Putin Aide Urges Russians to Quit Facebook, Citing Free Speech Concerns

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Members of the Ukrainian armed forces stay at a building damaged in fighting with pro-Russian separatists in Pesky village, near Donetsk, Ukraine, July 6.

After Facebook blocked the accounts of several prominent Russians for their use of a divisive term for Ukrainians, an aide to President Vladimir Putin advised Russian users to abandon their accounts on the popular social network in favor of homegrown alternatives, Russian media reported.

Igor Shchegolev told Russian users that the switch would help them avoid having their content blocked, TASS reported Tuesday.

The object of Facebook's recent hyper-vigilance has been the word *khokhly*, a term used to describe Ukrainians that can be either offensive or jovial, depending both on context and on who you ask.

A Ukrainian dictionary entry defines *khokhol* (the singular of *khokhly*) as a "derogatory name for a Ukrainian."

In popular usage, the term has been widely used in Russian and Ukrainian culture for centuries, often as a humorous, but not poorly intentioned jab.

But following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of fighting between rebel forces and the Ukrainian military, the term has increasingly been interpreted as demeaning and pejorative.

In late June, Eduard Bagirov — a Russian writer known for his conservative beliefs — was banned from Facebook for a week over a post that referred to Ukrainian people as *khokhly*.

Shortly thereafter Maxim Ksenzov, deputy head of Russia's communications watchdog Roskomnadzor, was slapped with a 24-hour Facebook ban for using the same term.

"Tolerance is fashionable at the moment (and I'm not talking about the religious notion). But I don't want to be tolerant!!" Ksenzov wrote in the post that provoked Facebook's ire. "Soviet people are Soviet People. Sometimes *khokhly* are *khokhly*," he wrote, latching a couple of smiley emoticons onto the controversial word.

Ironically, Ksenzov serves as a leading official in an organization that habitually blocks websites in Russia. More than 10,000 websites have been blocked by Roskomnadzor as of Thursday, according to a list available online.

One day after the incident, Ksenzov announced his decision to delete his Facebook account, opting instead to use its Russian equivalent VKontakte.

Intrigued by the phenomenon, Russian journalists and bloggers began to experiment with testing Facebook's limits, deliberately using the word *khokhly* in their posts.

Last week Facebook issued a one-week block of journalist Maxim Kononenko's page for posting a poem by Alexander Pushkin, a man widely considered to be Russia's greatest poet, containing the word *khokhly*.

Anton Nosik, a prominent Russian blogger, was blocked for 24 hours for posting a screenshot of Kononenko's Pushkin post, noting that the content is not blocked automatically; complaints are filed by users, causing Facebook administrators to respond.

Dmitry Popov, a journalist with tabloid newspaper Moskovsky Komsomolets took the experiment a step further, using the term in the context of its original meaning. Before evolving into a slang term for Ukrainians, the word *khokhol* referred to a historic hairstyle commonly sported by Ukrainian cossacks, featuring a long lock of hair left hanging from the top of a shaven head. Context aside, his post was deleted by Facebook last week.

By Tuesday, the scandal reached such proportions as to invite the attention of Russia's Foreign Ministry, whose spokeswoman Maria Zakharova took to her own Facebook page to decry the popular social network's blocking spree, saying it constituted "censorship" in a post in her own Facebook account.

According to Facebook's community standards, the social network removes hate speech, which is described as content that directly attacks others based on their race, ethnicity and national origin, among other features.

Speaking with RIA Novosti on Wednesday, a Facebook representative said that they "don't comment on individual cases of blocking user accounts."

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