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Beer Ads Return to Russian Stadiums, Television for World Cup

By Mark Lammey

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The Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow, which will host the 2018 World Cup final.

Beer ads may soon reappear in Russian stadiums, print media and television — but only through the end of 2018, the year Russia hosts the FIFA World Cup, according to a bill recently approved by the State Duma.

Proposed with an eye toward increasing regions' funding for sports events, the amendment, which passed its second and third readings on Friday, temporarily reverses a series of restrictions that were imposed in summer 2012 as part of a wide-ranging ban on alcohol advertising.

Part of a campaign to reduce alcoholism in Russia, the ban prohibited alcohol advertising on television, radio, the Internet, public transport and billboards, as well as in stadiums and within 100 meters of sports facilities.

An additional ban on advertising alcohol in print media went into force on Jan. 1, 2013, eliciting fierce opposition from media outlets who had previously counted on alcohol ads for up to 20 percent of their revenues.

The new legislation will allow beer to be advertised on television during live sports broadcasts and at stadiums during sporting events through the end of 2018. Some restrictions on print media will remain: Beer ads cannot appear on the front or back page of newspapers, or on the first or last pages of magazines, ITAR-Tass reported.

The amendment was passed with the aim of bolstering funding for the World Cup, according to Anatoly Karpov, a United Russia member and deputy head of the Duma's Economic Policy and Entrepreneurship Committee, RIA Novosti reported.

"The sponsors for [international sports competitions], in practice, are brewing companies," Karpov noted previously.

Gladly greeting their temporary reprieve, brewers can invest more than 5 billion rubles ($145 million) in advertising at sports venues, Kirill Bolmatov, Heineken Russia's director of corporate relations, told RIA Novosti.

The beer market has suffered heavy losses from the advertising ban. Isaac Sheps, chairman of the Union of Russian Brewers, predicted late last year that the beer market could shrink by 25 to 30 percent from its 2008 levels by the end of 2014.

The ban on advertising beer in these mediums will go back into force on Jan. 1, 2019.

Sergei Mironov, a Duma deputy from the A Just Russia party, opposed the amendment, saying it will lead to the excessive promotion of beer and, as a result, an increase in the consumption of alcoholic beverages, especially among young people, ITAR-Tass reported.

Bolmatov, however, said that the legislation offers an opportunity to develop a culture of responsible drinking in Russia.

Drinking beer while watching a match is a "longstanding tradition that has nothing to do with alcohol abuse and its consequences for a person's health," Bolmatov said.

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