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Federation Council Approves Controversial Anti-Terrorism Laws

By Hannah Berkman

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The upper house of the Russian parliament, the Federation Council (FC), has passed a controversial anti-terrorism legislation package, the Interfax news agency reported Wednesday.

The laws include far-reaching surveillance initiatives, harsher punishments for inciting or justifying terrorism online, and an increase in the number of crimes with which children aged between 14 and 17 can be charged. The lower house of parliament, the State Duma, approved the laws on June 24.

Independent Duma Deputy Dmitry Gudkov took to social media to call the vote a "revolution" after five of the 170 council members voted against the legislation. The FC usually passes legislation unanimously.

Many analysts and officials have raised concerns about the new laws. The Tatarstan State Council was among the organizations opposing the legislation's adoption, saying that the

bills warranted more discussion and “should not be rushed.”

Alexander Verkhovsky, the director of Moscow’s SOVA center — a group that monitors abuses of anti-extremism legislation — said that the laws limited citizens’ rights and allowed for punishment prior to a court decision.

The heads of Russia’s top mobile phone operators also spoke out against the laws, writing in a letter to the Federation Council’s head that the requirements for their companies to store user data were “technically and economically impractical.”

Russian Minister for Communications and Mass Media, Nikolai Nikiforov, said earlier on Wednesday that “a number of amendments” would be needed to ensure the package could be implemented.

The laws will go into effect in 2018 if signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that Putin was aware of concerns and had the right to make the final decision on vetoing the bill.

The laws were proposed by ultra-conservative United Russia lawmaker Irina Yarovaya and FC member Viktor Ozerov. Yarovaya has spearheaded a number of other repressive initiatives, including criminalizing the offense of religious sentiments, allowing police to fire at crowds, banning drug users from entering employment, and requiring NGOs receiving foreign funding to register as “foreign agents.”

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