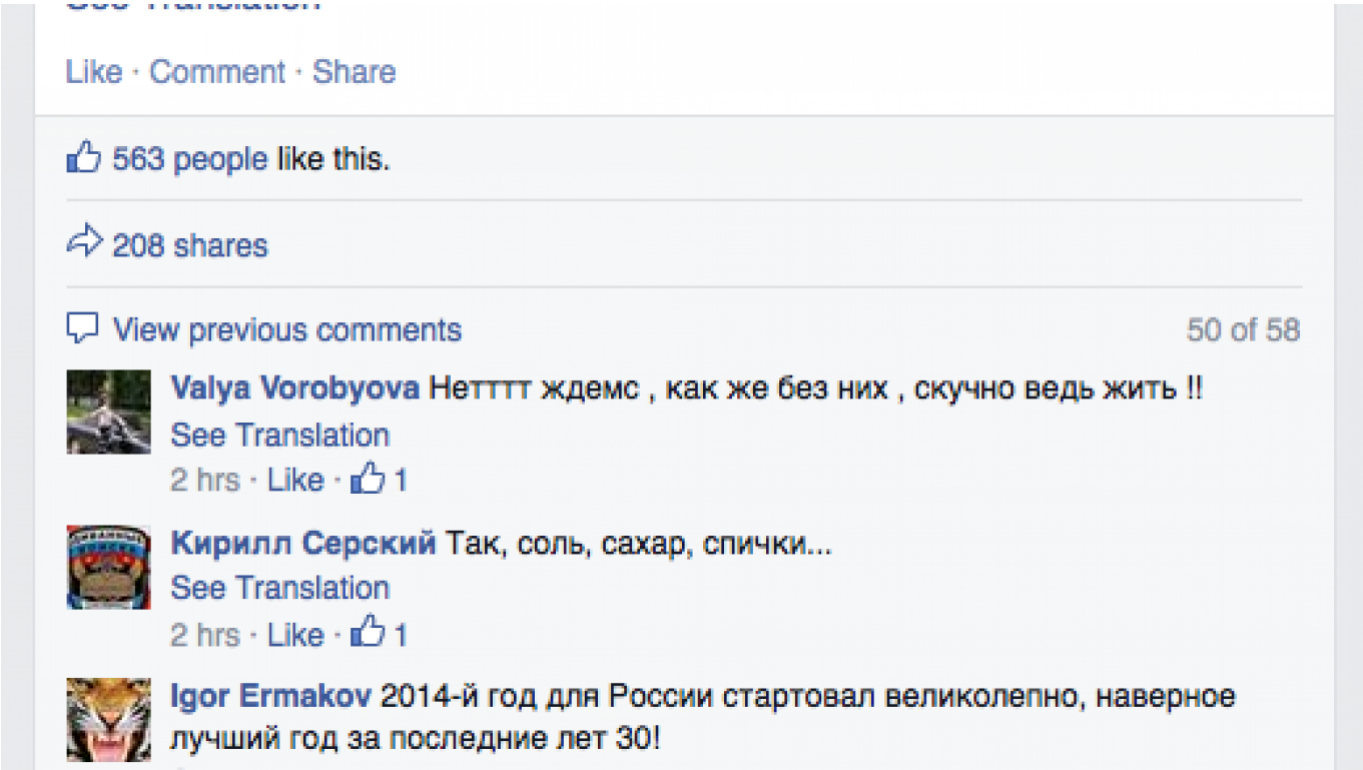
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Foreign Ministry Joins Pranksters With April Fool's Joke

By Andrew McChesney

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A message on the Foreign Ministry's Facebook page wishing people a happy April 1 and "no more jokes."

The Russian government joined a queue of pranksters taking advantage of April Fool's Day to have some fun Monday, but several people found reality so surprising that they wondered whether there was any reason to joke.

The Foreign Ministry said in a statement that it was going to adopt a strictly serious approach from now on out.

"Congratulations to all on April 1, 2014!" the ministry said on its Facebook page. "No more jokes."

The statement, which ended with a winking smiley face, spawned a slew of tweets as well as praise from some quarters. One Facebook user, who identified herself as Moscow resident

Tani Poly, said the ministry might intend to be serious, but it still had a sense of humor.

"So does the foreign minister and Russia's representative to the UN," she wrote. "This is superb. Something to be proud of. And I say this without any irony."

Over on Yandex, Russia's most popular search engine, Internet users who might have wanted to look up the latest news on Crimea were instead greeted by a realistic-looking fly that scurried around the screen.

"Yandex's main page is the best April Fool's I have seen so far," Associated Press reporter Nataliya Vasilyeva said approvingly on Twitter.

The fly seemed to have disappeared from the site later in the day.

But with a record 17 centimeters of snow falling on Moscow in 24 hours, people pulled themselves out of bed Monday morning wondering what had happened to the spring. Moscow's temperature peaked at a record 17 degrees Celsius in March.

"Winter has returned to Moscow, and this is no April Fool's joke," Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said at a City Hall meeting. He asked Deputy Mayor Pyotr Biryukov whether the city was prepared to deal with the snow.

Biryukov said Moscow had not seen so much snow on April 1 in 130 years but assured the mayor that the city would be unburied within 24 hours.

Meanwhile, private Dozhd television also found life to be stranger than fiction. It tweeted: "This is not a joke. Gennady Zyuganov is dissatisfied with Russian government's 'liberal course.'"

A hyperlink with the tweet led to an Interfax report about Zyuganov, head of the Communist Party, who complained to reporters on Tuesday that Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's Cabinet was "holding a liberal course" and failing to bankroll economic development.

Stories like the snowfall and Zyuganov appeared to be too much for Tony Halpin, a former Times of London reporter. He tweeted: "There are so many stories today that could be April Fool's but aren't that you wonder why it is necessary for newspapers to bother."

Well, The Moscow Times was among the newspapers that bothered, offering an article that said President Vladimir Putin had appointed ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych as his adviser on Ukraine affairs.

But the joke turned out to be on The Moscow Times when the story was inadvertently

published on its website a day early. The newspaper quickly took the article offline, but it had already generated nearly 200 tweets — and the cat was out of the bag. Readers had caught drift of the joke before it was sprung.

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