it too had been destroyed. The Baptist church was not demolished so brazenly as the Adventist one, but the local government has since revealed its hand by trying to forbid the Baptists to rebuild their own church on their own property. This is the sort of thing that was supposed to end with the collapse of Soviet rule—the deliberate destruction of places of worship, whether openly or under cover of darkness. But it hasn't ended, and Vladimir Putin's Kremlin

has shown no visible interest in making sure that it ends. Another defect in the latest State Department report on religious freedom is that it seems to go out of its way to avoid criticizing Putin: All the specific references to him are either neutral or positive.

But with Putin centralizing so much more power in his own hands, he now has less room to dodge responsibility. Both by word and deed, the U.S. government should be making it clear that it cannot have a full-fledged partnership with the Russian government as long as that government is trampling on the religious freedom of its own citizens—even, perhaps especially, those citizens whose denominations are poor and weak.