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Death Penalty Debate Reignited by Killings of Young Girls

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Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev

The recent brutal killings of two adolescent girls in Irkutsk and Tatarstan has reignited a debate over whether the country should reinstate the death penalty, a moratorium on which has been in place for more than a decade.

Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev was the first to weigh in on the subject, saying on national television that he favored bringing back capital punishment for certain criminals. He made his comments Sunday night in response to a question about the recent killings of 11-year-old Ulyana Alexeyeva in the Irkutsk region and 8-year-old Vasilisa Galitsina in Tatarstan.

"I'm afraid I will raise the ire of death penalty opponents, but speaking as an ordinary person, not as a minister, I don't see anything wrong with bringing it back for such criminals," he said on NTV. "For people who carry out terrorist attacks with multiple victims, the death

penalty is the natural reaction of society."

A torrent of commentary from top officials followed on Monday, with Communist Party lawmakers and some Federation Council senators declaring support for bringing it back but the Kremlin saying the president opposed its reinstatement.

"The president's position on the death penalty is well-known. This is a long-standing and consistent position," President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told opposition-leaning Dozhd television. "I don't know who could put this question on the agenda, but Putin's position is clear."

The death penalty has not been used in Russia since 1996, but it is still included in the Criminal Code as a punitive measure for the most heinous crimes. In 1996, Russia was invited to join the Council of Europe on the condition that it abolished the death penalty, by signing the protocol in the European Convention on Human Rights that bans capital punishment.

Then-President Boris Yeltsin introduced a moratorium on it in 1996 and signed the protocol in 1997, but it has still never been ratified by the Duma, making Russia the only country in the Council of Europe that hasn't approved the protocol.

An official moratorium was established in 1999 that lasted until 2010. In November 2010, the Constitutional Court introduced a new, indefinite moratorium.

Children's rights ombudsman Pavel Astakhov said Monday that all discussion of reintroducing the death penalty would stop if child murderers received life sentences without the chance of being released on parole. "The measure that replaced the death penalty — lifetime imprisonment — is used very rarely. Very few criminals who committed three murders are sentenced to life imprisonment."

According to the Federal Prison Service, 1,819 people were serving a life sentence as of Jan. 1, including some who were sentenced to the death penalty.

Pavel Krasheninnikov, chairman of the State Duma's Legislation Committee, said capital punishment should be eliminated in Russia for humanitarian reasons.

"The point is not even in our obligations in the Council of Europe. We need to abolish the death penalty because the state mustn't be an instrument of revenge," Krasheninnikov told Interfax. Vladimir Pligin, head of the Duma's Constitution and State Affairs Committee, also spoke out against it, citing the possibility of sentencing an innocent person to death.

Deputies from the Communist Party agreed with Kolokoltsev's position. "Finally we heard the right words from the head of the appropriate ministry about restoring the death penalty in the country," said Communist Deputy Alexander Kulikov. "We've been demanding that the moratorium be abolished for the last 10 years." Kulikov said his stance was shared by the party in general. Some Federation Council senators spoke in favor of the death penalty as well.

According to a Public Opinion Fund poll conducted in April, 62 percent of respondents think the death penalty should be reinstated, while only 5 percent think it should be abolished.

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