

RUSSIA: Russian bill decriminalizing domestic battery sails through first reading

By Tom Balmforth

RFL/RE (11.01.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2i0UBwd> – Russian legislators returned from recess by approving – with almost unanimous support – the first reading of a bill that would decriminalize assault in the family home.

The bill, which is in keeping with the conservative values espoused by President Vladimir Putin and has been protested by antidomestic abuse activists, seeks to downgrade assault inside the traditional family unit from a criminal offense to a misdemeanor.

Battery inside the home by family members remained a criminal offense in 2016, while cases of street assault – say, between two men – were legally decriminalized to a misdemeanor punishable by fine. The new legislation would remove this distinction.

Addressing the State Duma during the first reading, Olga Batalina, one of the bill's authors, on January 11 said the bill concerns non-serious assaults causing "bruises or grazes."

She recognized the problem of domestic abuse, but said there are better ways to combat it.

“What’s important is prevention,” she said. “What is important is the chance to help a person who has ended up in this situation. As you understand, help does not consist in bringing one member of the family to administrative or criminal account, but in stopping these things from happening in the future.”

Andrei Isayev, first deputy director of the United Russia faction, told the RBK business and politics news organization that domestic assaults would only be a misdemeanor in the first instance; a secondary offense would be deemed criminal.

Already weak legislation

The bill has nonetheless prompted concerns that it would land a blow to Russia’s already weak legislation on domestic abuse and send the wrong signals to society.

“The [bill] that the Duma is preparing to examine would only legalize the order of things that have strengthened in the minds of Russians: beating close ones is normal,” wrote Olga Bobrova, an editor at Novaya Gazeta.

Two activists picketed the State Duma on January 11 to protest

the bill. Alyona Popova, a prominent activist against domestic violence, held a placard with the ironic slogan "I created you, I'll kill you," adding that "in 2015, 11,756 boys and girls suffered from violent crimes in families."

Batalina has said the legislation aims to place minor assaults committed in a domestic context on a par with street assaults decriminalized last summer.

"There was objective bewilderment among people as to why conflicts inside the family, beatings of relatives are a crime, but the same action committed on the street is only an administrative offense," Batalina has said. "Our legislative bill proposes removing this conflict," she said.

In July, President Vladimir Putin signed legislation decriminalizing minor assault for first-time offenders. It is now punishable by a fine of up to 30,000 rubles, 15 days in jail, or up to 120 hours of community service.

Exempt from this legislation were domestic-abuse cases, which remained criminal.

The exemption was explained by a United Russia lawmaker, who wrote at the time: "We must not remove criminal punishment for assault inside the family since they [such assaults] are committed consciously and, consequently, are socially more dangerous than street [assaults]."

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