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Russian Lawmakers Rebuked for Proposing End to Food Import Ban

By Anna Dolgov

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Vendor sells sausages prepared at a local sausage shop of the "Russia" collective farm in the settlement of Grigoropolisskaya, Feb. 7, 2015.

A Pro-Kremlin political party has issued a formal reprimand to its maverick lawmakers after they argued that Moscow's ban on Western food imports has hurt Russians and proposed legislation to lift the restrictions and limit President Vladimir Putin's power to impose new sanctions.

Three parliamentary deputies from the A Just Russia party who cosigned the bill — Valery Zubov, Sergei Doronin and Mikhail Serdyuk — were ruled to have "violated party discipline," at a meeting of party leaders late last week, according to A Just Russia's website.

Two more authors of the bill — prominent lawmaker Dmitry Gudkov, who is credited as the project's main author, and Sergei Petrov — escaped reprimand. Gudkov and Petrov were elected to the State Duma on A Just Russia ballots but have since quit the party, though they

remain members of its parliamentary faction.

The bill, which was introduced in the Duma on Wednesday, seeks to reverse a ban on food imports imposed last year in response to Western sanctions over Moscow's actions in Ukraine. Critics say the move backfired against Russians by stoking inflation and limiting consumer choice.

The embargo "has led to an increase in food prices and significantly limited opportunities for domestic businesses by stripping them of access to foodstuffs of the type and quality they need," the proposal's authors said in a note accompanying the bill. The ban has forced some food producers to close and violates the constitutional rights of Russian business to free enterprise, the note said.

Gudkov said on his Facebook page, "Western sanctions and our dumb counter-sanctions have become such a major headache for everyone that we need to somehow back off without losing face."

But the bill has instead prompted a "terrible hysteria," Gudkov said.

A Just Russia has urged the three party members to recall their signatures from the bill, the RBC news agency reported, citing two unidentified party sources. A number of A Just Russia leaders have denounced the proposal as unpatriotic and an affront to Putin, the report said.

The bill would require any future sanctions to be passed as laws by the legislature, instead of being ordered by the president or the government.

Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin supported the move, saying via Twitter that it would be "reasonable to pass a law defining presidential and cabinet powers on introducing sanctions."

"Food sanctions were not urgent. They hit Russians themselves. It would have been better to discuss them in the Duma," Kudrin added.

But in a country where the legislature has long toed the Kremlin's line, some lawmakers rushed to affirm the president's right to ignore the Russian parliament's view on sanctions.

"Issues of the country's security and its foreign policy details are the jurisdiction of the president of Russia, enshrined by the Constitution," lawmaker Igor Rudensky was quoted by RBC as saying.

Yevgeny Tarlo, a member of the economic policy committee in the Federation Council, Russia's upper chamber of parliament, said he was planning to draft and introduce legislation that would further expand the president's right to impose any economic, political, "informational" and other sanctions against foreign countries, radio station Russian News Service reported.

"An economic, informational, political war is being waged against us," Tarlo was quoted as saying. "There are some politicians who are trying to earn points on bad populism, but the people are against that."

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