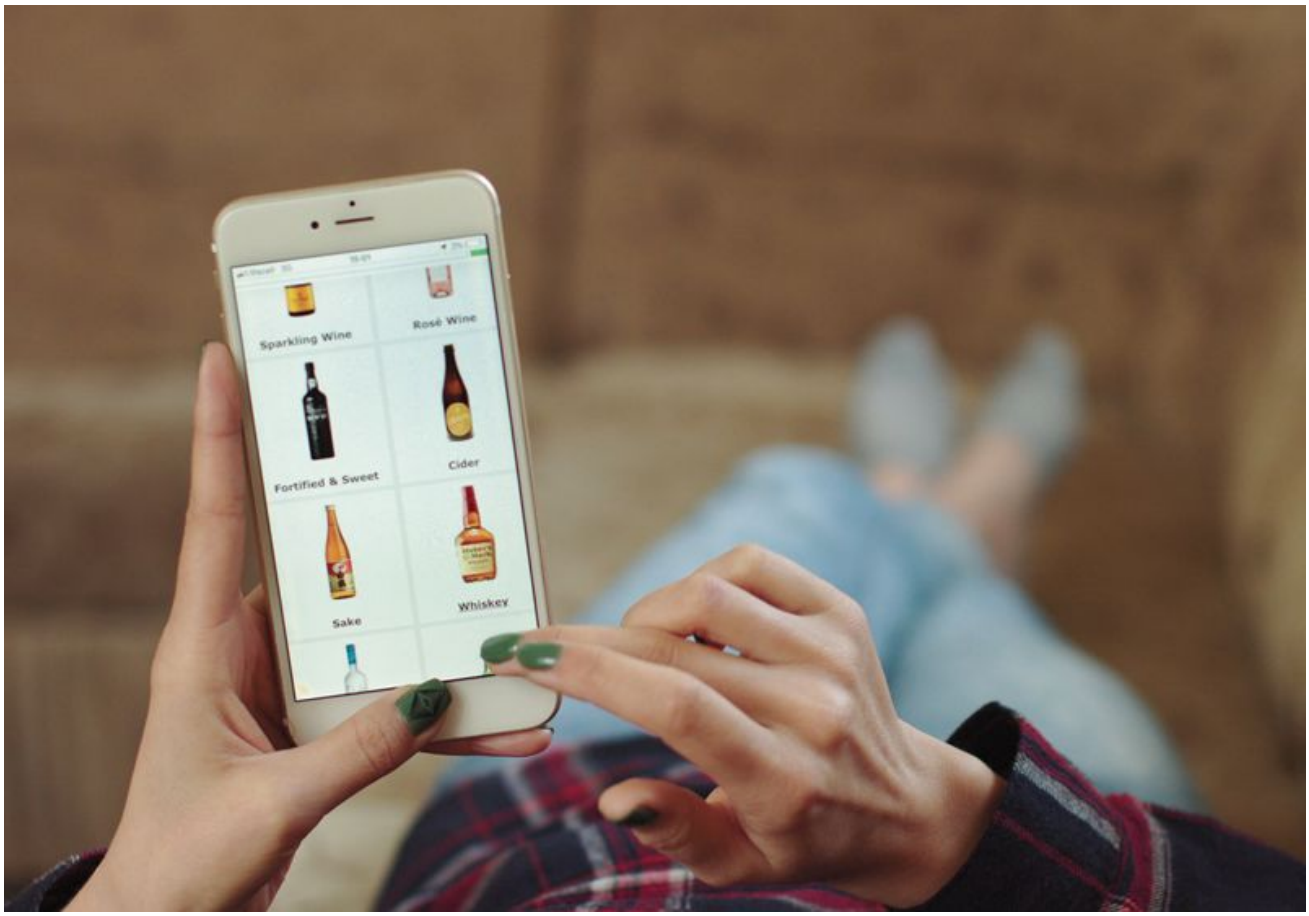
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Russian lawmakers indefinitely delay a pilot for online wine sales through Russian Post

Officials cited objections from Moscow authorities to an experiment that would have created a narrow exception to Russia’s ban on remote alcohol sales

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Russia’s lower house of parliament has postponed, without setting a new date, government-backed bills that would have allowed an experiment in online wine sales through Russian Post in Moscow and the surrounding Moscow region.

Maxim Topilin, chairman of the State Duma committee on economic policy, said Tuesday, November 17, that consideration of the two bills had been delayed for an indefinite period. He said Moscow and the Moscow region had raised a number of objections during a government commission on legislative activity, although, according to his remarks carried by Interfax, no formal comments from the authorities had yet been received by lawmakers.

An informed source cited by Interfax said the bill package was moved at the proposal of State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin after questions were raised for the government as it continued work on the initiative.

The two bills, numbered 332027-8 and 332033-8, were introduced by the government in April 2023. Deputies approved them in a first reading on November 11, but the proposal has remained controversial inside the Russian political system because it would carve out a limited exception to the country’s broad ban on remote alcohol sales.

The main bill would have launched a pilot program for the retail online sale of domestic wine through a specialized Russian Post website. Under the proposal, eligible products would include still wine, fortified wine and sparkling wine made from grapes grown in Russia. The seller and the consumer would enter into a retail sales contract remotely, and delivery and handover would take place only in Moscow and the Moscow region.

The proposal was drafted to let producers already holding licenses for producing, storing and supplying alcoholic products sell directly under the experiment without having to obtain an additional retail alcohol license. Russian Post, under the plan, would also have been allowed to store Russian wine belonging to those sellers without obtaining a separate storage license for that product.

The bill also went beyond Russian-made wine in a narrow way. It would have extended the experiment to wine, fortified wine and sparkling wine produced from grapes grown in member states of the Eurasian Economic Union, provided the origin of those grapes

could be confirmed under the bloc’s legal rules. That detail meant the measure was not only about Russian producers, but also about a potential sales channel for some suppliers from neighboring EAEU countries.

The second bill would have amended Russia’s law on state regulation of the production and circulation of ethyl alcohol, alcoholic products and alcohol-containing products. Its purpose was to remove, for the duration of the experiment, the ban on distance sales of alcoholic beverages that otherwise applies nationwide.

That national prohibition has been in place since 2007. Since then, Russian officials have repeatedly discussed whether online alcohol sales should be legalized, at least in limited form. Interfax said the Finance Ministry once prepared a separate draft that envisioned online trade starting in 2020, but that effort met opposition from the Health Ministry and the Interior Ministry.

The current initiative traces back to a 2021 instruction from the president directing the government and Russian Post to carry out an experiment involving the sale of Russian wines. Supporters have presented the idea as a controlled test rather than a broad opening of e-commerce for all alcohol. Even so, the issue has drawn strong attention because any exception to the online sales ban is politically sensitive in Russia.

Interfax said the proposal generated significant debate in the State Duma. Lawmakers placed the bills on the plenary agenda for first-reading consideration only on the condition that Agriculture Minister Oksana Lut, Digital Development Minister Maksut Shadayev and Russian Post chief executive Mikhail Volkov take part in the discussion. That requirement reflected the number of agencies and interests involved, from agricultural producers and regulators to digital oversight and postal logistics.

The pause leaves unclear whether the government will revise the bills to address concerns from Moscow and the surrounding region or whether the project will remain stalled. Topilin’s comments did not indicate a timetable for renewed consideration, and the source cited by Interfax suggested that questions for the government itself were part of the reason for the delay.

For the beverage sector, especially wineries in Russia, the delay keeps a possible new retail route closed for now. It also extends uncertainty for domestic producers and potentially for some EAEU suppliers that could have benefited if the pilot had moved forward. With online alcohol sales still banned at the national level, the fate of this narrow wine experiment is likely to remain an important signal for companies watching whether Russia is willing to loosen its rules on digital sales of alcoholic drinks.