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By Elliott Abrams

An amendment signed into law by Russian President Vladimir Putin threatens the "liquidation" of thousands of religious groups at the end of this year. When President Clinton meets with Putin during the Asia-Pacific economic summit, this issue should be near the top of their bilateral agenda.

In the last days of the Soviet Union, the government enacted the most enlightened law on religion in the history of Russia, providing broad legal protections for the right to exercise religious freedom and for the equality of religious communities. The law restored rights not only to the Russian Orthodox Church but also to Old Believers, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists, Muslims, Buddhists and a host of other faith groups that had suffered severe repression since at least 1929.

In the new atmosphere of freedom, thousands of new churches and religious groups were formed, feeding a post-Communist spiritual hunger that pervaded all regions and ethnic groups. Indigenous pastors and clerics headed many existing religious groups, while in others the leaderships had been decimated by decades of communist mistreatment and needed foreign clergy and teachers to help them reestablish themselves. In yet other cases, foreign missionaries, including Western evangelicals and followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, founded new faith communities--legally, and with Moscow's full knowledge.

These days of openness quickly passed, however. The Russian Orthodox Church--nostalgic for the leading position it had held in Russian society before the Bolsheviks--soon pushed for a law to restrict, if not ban, the activities of foreign religious workers and of non-orthodox Christians (as well as dissident Orthodox groups). While President Boris Yeltsin vetoed one egregious bill the Russian parliament sent him, he allowed another version to become law in 1997.

The 1997 Religion Law discriminates among religions and violates Russia's international commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It restricts the rights, powers and privileges of smaller, or newer, or foreign religious communities, while giving special status to Russia's "traditional" religions--primarily Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. It also creates an onerous and intrusive registration process.

Upon taking office this spring, Putin quietly signed a significant and double-edged amendment to the 1997 law. On the positive side, he extended to Dec. 31 of this year the deadline by which religious groups must register with officials. On the negative side, however, he required that unregistered groups be "liquidated" after that date.

If a system of due process were in place for religious groups to register, the situation would not be so dangerous. But quite the reverse is true: Local officials in some regions have delayed or denied registration to and sought liquidation of unpopular religious groups, even when they have been recognized and registered in other regions or at the federal level. Sometimes this delay or refusal occurs at the instigation of the local Russian Orthodox bishop or priest.

The threat of liquidation when the Dec. 31 deadline expires is substantial. At the end of September, according to the Russian Justice Ministry, only some 9,000 of the 17,000 religious groups in Russia had obtained registration. Given the slow pace of the registration process so far, it is hard to believe most of the remaining groups will be able to register by Dec. 31. Putin must intervene--both to speed up the process and to postpone the deadline.

Clinton will meet with the Russian president tomorrow or Thursday on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Brunei. He should stress to Putin how seriously the United States takes the issue of religious freedom and how important it is, both for Russia's future and for U.S.-Russian relations, that he postpone the Dec. 31 deadline and streamline the registration process. It is hard to see a warming trend in U.S.-Russian relations if the holiday season headlines are full of stories about houses of worship about to be shut down or declared illegal, their property seized and their congregations out in the cold legally--and physically as well.

The writer is chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to give independent recommendations to the executive branch and the Congress

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