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Teen Faces Charges for Insulting Pro-Putin Russians Online

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Efrem Lukatsky / AP

A 19-year-old Russian is facing criminal charges of insulting a national group's "human dignity" for several comments he posted in social media. The kicker? The national group in question appears to be "vata" — a negative slang term referring to pro-Kremlin Russians.

According to prosecutors, Alexander Gozenko, a resident of the south-eastern city of Saratov, made comments calling for violence toward a nationality on Vkontakte, Russia's largest social network. Officials have not specified the targeted nationality.

However, the SOVA Center, a Moscow-based think tank focused on extremism, reported that prosecutors launched the case against the teenager for a comment that said, "I propose to organize a Holocaust of vata." Law enforcement viewed the comment as inciting hatred toward Russians, SOVA said in an online statement.

In 2016, Russian law enforcement opened 298 criminal cases against individuals for statements made online, according to a report by the Agora international human rights

foundation.

Of□those, 29 people were convicted and handed down prison sentences. Three were ordered sent to psychiatric hospitals. Combined, the 29 convicted□Internet users were given 59 years behind bars. The average prison term in 2016 for online offenses was two years.

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The number of such cases has jumped sharply since 2015, when only 202 cases were□launched and 18 users were sent to prison.

According to Agora, the□likelihood of prosecution was higher for internet users who wrote□about Russia's military conflicts abroad.

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