

Activists Protest 'Cruel' Animal Rights Bill

By [Alexander Winning](#)

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Two stray dogs sleeping on a Moscow street as a third ambles away. **Vladimir Filonov**

Dozens of opponents of an animal rights bill called "cruel" by activists gathered at the public reception office of the State Duma on Thursday to petition Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin to revise the legislation.

The bill, which is being amended ahead of a second reading, outlines new regulations ensuring the humane treatment of pets and service animals but also sanctions the practice of killing stray cats and dogs as a means of keeping their populations under control.

"The idea of rounding up stray animals and killing them is just barbaric," said Yelena Nadyozhkina, coordinator of Russia Without Cruelty, an animal rights group.

Activists say
strays are

threatened by
"dog hunters"
and pending
legislation.

According to some estimates, there are as many as 25,000 stray dogs in Moscow alone. At present, killing or abusing animals is punishable by up to two years in jail, but activists say offenders are rarely punished.

On Thursday, a Sakhalin news portal reported that local authorities had put down 539 of the 563 stray dogs they have rounded up since the start of the year.

"We need new legislation to protect animals, not to punish them. We are campaigning for tougher penalties for those who harm animals," Nadyozhkina said, adding that similar petitions would be filed with municipal deputies in 30 Russian cities in the coming days.

Nadyozhkina said activists were also seeking the removal of Maxim Shingarkin, a lawmaker with the nationalist LDPR party, as head of the working group on the new animal rights bill.

"Such people shouldn't sit in the State Duma," she said, explaining that Shingarkin had outraged animal lovers by accusing them of keeping their pets as "slaves" and calling strays a threat to society in a talk show broadcast on state-run TV.

Thursday's event comes as animal rights activists are waging a wider battle to end "dog hunting," a controversial hobby in which vigilante dog killers leave out poisoned meat to cull stray animals.

After news reports that dog hunters claimed about 70 victims in a Moscow park in September, hundreds of protesters took to the streets to condemn the practice. Investigators have not found the culprits.

"Dog hunting is a real problem, and it's not going away," Nadyozhkina said, as a black mongrel sat obediently beside her with a sign around its neck reading "We defend you. Will you defend us?"

The origins of dog hunting are shrouded in mystery, but those who practice the hobby are known to boast of their exploits on online forums including Vreditelyam.net.

Maxim Smetanin, a research assistant at a technology institute who attended Thursday's event, suggested to a reporter that dog hunting may have grown out of "crow hunting," a sport he said was popular in Russia in the early 2000s.

"You may laugh, but dog hunters are a serious problem," said Smetanin, who said he had taken in a stray dog and cat and was looking for a third companion. "There are real fears that they will target homeless people next."

Contact the author at a.winning@imedia.ru

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