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Russia's Human Rights Chief Slams Chatbots for Dodging Ukraine War Questions

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A Yandex “Alisa” AI assistant. **Alexander Shcherbak / TASS**

Russian tech companies Yandex and VKontakte are being grilled by government officials for making their homegrown artificial intelligence chatbots avoid subjects related to the invasion of Ukraine, the Kommersant business daily reported Tuesday.

Presidential Human Rights Council chief Valery Fadeyev said he was surprised to learn that Yandex’s Alisa and VKontakte’s Marusia refuse to answer when asked about the legal status of eastern Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the early 2022 massacre of Ukrainian civilians in Bucha.

“[OpenAI’s] ChatGPT has answers. I thought it would be harsh [Western] propaganda. But no — it’s one side’s opinion and the opposite side. There’s a discussion. It’s vague, but there’s an answer,” Fadeyev was quoted as saying at a forum.

“Why do our new tools hesitate to answer?” he asked.

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Yandex’s head of AI development, Alexander Kraynov, hinted that producing an answer deemed “wrong” by the Kremlin carried the risk of criminal prosecution amid wartime censorship and a crackdown on freedoms.

“Avoiding the answer is the best thing we can do for now because if we had answered badly, we would have most likely been banned altogether,” Kommersant quoted Kraynov as saying at the event.

Human Rights Council member Igor Ashmanov confronted Kraynov for allowing Russian children to face ideological ambiguity.

“There’s no sense in telling a child ‘You know, one source says the Russians killed everyone in Bucha, while another says it’s an American and Ukrainian fake.’ The child should have one answer,” Ashmanov said. “It’s the same with history — even talking to a teenager, you can’t give them many points of view.”

It was not immediately clear whether a VKontakte representative also took part in the discussion on “protecting rights and freedoms in a digital age.”

Dmitry Medvedev, Russia’s former president and current deputy chairman of Russia’s Security Council, accused Yandex’s chatbot of being a “terrible coward” earlier in May when it dodged questions about U.S. laws allowing the seizure of Russian assets, as well as about statutes of the Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera.

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