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Church, Lawmakers Target Abortion

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The Russian Orthodox Church teamed up with conservative lawmakers Monday to push legislation that would radically restrict abortions in a nation struggling to cope with one of the world's lowest birthrates.

The legislation would ban free abortions at government-run clinics and prohibit the sale of the morning-after pill without a prescription, said Yelena Mizulina, who heads a parliamentary committee on families, women and children.

She added that abortion for a married woman would also require the permission of her spouse, while teenage girls would need their parents' consent. If the legislation is passed, a week's waiting period would also be introduced so women could consider their decision to terminate their pregnancy, said Mizulina, a member of A Just Russia.

During the time of the Soviet Union, abortion laws were liberal, and unrestricted termination of pregnancy became virtually the only method of family planning. Sex education was frowned upon.

Russia's abortion rates are still among the world's highest, contributing to a fertility rate

of only 1.4 children per woman — far below the 2.1 needed to maintain the existing population. The rate has become a serious concern for Russia as it fights to stem a steep population decline.

Mizulina said she wants to see public debate on abortions before the bill is submitted to parliament, an apparent attempt to build support after similar legislation stalled last year.

A bill proposed in late 2010 called for the criminal prosecution of doctors who end late-term pregnancies, but it faced government opposition and was never put up for a vote.

The effort to restrict abortions has strong backing from the Russian Orthodox Church, which has sought a more muscular role in society in recent years. It counts more than 100 million Russians in a population of 141 million as its congregation, although polls show that only about 5 percent of Russians are observant.

"I hope that very soon we will live in a Russia without abortions," church spokesman Vsevolod Chaplin said at Monday's presentation.

According to a United Nations survey in 2004, Russia had the world's highest abortion rate: 53.7 per 100 women.

Figures from the Health and Social Development Ministry suggest that the rate may have declined in recent years, though it remains high: In 2009, there were 74 abortions for every 100 births in Russia, a significant drop from 169 abortions per 100 births in 2000.

The total number of abortions recorded by the health ministry in 2009 reached nearly 1.3 million.

Mizulina claims that the official statistics do not include pregnancies terminated at private clinics, or those stopped by morning-after pills, and the true number might be closer to 6 million.

She also proposed that the law be changed to allow women to leave unwanted children at orphanages anonymously without risking criminal prosecution for child abandonment.

It was unclear how much support the anti-abortion measures would receive in parliament.

Natalya Karpovich, a lawmaker with the ruling United Russia, who is expecting her fifth child, said she supported stricter regulation of abortions. But she said banning the procedure in Russia was unrealistic and would only lead to more children whose parents were unwilling or unable to care for them.

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