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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Here Are the Russian Laws that Came Into Effect This Year

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It wasn't just hangovers and eerily quiet streets that the first day of 2018 brought with it. A score of new laws also came into effect in Russia when the clock struck midnight on Jan. 1, 2018.

Here is a pick of the most important:

- **1. No more anonymous messaging**

Users of online messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram are now required to identify themselves by their local cell phone number.

The controversial law also blocks users who disseminate "illegal information," as critics deride President Vladimir Putin's strategy to establish greater regulation over the Internet as

a crackdown on freedoms.

2. Tax-free shopping

Foreign tourists will now be able to reclaim local value-added taxes (VAT) on non-food goods purchased in Russia.

Under the system that will be field-tested in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Sochi, tourists will be able to get a refund of 18 percent VAT from purchases over 10,000 rubles ($175) with a valid receipt.

3. Firstborn benefits

Poorer families will receive a monthly allowance on the birth of a first child, as the government attempts to counter the decline in birth rates.

An existing "maternity capital" policy will also allow families to receive monthly payments for second children until the end of 2021.

Earlier reports suggested late in December that mothers-to-be tried to delay labor until 2018 to qualify for the benefits.

4. Foreign labor quotas

Russian pharmacies and retailers will be prohibited from hiring foreigners, with the exception of employers in Moscow and eight other Russian regions.

5. Minimum wage increase

Workers in Russia's lowest-earning income bracket will now earn 9,489 rubles ($165) monthly, or 85 percent of the minimum subsistence level. The government has promised to get the country's minimum wage up to the subsistence level by Jan. 1, 2019.

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