

The latest on our seminary student, Roman Turenko

In early July, two members of the Russian *Duma* (parliament) introduced a series of amendments under the guise of anti-terrorist legislation that ushered in tighter restrictions on missionary activity and evangelism in Russia, despite prayers and protests from religious leaders and human rights advocates. While the law was said to have been created to stop the influence of Islamic extremism, in reality it clamps down on any church other than the Russian Orthodox, support for which is closely tied to Russian nationalism. President Putin has in recent years increasingly emphasised his own membership of the Russian Orthodox Church as a means of bolstering popular support for himself.

The *Duma* adopted the amendments and the bill was passed by the Council of the Russian Federation, and on the 20th of July, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed it into law.

Under the new law, anyone who shares the Christian faith – even in a casual conversation – will be required to have prior authorisation from the state. This includes something as basic as an emailed invitation for a friend to attend church. Even in a private home, worship and prayer will only be allowed if there are no unbelievers present. Churches will also be held accountable for the activities of their members. So if, for example, a church member mentions their faith in conversation with a work colleague, not only the church member but also the church itself could be punished, with individuals facing fines of up to 50,000 roubles (US\$770). There are also restrictions on the extent to which churches can have contact with foreigners; for example, any non-Russian citizen attending a church service would be required to have a work visa or face a fine and expulsion from Russia.

By now you may be asking, what does this mean for our student Roman Turenko?

Around about the same time that this new law went into effect, Roman's communication with us became a little subdued, and he also began to fall behind in his study of the Greek language. Roman also had a few health issues as well, namely suffering from a chronic neck problem. Although he eventually passed his Greek with an A, there was a concern that Roman, due to his neck problem and the restrictions of the Russian government, would not be able to keep up at the required pace of the next set of subjects, which would require spending 15 hours a week (3 hrs per day) online with his teachers via Skype, and around 30 hours per week reading and completing assignments. After sharing our concerns with Roman, WTS (Walther Theological Seminary) and the AELC Seminary Committee has decided that it will be nigh impossible to continue to teach Roman. Actually, we suspect that Roman's recent communication with us becoming rather subdued is due to the fact that there is already fear from Roman's end that he could be prosecuted for conversing with us, and the reality is that there is a real possibility Roman and his family could be placed into harm's way if his studies continue, and we certainly do not wish for this to happen. There are also reports that the Russian government is talking about shutting down Skype and any other online chat programs in the near future, thus making it almost impossible to communicate with Roman.

Where to from here? While the WTS and AELC will no longer teach Roman, there is no reason why Roman cannot carry out private study and serve his own family as the head of the household. And we must also remember to pray for Roman and other Christians in Russia. Many Christian leaders in Russia have expressed serious concerns about the new law, and in scenes reminiscent of the Book of Esther

(4:1-17) churches all over Russia are praying and fasting for deliverance from this Soviet era law. We leave it in the Lord's hands, but for now, Roman is no longer studying for the ministry.

The AELC Seminary Committee