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Moscow Activists Protest Widespread Facial Recognition With Face Paint

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"Sledui" (Follow) advises followers to paint their faces with bright, asymmetric patterns and thick black marks to throw off facial recognition. **katrin.nenasheva / Facebook**

A Moscow activist campaign is encouraging people to protect their privacy by covering their faces in bright, bold designs.

Police-controlled facial recognition technology has been expanding in Moscow's wide-reaching surveillance network since 2017. While law enforcement says the technology helps catch wanted criminals, critics have spoken out against what they say is non-consensual identification and the potential for citizens' data to be sold to third parties.

The Telegram-based campaign, called "Sledui" (Follow), advises followers to paint their faces with bright, asymmetric patterns and thick black marks to throw off facial recognition.

Sledui says its primary goal is to act as a visible symbol of discontent with the city's facial recognition system, which it says lacks transparency and was implemented without input

from the public.

“We do not want to enter the lenses of CCTV cameras without our consent. We do not want new technologies to lead to total control. ... To protect ourselves from surveillance and facial recognition for a few minutes, we use makeup — makeup as a symbol of disobedience,” artist and activist Ekaterina Nenasheva wrote on her Facebook page.

Sledui's Telegram channel, which has more than 240 followers, publishes instructions for creating a design and encourages members to upload photos of themselves once they’ve painted their faces.

Related article: Russia Is Building One of the World’s Largest Facial Recognition Networks

This is not the first time concerned citizens have taken the fight against facial recognition into their own hands. In 2017, a Yandex employee designed a makeup pattern which blocked facial recognition algorithms, but ended the project out of concern that his designs could be used to commit crimes. The following year, a journalist wore a hyper-realistic mask resembling an American artist’s face in public for a week.

Moscow has one of the world's largest video surveillance networks, with over 170,000 cameras throughout the city. Starting in September, facial recognition technology will be introduced in the Moscow metro.

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