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Critical Court Aide Resigns

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A Constitutional Court aide who publicly criticized presidential proposals to soften punishments for various crimes resigned after taking flak from the Kremlin.

Vladimir Ovchinsky, adviser to court Chairman Valery Zorkin, quit after a telephone conversation with Zorkin, the court said in an e-mailed statement Tuesday.

Ovchinsky, former head of Russia's Interpol bureau, criticized on radio and television the Kremlin-backed amendments to the Criminal Code, a draft of which the Public Chamber submitted to him for review, he told Kommersant.

Ovchinsky said on Radio Liberty that the proposals are judicially incorrect and would allow criminals to avoid jail for serious crimes, including torture.

They also decriminalize smuggling of consumer goods, which appears to be a concession to the "smuggler lobby," he told The Moscow Times on Tuesday. He admitted he had no clear idea of how that lobby would work.

Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Naryshkin found that Ovchinsky's criticism violated legislation

on public servants, which bans them from commenting on activities of state bodies unless it is a servant's direct responsibility to comment on them, Ovchinsky said.

"I decided that I couldn't work under such circumstances," Ovchinsky said by telephone, adding that "only public discussion can set right a bill."

In a similar scandal, Constitutional Court Judge Anatoly Kononov resigned in 2009 under pressure from fellow judges over an interview that denounced mounting pressure on the judicial system.

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