

Russian Official Lauds Condom Restrictions

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A senior Russian official has praised plans to restrict condom imports as part of a drive to reduce reliance on foreign-made goods, suggesting Wednesday that a dearth of the rubber contraceptives will make people more “disciplined” and boost birth rates.

Fewer condoms will make people “more strict and discriminating in choosing partners, and maybe will do a favor to society in respect to solving demographic problems,” former public health chief Gennady Onishchenko said, news agency RIA Novosti reported.

Onishchenko's remarks came a day after the Industry and Trade Ministry proposed limiting imports of condoms and other medical equipment including X-ray and ultrasound machines, defibrillators and incubators.

Officials have moved in recent months to reduce the country's dependence on foreign goods in a range of sectors amid a surge of patriotism that has swelled following the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine last year.

Sexually transmitted diseases are widespread in Russia and HIV infection rates are on the rise, even as most European countries have succeeded in bringing them down. There are expected to be over 1 million Russians infected with HIV by the beginning of next year.

Onishchenko also denied there would be any possible repercussions for public health. "Rubber technical goods [condoms] have nothing to do with health," he said, according to RIA Novosti.

The move to cut condom imports appeared not to have been agreed with President Vladimir Putin. The president's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that the Kremlin "had not thought about" the issue, RIA Novosti reported.

Industry executives were quick to point out that Russia is overwhelmingly dependent on foreign-made condoms. Russian producers supply up to 4 percent of the domestic market, according to Yessenia Shamonina, the head of Russia's largest contraceptive supplier, the Russian News Service reported.

Most of Russia's domestically manufactured condoms are produced by one factory, the Armavirsky Factory in the Krasnodar region of southern Russia.

The proposal by the Industry and Trade Ministry concerns only state procurements — not purchases by companies or individuals — and so would only affect 2 percent of the condom market.

In 2013, Russians used 418 million condoms — 3 percent more than the year before — and the value of the market was 9.8 billion rubles (\$156 million), according to a study published by the Discovery Research Group and reported by the RBC website last year.

Russians used 51 percent more condoms in April 2015 than they did in the same month a year earlier, according to figures cited Tuesday by the Vesti.ru news website.

Russia also reportedly has a serious problem with an illicit condom trade, in which cheaply made condoms are falsely marketed as established brands. About half the condoms sold in Russia are counterfeit, the Bolshoi Gorod magazine reported last month, citing industry experts.

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