

Kazak Smokers Fuming

Author: [IWPR](#)

Angry smokers say they will defy ban on lighting up in public places.

"It's madness! Now I have to run out of my office every time I want to have a smoke. I can't leave my workplace and stand in the corridor for hours, in a specially designated place," said businessman Alexei Mandrykin indignantly.

Many Kazak nicotine addicts are similarly outraged by the government's April 1 ban on smoking in public places. The authors of the bill say it is aimed at reducing the number of smokers - there are 3.2 million, nearly a third of the adult population, according to official statistics. But some believe the number is much higher.

"The count was mainly done in the big cities and regional centres, while smokers in the rural areas have never been counted," said sociologist Mikhail Maznov.

As one might expect, smokers are uniformly against the ban. But many non-smokers appear not to care. Since the ban the Kazak media have carried out surveys which clearly show that most of the former are totally against the law. Of the latter, half are indifferent. Only a quarter of those polled approve of the change.

These polls appear to be a fair reflection of public attitudes, judging by the people IWPR spoke to.

Youngsters are particularly hostile to the ban. A survey conducted by the Association of Sociologists and Political Scientists shows that one third of people aged between 13 and 18 smoke.

"I don't think it is right to ban it. I have always smoked wherever I like, and I'll continue to do so," said Almaty student Kanat Aibasov.

"Few people will obey the law. And I'm not one of them," said Yevgenia Sopina, a high school pupil from Almaty.

Gaukhar Mametova, a manager from Almaty, does not smoke, and welcomes the ban. "At least there is hope that the war on smoking will produce results," she said.

Others people think there are more effective ways of addressing the problem.

"I am not a smoker, but I think that what the authorities have come up with is absurd. It would be much more effective to raise tobacco prices.... Many people would then think twice about spending money on cigarettes," said Bishkek resident Yulia Medvedkina. She notes that the cost of the cheapest pack of cigarettes in Kazakhstan - about 15 US cents - is a fraction of prices in European countries.

Sociologists suggest that the ban will be useless, or even counterproductive.

"Many smokers have taken a negative view of the change, and think it is an encroachment on their rights. This perception of the bill will play a role that is anything but positive," said Erkin Abdrakhmanov, a sociologist from Astana.

Abdrakhmanov compares the situation to the anti-alcohol laws instituted towards the end of the Soviet Union, when the ban only increased consumption.

Under Soviet and post-Soviet governments, smoking was not allowed in many public places, but the measures were enforced half-heartedly or not at all. Public attitudes in Kazakhstan have not turned against smoking as they have in many other countries.

Another factor that suggests the anti-smoking law will not enjoy popular support is that many perceive it as just another method for officials to collect money. Supporters of the bill say it will mean more revenue for the central government, but many people think that the institutions where smoking is banned will simply hold on to money from the fines they collect.

There is still no system of fines which would allow the law to be imposed in practice, although IWPR was told at the justice ministry that this would come.

To check how the law is taking effect, IWPR's correspondent carried out two practical experiments - in the Lomonosov Theatre and the international bus station in Almaty.

In the theatre I found that people were smoking as before in the bar, with no attempt by managers to stop them. I then went to the bus station and lit up in the waiting room.

After a couple of minutes I was approached by a member of staff who told me to stop - and to pay a fine. I agreed to pay up as long as he could read me the relevant legal regulation. At this the staff member called security, so I retreated - without paying the fine.

Given the complexity of enforcing the law, and given the natural disinclination of Kazak smokers to knuckle under, it seems unlikely that the country's public spaces will become smoke-free any time soon.

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