

Duma to Consider Harsher Libel Penalties

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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The new bill to be heard in the State Duma would classify libel as a criminal act. **Andrei Makhonin**

Opposition activists and human rights defenders have condemned a new State Duma bill that would dramatically increase the punishment for defamation, calling the proposal an attempt to silence dissenters.

The bill, introduced Friday, would make defamation a criminal offense punishable by a maximum fine of 500,000 rubles (\$15,200) or up to five years in prison.

"It's obvious that the idea ... is to silence anybody who criticizes the government and promotes the protest movement," said Deputy Duma Speaker Ivan Melnikov of the Communist Party, Interfax reported.

Defamation was decriminalized in December as part of a general liberalization under then-President Dmitry Medvedev and is currently punishable by a fine of up to 3,000 rubles (\$90).

United Russia's Pavel Krashennikov, who co-authored the bill, said that the current penalty is "ineffective" and that decriminalization "hadn't led to anything good."

"People are practically with impunity accusing others of the most heinous crimes, calling them bandits, terrorists and corrupt officials," he said, Interfax reported.

The bill, which is expected to be heard in a first reading in the fall, would also raise fines for slander from 3,000 rubles to 50,000 rubles.

Veteran human rights leader Lev Ponomarev said the bill is the latest in a series of proposals by ruling party lawmakers aimed at neutering the opposition.

"The crackdown continues. ... They passed gigantic fines for demonstrations, and they want to destroy NGOs that receive foreign funding. This is just one more such initiative," he said, Interfax reported.

Opposition activists are frequently accused of defamation for accusing officials of corruption and other misdeeds.

For example, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and his lawyer have sued Oleg Orlov, former head of the Memorial human rights organization, for defamation in separate cases. He was acquitted in both cases.

Anti-corruption whistle-blower Alexei Navalny, who is being sued by a senior lawmaker for calling United Russia "the party of crooks and thieves," could face a fine of up to 200,000 rubles (\$6,080) under the new legislation.

Deputies from A Just Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party also criticized the bill.

"If we had free elections and parties had equal access to resources, then this might be acceptable," said A Just Russia's Mikhail Yemelyanov, Interfax reported. "Without that, toughening the law and using repressive measures to punish the opposition won't solve the problem. It would only make it worse."

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