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Cautious Praise for Revised Police Bill

By Alexander Bratersky

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Trying to understand what is new in the Kremlin's latest version of its 176-page bill to reform the police force could take considerable time.

So the Kremlin, in line with its mantra to fight corruption with transparency, has published the entire bill online — complete with editor's marks so readers can see what has been crossed out with a green line.

The result, lawmakers and analysts said, is a significantly improved bill that takes into account many critical public comments posted on a government web site that carried the initial draft of the bill in August.

“More passages have been clarified in the new bill, but many things regarding public control are still unclear,” said Alexander Brod, a human rights activist and a member of the Public Chamber.⊠Brod said the bill still gives police more power in their checks on businesses, including the right to use taxes as a pretext.

Business associations say police checks are often used to demand bribes.

Unlike in the initial version, police will not be obliged to inform the tax authorities if they open a case on tax evasion charges.

“Until the police bill is amended to ban police from conducting tax inspections and opening criminal tax cases, we cannot expect the relationship between the police and business to reach a new level," said Dmitry Lipatov, a lawyer with the Nologovik tax consulting firm.⊠A controversial passage deleted from the bill gave police officers the right to enter a house at any time while on duty.

Also, if a person's rights are violated, the police officer will be required to "bring his apology" to wherever the person desires — his home, office or educational facility, the bill says. The original version only said the officer should apologize, without elaborating.

As in the initial draft, a police officer will for the first time be obliged to read a suspect his rights and explain the reason for his arrest. ⊠A detainee will have the right to make a telephone call unless he previously fled custody. If the suspect is a foreign citizen, police should notify his country's embassy. ⊠Alexei Volkov, deputy head of the State Duma's Security Committee, said the bill needed to preserve a "happy medium."

“We have been afraid that our own police force might get out of control, but we should also realize that it has to fight crime and needs to be armed for the task,” the United Russia deputy said by telephone.

He said the latest version faced additional revisions in the Duma.

Medvedev submitted the police bill to the Duma on Wednesday, and it was posted on the Zakonoproekt2010.ru web site on Wednesday night.

The initial draft called for the police reform to come into effect Jan. 1. The date has now been changed to March 1, and a person close to the presidential administration told Vedomosti on Thursday that the reason was to avoid the introduction of new police rules during the long New Year's holiday break.⊠Nina Ostanina, a Duma deputy with the Communist Party, said the main problem was not the lack of a good law on the police but the lack of a pool of qualified police officers.⊠“Most of the officers we have today are ready to cross any line and could be turned into a force to harass our own people,” she said by telephone.

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