

Medvedev Inks Law on Abortion

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President Dmitry Medvedev has signed into law the country's first regulations on the largely unrestricted practice of abortion, requiring clinics to warn potential clients of the purported health hazards of the procedure.

The law signed Thursday is seen by some observers as possibly the first in a series of new rules governing abortion.

Russia has among the highest abortion rates in the world, a major contributor to a worrying population decline that the Kremlin is under massive pressure to stop.

Free abortion is available at any licensed medical clinic in the country and at any term in the pregnancy, though late termination is only permitted on grounds of severe health risks to the mother or fetal abnormalities.

That liberal policy was instituted in the Soviet era when pregnancy termination was practically the only form of birth control and condoms were unreliable, of poor quality and seldom used. That policy is now coming under serious attack for the first time by increasingly vocal conservatives backed by the resurgent Russian Orthodox Church, which

is pushing for an outright ban on abortion.

The debate in Russia hasn't achieved the ubiquity and fierceness of the United States, but it's unlikely to recede, given the influence of the church and the fact that deaths exceed births in this country.

The issue has remained on the agenda, despite lawmakers in June recalling a church-proposed bill seeking a ban on free abortions at government-run clinics and the prohibition of the sale of the morning-after pill without a prescription.

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 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 in comparison with 169 abortions per 100 births in 2000.

The total number of abortions recorded by the Health and Social Development Ministry in 2009 reached nearly 1.3 million.

The population, which currently stands at 143 million, has shrunk by about 5.7 million since the fall of the Soviet Union in a plunge also blamed on rampant alcoholism, bad diets and lack of exercise.

The Kremlin on its web site didn't mention demographics in its explanation of the law, which forces clinics to devote 10 percent of any advertising space to warnings, justifying the move only in terms of "protecting the health of the woman" against the possible risks.

But Medvedev has made redressing the birth-death ratio one of the key goals of his presidency, and his wife, Svetlana, is a noted pro-life proponent.

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