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Russian Lawmakers Suggest Punishing People for Being Unemployed

By Anna Dolgov

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A lawmaker on the State Duma's labor and social policy committee, Valery Trapeznikov, said that his panel would review the proposal, adding that Russians who do not work are costing the state income tax losses.

In a move reminiscent of the Soviet era, Russian lawmakers have proposed introducing a penalty for being unemployed, and called for amending the Constitution to make labor the duty of each citizen, Russian media reported Monday.

The bill, drafted in the municipal legislature of St. Petersburg and soon to be introduced before the State Duma, would make "employment dodging" an offense punishable by community service, Izvestia reported. The daily claimed to have obtained a copy of the draft bill.

The move would echo the practice of the Soviet Union, whose Constitution enshrined labor as the "right" and also the "duty" of each citizen. It would also echo a law that the former Soviet

republic of Belarus adopted recently, making “social parasitism” — a Soviet-era term for unemployment — punishable by a fine, in a bid to crack down on tax evaders.

Joseph Brodsky, one of Russia's most prominent poets and its last Nobel prize winner in literature, was convicted of social parasitism during a 1964 trial, over the course of which the judge famously wondered who had recognized him as a poet.

Izvestia reported that under the new bill, adult and able-bodied Russians who have been out of a job for more than six months “when there is appropriate work available,” could be sentenced to up to one year of community service.

St. Petersburg lawmaker Andrei Anokhin was quoted by Interfax as saying that jobless Russians should apply to state-run employment agencies, and the “state should provide everyone with work.”

“Then it would be much easier to track down those who avoid working,” Anokhin was quoted by Izvestia as saying.

A lawmaker on the State Duma's labor and social policy committee, Valery Trapeznikov, said that his panel would review the proposal, adding that Russians who do not work are costing the state income tax losses, the report said.

Communist State Duma deputy Vadim Solovyev referred to the proposal as “unconstitutional” in comments carried by Interfax.

“The introduction of a criminal penalty for being unemployed would mean violating the Constitution and international agreements,” Solovyev said Monday, noting that Russia is bound by its ratification of the International Labor Organization's convention prohibiting forced labor.

Mikhail Yemelyanov, a Duma deputy from the A Just Russia party, said that he is confident the proposal will not survive a parliamentary vote. “This initiative cannot be approved because it is meaningless,” Yemelyanov told Interfax on Monday.

Meanwhile, Federation Council member Alexander Ryazantsky offered an alternative to the proposed penalty in comments to Interfax, suggesting that the unemployed should lose their rights to certain social benefits, such as advanced medical coverage and pensions.

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