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St. Petersburg to Introduce Ethnicity Recognition Software in CCTV Cameras

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Dmitri Lovetsky / AP / TASS

Officials in St. Petersburg announced controversial plans to equip thousands of the city's surveillance cameras with ethnicity recognition software, the Kommersant business newspaper reported Thursday.

Oleg Kapitanov, head of interethnic relations for the St. Petersburg city government, said around 8,000 of the city's 102,000 cameras will feature the new ethnicity recognition technology. According to him, the system will help combat "the formation of ethnic enclaves" and "prevent social tension."

Kapitanov said the St. Petersburg city government purchased an ethnic recognition software license for 38.4 million rubles ($434,000) from an unidentified vendor as part of the city's "Safe City" program.

Chinese security firms have marketed racial and ethnic profiling capabilities abroad, and surveillance research groups have documented growing demand in China for facial

recognition cameras that track characteristics such as skin color and ethnicity.

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Russia's presidential Human Rights Council chief, Valery Fadeyev, told Kommersant that he views plans to roll out ethnicity recognition cameras in St. Petersburg as "degrading to human dignity."

Alexandra Dokuchayeva, deputy director of the state-affiliated Institute of the Commonwealth of Independent States NGO, warned that the move would "only sow tensions and ethnic discord."

"Ethically, it raises serious questions about the competence of people in government positions," Dokuchayeva said.

Still, St. Petersburg officials have defended the move, saying the system would help authorities predict resource needs for maintaining order at mass public events and optimize the deployment of volunteers and law enforcement officers who speak different languages.

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