

Lawyers Protest Courts Merger in Open Letter

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Lawyers criticized the Kremlin on Tuesday in a rare display of public discontent, speaking out against a measure that will abolish what they called the most progressive branch of Russia's judiciary.

More than 80 law firms on Tuesday released an open letter against the measure, which they said would de facto dismantle the arbitration system in the country.

The arbitration courts are much more transparent, independent and modern than the "parochial" general jurisdiction courts, according to the letter, published on Arbitrations.ru.

The reform would hamper business competition in the country and prompt Russian entrepreneurs to take their disputes to foreign courts, the appeal said.

The letter called for the reform bill to be dropped or at least put on hold pending a broad discussion with the judicial community, which has not been consulted about the draft legislation.

President Vladimir Putin proposed in July to merge the Supreme Arbitration Court, which oversees business disputes, with the Supreme Court, which handles criminal cases and civil lawsuits.

The reform would solve the problem of conflicting jurisdictions between the courts, Kremlin representatives said earlier this year.

A bill on the reform, which would require amending the Constitution, is due Wednesday for a crucial second reading in parliament, where most parties have backed the proposal.

No lawmakers commented on the proposal Tuesday. The State Duma's Constitution and State Affairs Committee on Monday recommended for the bill to be passed without any changes.

A Kremlin spokesman refused to comment, the RBC Daily news website said Tuesday.

Russia's judiciary, much criticized for its reported dependence on the executive branch, is trusted by only 21 percent of Russia's population, according to a nationwide survey last month by the independent pollster Levada Center.

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