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Putin Approves Ban on Foul Language in Media

By Jonathan Earle

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President Vladimir Putin has signed into law a bill that introduces fines of up to 200,000 rubles ($6,000) for media outlets that use foul language, the Kremlin announced Monday, although it is still unclear which expressions will be illegal.

Individuals now face fines of up to 3,000 rubles ($100) for creating or distributing media containing swear words, while officials can be fined up to 20,000 rubles, and organizations — between 20,000 and 200,000 rubles, according to the text of the bill available on the State Duma's website.

Media products that violate the new rules may be confiscated.

But the law does not say what constitutes "obscene language," as recommended by the government last month, or contain a list of banned expressions.

Such additions would have been “senseless,” said Sergei Zheleznyak, a deputy from the ruling United Russia party and a co-author of the bill, who said linguistic experts could separate fair from foul expressions in the media, just as they currently do for other forms of public speech.

He also defended the bill as a necessary step to free the media from “a shameful phenomenon,” according to comments carried by Itar-Tass last month. The bill's explanatory note said the restrictions were aimed at protecting children.

It was approved by the Duma and the Federation Council last month with little opposition. One of the few dissenters, Deputy Boris Resnik of United Russia, questioned the bill's raison d'etre.

“What provoked this bill? What happened? Not a single serious, sane media outlet uses obscene language on its pages,” said Resnik, a journalist by profession, the BBC's Russian Service reported.

Journalist Alexander Plyushchev said that without a list of banned words, the law is absurd. “How can you approve a law establishing penalties for a crime without defining the crime?” he wrote on his popular blog.

Will softer variations of Russian's gravest words be banned? What about words that are not quite swear words, but are still crude and offensive? he wondered.

“In other words, I, a journalist, will have to get inside the head of experts whom I've never met and guess which words they'll consider illegal,” Plyushchev wrote. “How am I supposed to do that?”

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