

Criticism Flies as Talks on Police Reform End

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

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Police officers holding a young man against a police bus Aug. 31 during an opposition gathering. Reforms of the country's law enforcement are themselves attracting criticism. **Igor Tabakov**

As a public discussion of police reform wound up Wednesday with almost 21,000 comments on a government web site, opposition politicians and human rights advocates declared that the bill needed a complete overhaul.

The 11-chapter bill, published in early August on Zakonoproekt2010.ru, is a part of President Dmitry Medvedev's drive to reform the police force.

The chapters that sparked the most debate on the web site concern police officers' responsibilities and rights, with more than 1,500 and 1,400 comments, respectively, as of Wednesday afternoon. The least popular item, "Work Discipline of the Police," only had about 50 comments.

The bill, which is to replace a 1991 law on the police, is supposed to provide a complete list of the rights and responsibilities of the police, whose activities are currently regulated by hundreds of amendments and bylaws to the main law.

Medvedev also proposed to replace the Bolshevik-era name for the force, "militia," with "police."

It was unclear Wednesday whether he planned to proceed with this change, which would cost several hundred million rubles.

Medvedev promised in August to revise the draft, taking the public's opinions into consideration before submitting the bill to the State Duma, which is expected to happen this fall. The pledge was reiterated Monday by Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev.

But some human rights advocates and lawmakers said they planned to draft alternative bills from scratch.

One version will be prepared by the president's own human rights council, which discussed the draft at a meeting Tuesday.

"The current version is so bad that we decided that it would be easier to rewrite it than adjust it," Yelena Panfilova, a member of the council and director of Transparency International's Russia office, told The Moscow Times.

The liberal Yabloko party said in a statement that its legal experts would continue working on their own [alternative bill](#), which is based on the Kremlin's but already has about 150 amendments, including increased public supervision for police and more rights for detainees. Yabloko said detainees should be guaranteed acceptable detention conditions and the right to make a telephone call after being arrested, something that Medvedev's draft denied them.

Medvedev has said the bill should close all loopholes for potential abuse of power by police, who are notoriously violent and corrupt.

The bill in its present form would also step up the centralization of the police force, making it more dependent on the federal authorities and less on the local citizens it is supposed to serve.

In an indication that even top officials lack complete unity on police reform, Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov called on Wednesday for the introduction of popular elections for district police officers, a measure that the Kremlin did not see fit to include in its draft.

Such elections "shouldn't be a carbon copy of sheriff elections in America," Konovalov said, Itar-Tass reported. But, he added, "People should themselves select those who protect them."

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