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Media Watchdog Warns Charlie Hebdo-Style Cartoons Constitute Crime in Russia

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Russia's media watchdog on Friday warned that the publication of religious-themed religious cartoons, like those of Charlie Hebdo, could be considered a crime.

Russia's communications watchdog issued a formal warning to the country's media on Friday against publishing religious-themed cartoons, saying their publication could be classified as a crime.

The warning issued on Roskomnadzor's federal website followed an earlier statement on its Facebook page and previous warnings from regional branches of the watchdog.

"The publication in the media of religious-themed cartoons could be classified by Roskomnadzor as offensive or degrading to members of religious denominations and organizations, or as inciting national or religious hatred, which is a direct violation of the laws on mass media and extremism," the federal agency said in its statement.

The agency also said the publication of religion-themed satirical content contradicted "ethical and moral norms formed over a century of cohabitation" between people of different backgrounds and faiths in Russia.

Following the deadly terrorist attack on French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris on Jan. 7, which the gunmen said was revenge for the magazine's depictions of the prophet Muhammad, publications across the world have reprinted some of the cartoons in a show of solidarity and support for freedom of speech.

The Kamchatka branch of Roskomnadzor wrote to local news outlets Tuesday to warn them that publishing cartoons of religious figures was "inadmissible."

The next day, the St. Petersburg-based Business News Agency said it had received an order from the local Roskomnadzor to take down the pictures of Charlie Hebdo's latest cover — again featuring the prophet Muhammad — that it had published on its website last week.

Business News Agency said Roskomnadzor had warned that a criminal case could be opened over such publications, and had "strongly recommended" that it take down or replace the images. The website obliged, covering up the picture of the magazine cover with a notice reading: "We can't show you this image at the request of Roskomnadzor."

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