

Russia's Anti-Drinking Law Denounced as Human Rights Violation

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A member of Russia's Presidential Human Rights Council has denounced a new bill that introduces jail sentences for public drunkenness as a violation of human rights.

The new bill, which is scheduled for its final reading in the State Duma on Friday, would introduce 15-day jail sentences for anyone who appears drunk and refuses to be tested for blood alcohol content levels.

The bill would give police excessive powers and would encourage corruption, according to Tatyana Morshchakova, a member of the presidential human rights council, Russian News Service reported Thursday.

"Lawmakers are trying to create a new form of administrative offense, consisting of a whiff of alcoholic drinks coming from a person from the point of view of those who detain that person," she was quoted as saying.

"A citizen's rights would be violated in this case 100 percent, because in the absence of a clear definition of an offense, the despotism of those who order penalties increases on a progressive scale," she said, adding that there is also a "corruption factor, naturally."

The primary author of the bill, head of the parliamentary security committee Irina Yarovaya, defended her draft legislation, saying that police would only order testing for those people who give "sufficient grounds to presume" that they had consumed alcohol in public places where drinking is prohibited, RBC reported.

She did not elaborate how police would be expected to distinguish between those who had a few drinks at a bar and were walking home and those who had those drinks in a park — an issue that was quickly pointed out by lawyers, RBC reported.

"On what grounds would police be testing pedestrians?" lawyer Igor Trunov was quoted as saying. "What should people do if they drank in a restaurant and are headed home? Should they arrange sleeping spots [at restaurants] or take secret paths?"

The human rights council's Morshchakova denounced the bill as a masked attempt to outlaw drinking, Russian News Service reported.

"What we are talking about here in fact is turning into an administrative offense the very consumption of alcoholic beverages," she was quoted as saying. "There have been cases in history when alcohol consumption was banned, and I believe it did not lead to anything good."

Under the bill, pedestrians on Russian streets who are suspected of being drunk and refuse to be tested for blood alcohol content could face penalties ranging from a fine of 5,000 rubles (\$100) to 15 days in jail.

Currently, drinking in places "prohibited by federal law" carries a fine of 500 to 1,500 rubles.

Places prohibited by law include courtyards and stairwells of apartment buildings along with playgrounds and public parks.

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