

State Duma Approves Putin's Proposal to Soften 'Extremism' Law

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Sergei Kiselyov / Moskva News Agency

Russia's State Duma has approved legislation to soften criminal penalties for social media posts deemed "extremist" by the authorities — a measure proposed by President Vladimir Putin earlier this year.

Article 282 of Russia's Criminal Code has been used as a catch-all by the authorities in recent years to target users who post insensitive online content, including memes, on grounds that they incite racial, religious or other forms of hatred. According to the SOVA Center NGO, a total of 461 cases were opened in 2017 for violations of the article — which carry jail sentences of up to five years. The Russian president [submitted](#) a draft bill in October to partially decriminalize the offence after a series of high-profile cases this summer sparked public criticism.

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Under the new legislation [passed](#) by the State Duma on Wednesday, first-time violators of article 282 will be punished with fines or administrative arrests of up to 15 days. Repeat offenders will be [subject](#) to up to five years in jail.

“[The legislation] will rule out excessively harsh punishments for reckless one-time posts or shares on the internet,” Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin [said](#). “On the other hand, it will preserve accountability for online extremism.”

Critics have said that the new legislation fails to address the authorities’ broad application of anti-extremism laws.

“These are simply cosmetic changes to calm people down,” Damir Gainutdinov, a lead lawyer at the Agora international human rights group, told The Moscow Times after Putin submitted the legislation in October.

The legislation must be passed by the upper house Federation Council before being signed into law by President Putin — typically a formality in Russia’s legislative process.

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