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Countrywide Public Smoking Ban Looms

By Alexander Winning

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Municipal deputy Dmitry Salov picking up a cigarette butt during a recent anti-smoking event on the Arbat. **Alexander Winning**

Suffocating bars, smoke-filled restaurants and ash-laden office stairwells could soon be a thing of the past if legislation aimed at banning smoking in public places passes the remaining few hurdles and gets signed into law.

But not everyone is rejoicing at the prospect of a government-led crackdown on smoking.

"Smoking is a habit for millions of Russian adults who buy legal products in licensed shops with money they have earned honestly and on which they have paid taxes," said Andrei Loskutov, executive director of the All-Russia Movement for Smokers' Rights.

"In its current form, the bill will prevent them from smoking these legal products. This is a direct infringement of smokers' rights."

Loskutov spoke to The Moscow Times days before the State Duma is scheduled to hear on

Friday a second reading of the anti-tobacco bill, which would phase in restrictions on smoking in public places and toughen legislation affecting tobacco sellers.

The bill, which lawmakers passed in a first reading on Dec. 14, would from June ban filmmakers from showing smoking in movies and outlaw smoking in educational institutions, short-distance forms of public transportation and parks.

Starting June 1, 2014, kiosks would be prevented from selling tobacco and smoking would be banned in bars, restaurants, nightclubs, medical and cultural institutions, long-distance forms of public transportation and hotels.

There are also plans to hike excise taxes on tobacco, introduce a minimum price of 61 rubles ($2) for a pack of cigarettes and ban tobacco companies from advertising.

"This is the 150th set of anti-smoking legislation worldwide, and it is the harshest of them all. Russia doesn't deserve this, we had quite enough bans in the 20th century," said Loskutov, who also heads the Russian Cigar Union.

Health experts have long argued that a tougher stance on smoking is essential in Russia, where roughly 40 percent of the adult population smokes, according to the latest government data.

And with Ukrainian authorities on Dec. 16 limiting smoking in public places to specially ventilated areas set apart from non-smokers, European smoking norms appear to be migrating east.

But there remains palpable discontent among Russia's 44 million-strong smoking community, and Mikhail Boyarsky, a celebrated Soviet actor who also co-chairs the movement for smokers' rights, said the government should leave smokers alone.

"Smokers have a different way of life. They look at the world differently and don't mess with nonsmokers," Boyarsky said in a video address posted on the movement's website.

"A cigarette is a good friend. It can also be an enemy to a certain extent, but not for everyone. People who understand the meaning of smoking, I think God looks after them," said Boyarsky, who has served as a campaign representative of President Vladimir Putin.

Putin, who is known for his love of sports and for performing heavily publicized "action man" stunts, backed the ban on smoking in public places in the buildup to last year's presidential election.

Toughening smoking legislation is also close to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's heart, with the former president and United Russia leader having commented extensively on the issue.

"Nonsmokers are waiting impatiently for this bill to be passed, and I'm convinced it works in the interest of our country's citizens," Medvedev said on his video blog in October, adding that 80 percent of people, including two-thirds of smokers, backed harsher smoking regulations.

But judging by a countrywide poll released by the independent Levada Center last week, Medvedev's calculations may be flawed.

The survey, which gave no margin of error, found that only 20 percent of respondents favored making smoking in airports illegal. Even fewer supported a ban on smoking on long-distance trains and in restaurants and bars (19 percent, 17 percent and 16 percent, respectively).

A more effective measure, respondents said, would be to better inform people about the dangers of smoking and offer advice on how to quit — a point of view expressed by municipal lawmakers at a recent anti-smoking event on the Arbat.

At the informal Jan. 17 event, municipal deputies Dmitry Salov and Yevgeny Babchenko pasted informative posters along sidewalks and offered passers-by Soviet-style candies in exchange for cigarettes to discourage smoking on one of Moscow's most historic streets.

"We are aiming to show that Moscow is a European city, to instill respect for one's neighbor," Babchenko said.

Although passers-by initially seemed reluctant to hand over their smokes during the blustery event, Salov was optimistic that the Arbat would become the first non-smoking street in Russia.

Salov, who heads a council of municipal deputies promoting healthy living in the capital, said his council had appealed to the Moscow city government with a request to look into the proposal.

From the federal government's perspective, Sergei Kalashnikov, head of the State Duma's Public Health Committee, said the wording of any anti-smoking law needed to be tough to ensure compliance.

"In Russia, everyday life isn't regulated enough. Whereas it's enough to simply tell Swiss people that they shouldn't smoke, in Russia this wouldn't work. In Russia, tough laws are compensated by the fact that people don't obey them," said Kalashnikov, who represents the Liberal Democratic Party in the Duma.

"I'm convinced that smoking reflects the level of culture in a country. In countries where people worry about their health, smoking is seen as a vice," he said by phone. "Unfortunately in Russia the majority of people think that smoking is completely acceptable."

Work on the current bill began in 2008, when Russia ratified the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, Kalashnikov said, adding that his committee had relied on equivalent international legislation in drafting its recommendations to lawmakers.

In health circles at least, those recommendations appear sound. Luigi Migliorini, the World Health Organization's special representative in Russia, said the bill could have a significant impact in reducing smoking-related fatalities.

"The measures presented in the bill will help teenagers, young people and women stay away from smoking," he said in a written statement.

“It is expected that the number of smoking-linked premature deaths in Russia will be reduced significantly. At present, up to 400,000 Russian citizens die of tobacco-related diseases each year.”

Kalashnikov said that all political parties now back the government’s anti-smoking initiatives and that he expected them to be signed into law before the spring, despite Loskutov’s claims that they will be impossible to enforce.

“Instead of all these formal bans, we should be creating conditions for smokers to light up wherever they are in areas separated from non-smokers,” Loskutov said.

“That way they won’t unwittingly promote smoking to their children at home.”

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