The Moscow Times
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Russia Looks to Make Food Smuggling as Serious as Arms Trade

By The Moscow Times

August 20, 2015



A customer chooses a sausage at an Auchan grocery store in Moscow, Russia.

Russian customs officials want to make smuggling banned Western foods a criminal offense as serious as dealing in radioactive materials or explosives.

In retaliation to Western sanctions over its role in the Ukraine crisis, Russia last year banned certain food imports from the European Union, the U.S. and a few other countries. President Vladimir Putin this month ordered the destruction of confiscated contraband food, with hundreds of tons of fruit and cheese steamrolled and burnt in a public display of the ban enforcement.

The Federal Customs Service on Thursday published a draft bill suggesting that banned foreign foods be listed as "strategically important," a label so far reserved for radioactive materials, poison, armaments and explosives. The re-classification would allow authorities to bring criminal charges, with prison terms of up to seven years, against individuals and

companies involved in smuggling.

The customs officials claim that the current penalty for banned food smuggling, a fine of up to 300,000 ($4,500), is not harsh enough as a deterrent.

The Kremlin is determined to enforce the ban amid continuing tensions with Europe and the U.S. over the Ukrainian crisis, and has ignored a public outcry over the destruction of food at a time when the economy is in recession and the poor are struggling to feed themselves.

Eager to demonstrate their zeal in enforcing the ban, local authorities from all over Russia file daily reports on new and increasingly exotic means they employ to destroy the banned food.

Prosecutors in the Volga River city of Samara said Thursday they had discovered several kilos of banned French and Dutch cheese in a local grocery store and destroyed it by slicing it into pieces and pouring household bleach on it.

The draft bill on criminal liability for food smuggling will be up for discussion in the government until Sept. 3, when a decision is expected.

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