

Insight

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Analysis: Russian domestic violence bill finalised amid controversy

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ROSSIYA 1

Russian state TV talk show criticises existing domestic violence legislation

On 29 November, the Russian upper house of parliament, Federation Council, proposed its first version of a bill against domestic violence, which has long been the subject of controversy.

Earlier this year, several high-profile cases of abuse led to a renewed discussion of the bill in parliament. While some government officials insisted that the bill be adopted as a matter of urgency, others continued to downplay the problem of domestic violence, calling it "[exaggerated](#)".

At the same time, debate in the Russian media has also intensified, with many pro-Kremlin commentators starting to voice support for the new legislation.

Domestic violence was partially decriminalised in February 2017: the first instance of battery became an administrative offence punishable by a fine between R5,000 (78 dollars) and R30,000 (470 dollars). Since then, only repeat violations are considered a crime.

What does the new bill say?

The [final version of the bill](#), published on the Federation Council website on 29 November, does not mention punishment for domestic violence, nor does it class it as either an administrative or criminal offence.

Instead, it defines domestic violence as "a deliberate act causing or threatening physical harm and (or) psychological suffering and (or) damage to property, and not containing signs of an administrative or criminal offence".

The bill says its objective is to "preserve the family" and promote reconciliation between victims and offenders.

The bill introduces the concept of [restraining orders](#) issued by the police to protect victims of domestic violence or those in danger. The orders forbid offenders from engaging in communication with victims or finding them for 30 days, and can be extended to 60 days.

If the police officer issuing the order suspects that the offender is likely to violate the above rules, they can request a similar protective order from a court, which can be extended for up to a year.

Rights activists' criticism

The proposed version of the bill triggered a wave of criticism from women's rights activists.

"I am in total horror. Starting with the purpose of the law which is 'to preserve the family' and not to protect the victim, and ending with 'to support the reconciliation of the sides'. We have been constantly telling real stories of victims murdered by their abusers exactly after reconciliation," women's rights advocate Alyona Popova [said in a Facebook post](#).

She also pointed out that the new bill "completely excludes all types of physical violence (battery, harm to health, etc.) from the law".

Lawyer Mari Davtyan, who is also a member of the Federation Council's group working on the bill, [said on Facebook](#) that the proposed version of the law was "illiterate in legal terms".

"This is a result of the Federation Council flirting with different kinds of radical conservative groups. And this is bad! You have to think not about humouring those people who see violence as a traditional value, but about protecting those whose life and health are in danger," she added.

The discussion of the bill has been extended to 15 December before the lower house of parliament, the State Duma, considers it.

Official stance

But the official position on the bill is far from unanimous.

Among its active supporters are Moskalkova, Federation Council chairwoman Valentina Matviyenko and lower house member Oksana Pushkina.

Other officials were reserved.

On 22 November, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the domestic violence bill was "not on the agenda of the president's administration".

The Justice Ministry, in a letter to the European Court of Human Rights, said that the problem of domestic violence in Russia was "[exaggerated](#)", adding that the majority of domestic abuse victims were men.

The leader of the nationalist LDPR party, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, said the reason for domestic violence was "men's undervalued role in society", while controversial politician Vitaly Milonov said on [Govorit Moskva radio](#) that the domestic violence legislation was "witches' law".

Patriarch Kirill of the Kremlin-backed Russian Orthodox Church criticised the bill, saying it would sanction "an intrusion into family affairs".

State TV support

The topic of domestic violence previously received little attention from state TV, but over the past month prominent state TV presenters voiced support for the bill even in the absence of unambiguous official backing. Many comments followed the murder of St Petersburg student Anastasia Yeshchenko by a professor.

On 17 November, Rossiya 1 TV [anchor Dmitry Kiselyov said](#) in his weekly news programme Vesti Nedeli (News of the Week): "It is strange that there is no term for domestic violence in Russian law. Therefore, there are no convincing statistics. However, it is absolutely clear that it is women who suffer the most from domestic violence in married couples."

Speaking on his talk show, Rossiya 1 journalist Vladimir Solovyov called for "a zero-tolerance policy on violence against women". In a later programme, Solovyov also said that "all conditions need to be created to help the woman understand it is not her fault".

The bill on domestic violence was discussed on Rossiya 1 talk show 60 Minut (60 Minutes), too. Presenters [Yevgeny Popov and Olga Skabeyeva criticised existing legislation](#).

Why was the discussion renewed?

In 2018, human rights ombudsman Tatiana Moskalkova, who had originally supported the partial decriminalisation of domestic violence, [said the decision was a "mistake"](#).

In July 2019, Moskalkova [said she was going to](#) push for the adoption of the new law against domestic violence following a public outcry over the news of a seven-year-old girl from Ingushetia being abused by her family.

In November, the case of a St Petersburg State University professor killing and dismembering his student [contributed to the discussion](#). The professor claimed he was in a relationship with the student and killed her out of jealousy.

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