

November 24, 1999: Commission Welcomes Russian Court Decision

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November 24, 1999 Contact:

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The Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Rabbi David Saperstein, today hailed as progress a Russian Constitutional Court decision that religious groups already registered in 1997 do not have to re-register under a restrictive law passed that year. That law, which has been criticized by religious groups, human-rights organizations, and Western governments, created a two-tiered system of religious registration. "Traditional" faiths in the first tier, including the Russian Orthodox Church, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism, are recognized under the law and enjoy full rights. But so-called "nontraditional" groups could have their rights seriously limited unless they are registered with the government. The law provides that a faith group must prove it has been in Russia for 15 years to be registered and must register by Dec. 31, 1999. If the law were enforced to the letter, critics say, it could result in registration being denied, not only to new faiths, but to groups that were banned under Soviet rule and forced to operate underground, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. The court held that local religious organizations registered before the law was passed retain their status and need not re-register. At the same time, it upheld the law's constitutionality. "This decision bodes well for the rule of law in Russia as well as religious freedom," Chairman Saperstein said. At the same time, he pointed out, the law still discriminates against smaller religious groups, relegating them to an inferior status compared to the "traditional" religions. "The true test of religious freedom is what happens to minority faiths," Saperstein said. The Commission, which has designated Russia as a country of special focus along with Sudan and China, will continue to monitor developments there closely, he added.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Chair

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