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'We Live in Russia, Not Sodom and Gomorrah'

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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Protesters kissing at a gay rights demonstration in front of the State Duma building last week. **Igor Tabakov**

With a United Russia deputy declaring that Russia is not Sodom and Gomorrah, the State Duma gave tentative approval to a bill that would ban "gay propaganda" to minors.

But the measure, which mirrors similar legislation in place in St. Petersburg and several other areas, met with unusually strong resistance from opposition-minded lawmakers.

Of the 450 deputies, 52 refused to vote on Friday, while one opposed it, Sergei Kuzin of United Russia, and one abstained, Dmitry Nosov of the Liberal Democratic Party. But with the support of the other 338 deputies in attendance, the bill was easily approved in a first reading.

"We live in Russia, not Sodom and Gomorrah," United Russia Deputy Dmitry Sablin said

before the vote.

Russia, he said, was "founded on its own traditional values, the protection of which is dearer to me than even oil and gas."

The bill, which stipulates fines of about 4,000 rubles to 500,000 rubles ($130 to $16,000) for promoting homosexuality among minors, was introduced in the Duma by Novosibirsk regional lawmakers in March. The date for its consideration was pushed back several times before Friday's vote.

"The bill is being used to distract people from more important topics, such as a bill passed in a first reading last week giving regions the option not to hold gubernatorial elections," said Just Russia Deputy Dmitry Gudkov, who decided not to vote on the bill Friday. He made his remarks on Twitter.

Human rights organizations said the bill would aggravate societal divisions over gay rights.

Sergei Nikitin, head of Amnesty International Russia, said the measure showed the world how backward Russia remained in its attitude toward gays.

"It's unacceptable to discriminate against people because of their sexual orientation," he said. "The bill contradicts both Russian and international legislation and in no way will help to establish common ground in society."

In Washington, the U.S. State Department said it was "deeply concerned" about the bill and noted that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been pressing Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov over the issue for more than a year.

"You know how strongly we feel about LGBT rights around the world, how strongly the secretary of state personally feels, that nobody should be discriminated against for who they love," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters Friday in Washington, according to a transcript on the State Department's website.

"I would note that Russian citizens are also concerned. I understand that there was a kiss-in outside the Duma today to protest this legislation," she said.

A clash broke out at the kiss-in when self-professed Orthodox activists attacked gay-rights activists in the second brawl during a kiss-in protest at the same place in a single week. Police said 20 people were detained Friday.

"We are concerned about homophobic sentiment in Russia and about the fact that LGBT activists have been attacked in every region where they have tried to show their discontent with the bill," said Yulia Gorbunova of Human Rights Watch.

According to a survey by Levada Center last year, 32 percent of Russians consider homosexuality "an illness or the result of a psychological trauma," while even more, 43 percent, believe it is "immoral and a bad habit." Only 17 percent call homosexuality a sexual orientation that can exist alongside heterosexuality.

The debate over gay rights came to the forefront last year after St. Petersburg legislators

passed their law. The St. Petersburg initiative instituted fines for the promotion of homosexual relationships among minors, and it essentially bans gay-pride parades.

Activists for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people appealed to the Supreme Court, which upheld the law.

Only 4 percent of the population supports gay-pride parades, while 52 percent opposes them, the Levada Center's poll found.

"In October, the UN Committee on Human Rights recognized a similar bill in the Ryazan region as discriminatory," Gorbunova said. "We are concerned that instead of adjusting Russian legislation to international norms, our government wants to make the law work on the federal level."

In addition to Ryazan, Novosibirsk, Arkhangelsk and Kostroma have passed similar laws.

Opponents of the Duma bill say it equates gays to pedophiles. Human rights activists also fear that the vague definitions used in the bill would open the door to misuse.

"The bill is worded in such a way that many attempts to discriminate against the LGBT community might be camouflaged by the words 'propaganda' and 'homosexuality,'" she said.

Just Russia Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov, who refused to vote, said on Twitter that the bill was poorly written and might lead to repressions.

Rights organizations said the bill contradicts international treaties signed by Russia, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said in December that Russia did not need laws that regulate sexual relations.

To become law, the bill must be approved in two more readings in the Duma, after which it must be considered in the Federation Council and signed by President Vladimir Putin.

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