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Russian Lawmaker Defends Media's Right to Report on Cancer Suicides

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Senator Konstantin Dobrynin

Senator Konstantin Dobrynin, deputy head of the Federation Council's constitutional law committee, is challenging a federal watchdog's decision to force a news outlet to delete information about why nearly a dozen people suffering from cancer committed suicide last month in Moscow.

"The information about the reasons for suicides by cancer sufferers is socially significant in this case. ... Covering up such information could lead to even more victims," the senator said in comments carried by state news agency RIA Novosti.

Dobrynin says that the federal media watchdog's decision to suppress the content violated the constitutional right to legally receive and distribute information, and he has sent an official inquiry to the watchdog's head, Alexander Zharov, RIA Novosti reported.

A ban on reporting about reasons for such suicides does not enable an adequate public view of the problems faced by cancer sufferers in Russia, including possible difficulties in obtaining necessary medication, Dobrynin was cited as saying in the inquiry.

Media watchdog Roskomnadzor earlier this month warned a popular religion-focused news site, Orthodox Christianity and the World, to delete all information pertaining to "methods" and "reasons" for suicides, according to a copy of the complaint posted on the news site.

The site was explicitly told to delete text that said: "The wife of the deceased explained that her husband suffered from constant pain because of cancer and often said he was tired of being sick," according to the complaint.

A controversial Russian law enacted in 2012 prohibits online content advocating suicide and drug use, among other things. Any website in violation can be blocked by the government.

At least 11 people with cancer committed suicide last month in Moscow and the surrounding region. One was reportedly a professor who hanged himself in his own lecture hall.

Moscow's deputy mayor for social issues, Leonid Pechatnikov, publicly dismissed speculation that the suicides were linked to difficulties in obtaining painkillers, an issue that brought the Health Ministry under scrutiny last year.

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