

Smoking Ban Met With Skepticism

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A man apparently flouting the newly introduced public smoking ban by lighting up near an entrance to the metro. **Igor Tabakov**

The new anti-smoking law that came into force last week and is seen by the government as a measure to fight population decline has been met more with skepticism than strict implementation.

The measures that took effect on June 1 are the first phase in a large-scale program designed to change the public's attitude to smoking by imposing strict restrictions in public places and significantly increasing prices on tobacco products.

Many of the restrictions introduced last Saturday pertain to smoking in places where it has already been prohibited, such as on public transportation and in schools, museums and hospitals.

But now, added to that list are universities, sports facilities, stairwells of apartment buildings, municipal and office buildings, playgrounds, beaches, filling stations and any area within 15

meters of a metro entrance, as well as bus stops, train stations and airports.

Most smokers interviewed say the ban is unlikely to be strictly implemented and that authorities themselves will disregard the rules.

The law, developed by the Health Ministry and signed in February by President Vladimir Putin, was designed to put a dent in the death rate caused by smoking and help boost a dwindling population.

According to the World Health Organization's Global Adults Tobacco Survey, some 40 percent of Russians (22 percent of women and 60 percent of men) are habitual smokers, resulting in up to 400,000 deaths from tobacco-related diseases annually.

"It's a big step in strengthening the position of our society on the absolute evil that is smoking," Chief Sanitary Inspector Gennady Onishchenko said last week.

All tobacco advertising in media and on the Internet is prohibited by the first stage of the law, and it also bans tobacco companies from sponsoring public events and festivals.

But the stricter measures are expected to come into effect next June, when a Western-style ban on smoking will be introduced in cafes, bars, restaurants, hotels, shops, markets, long-distance trains and on railway station platforms.

Open displays of cigarettes in shops will also be forbidden, as well as sales of cigarettes from any retail outlet that is smaller than 50 square meters, making tobacco sales in kiosks illegal.

According to an opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center and published Monday, 46 percent of Russians are well aware of the new restrictions.

But 32 percent said they did not believe smokers would comply with the law, and 54 percent expressed doubts that police would fully control its implementation, while 23 percent said the law would not be enforced at all.

"The law won't work, it's the same thing as banning kissing in public," said 38-year old Muscovite Andrei, an advertising specialist, while smoking near a metro station.

"I know it's not allowed to smoke by the metro anymore, but everyone smokes, and so do I," he added.

Although the law is already in effect, fines for its violation have yet to be officially approved by the State Duma. The lower chamber is expected to pass corresponding amendments to the Administrative Code by mid-July.

The planned amounts are up to 1,500 rubles (\$47) for smoking in public places and up to 50,000 rubles (\$1,500) for smoking on board airplanes. The most strict fines will be applied to those who violate advertising restrictions: up to 500,000 rubles.

Moscow police chief Anatoly Yakunin in an interview with Rossiiskaya Gazeta last week said it was good that the law took effect before the fines were set, since it "provides people with a transition period when verbal warnings will be used instead of fines."

Pensioner Alexei, smoking at a bus stop in Moscow, predicted that people would not comply with the law until the fines were introduced. Seventeen-year-old student Leonid, on the other hand, said he would be willing to pay a fine if he could smoke where he wanted to.

At the Leningradsky Station, where platforms tend to be full of smokers, none were spotted close to the entrance, with the exception of one of the station's workers, who refused to comment when asked whether he knew about the new restrictions, saying he was too busy with his work.

Most people interviewed agreed, however, that those who didn't want to quit wouldn't, regardless of the measures the government comes up with, and that the law wouldn't be implemented because authorities would violate it too.

The overall attitude towards the law in St. Petersburg didn't seem to differ much from Moscow. Sitting by the metro entrance and lighting a cigarette, Igor, 36, said he was sure the new law wouldn't affect him.

A man sitting beside him, 39-year-old Andrei, called the law "more nonsense produced by the Duma deputies."

"I don't care about this new law. My brother is an army officer, he will defend me in case of any trouble."

Women, by contrast, seemed to be more law-abiding, both in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Moscow resident 25-year-old manager Natalya said she hoped the law would help her to quit, while 56-year-old Irina in St. Petersburg said she felt positively about the measure and that it would "certainly affect people's attitudes, albeit slowly."

Currently, Russia is the second-biggest tobacco market in the world after China, and one of few countries with the lowest prices on cigarettes, with an average price for a pack at less than \$2.

The law is intended to bring Russia in line with a World Health Organization tobacco control treaty that Moscow ratified in 2008 and also to introduce new taxes on tobacco, leading to a fivefold increase in prices.

The Finance Ministry previously said it was considering hiking excise taxes to 3,000 rubles per 1,000 cigarettes by 2015 as part of plans that would seek to add 1.9 trillion rubles to the

federal budget over three years.

A minimum price for cigarettes is expected to be set in January. Lawmakers hope increasing prices on tobacco will turn people off of smoking, though most smokers are likely to strongly oppose this strict measure.

Opponents of the bill fear that people will resort to buying low-quality, cheap cigarettes from shadow tobacco manufacturers, which could ultimately make the government's plan for a population boost backfire.

In an interview with Rossia-1 television channel last week, Duma speaker Sergei Naryshkin said the law would be corrected and amended over the next several years.

"We will thoroughly follow how the law is implemented and observe the public's reactions to it," he said.

Staff writer Ivan Nechepurenko contributed to this report.

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