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Russian Lawmaker Proposes 12 Years in Prison for Food Smugglers

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If a Russian lawmaker gets his way, cheese-runners circumventing the country's ban on foreign food imports by bringing in caches of illicit Italian Parmesan may soon be facing up to 12 years in prison.

State Duma deputy Yevgeny Fyodorov of the ruling United Russia party has proposed expanding Russian laws against smuggling, adding food from Western countries to the list of illegal contraband goods that currently includes such items as drugs and weapons, pro-government daily Izvestia reported Thursday.

Currently Russia's Criminal Code cites penalties ranging from large fines to 12 years in prison for smuggling alcohol and tobacco — which dealers often move across borders illegally to avoid taxes — and Fyodorov urged the same punishment for smuggling into Russia foreign food items that Moscow has banned in response to Western economic sanctions over the crisis in Ukraine.

"If would be perfectly fair to expand the punishment envisaged for smuggling cigarettes and alcohol to include people who ignore the authorities' decisions about the food embargo," Fyodorov was quoted by Izvestia as saying.

The bill, which Fyodorov plans to introduce at the State Duma during the upcoming fall legislative session, would spare tourists "who bring with them food in their carry-on bags, in larger quantities than is permitted," applying only to "massive shipments," the lawmaker was quoted as saying.

Currently, food brought into Russia in violation of the embargo can be confiscated and, according to a recent order from President Vladimir Putin, should be destroyed.

But current laws do include any criminal penalty for those who are caught moving large shipments of illicit Western food across the border.

"Currently there is no such culpability," head of Moscow's Bar Association Andrei Knyazev was quoted by Izvestia as saying. "The current articles of the Criminal Code regulate responsibility for smuggling narcotics, poisons and so on, but they do not cover consumer goods, including food."

Dmitry Chugunov, a high-ranking member of Russia's Civic Chamber, a state panel that advises the government on legal issues, praised Fyodorov's proposal.

"If we don't kick this food addiction, we will never learn to build worthy cheese factories, will not reach positive results in import replacement," Chugunov was quoted as saying.

"If people are allowed to bypass laws, these [Western] products will continue to reach our shelves, but will be more and more expensive," he said, Izvestia reported. "So if there are no laws yet regulating this activity, they should appear."

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