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Russia's Supreme Court Says Criticism of Politicians Does Not Constitute Hate Speech

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The Russian Supreme Court. **Artyom Geodakyan / TASS**

Russia's Supreme Court ruled on Tuesday that criticism of politicians, public figures and organizations does not qualify as a criminal offense under the country's anti-extremism laws.

Under those laws, individuals convicted of "inciting hatred, enmity or breaching human dignity" against ethnic, racial, religious or social groups can face up to five years in prison.

Russian activists and some lawmakers have long criticized the laws, arguing that ordinary social media users can be swept up for simply posting insensitive content, including memes.

At a plenum session, the Supreme Court clarified that statements should be considered extremist only if they advocate genocide, mass repression, deportation or other illegal actions against members of a particular ethnicity, race, religion or social group.

"Criticism of political organizations, ideological and religious associations, political or public

figures in connection with the performance of their official duties... should not be regarded as conduct aimed at inciting hatred or enmity," the Interfax news agency quoted the ruling as saying.

The court added that criticism of political, ideological or religious beliefs, as well as ethnic or religious customs, does not meet the legal definition of hate speech.

The Supreme Court also said that the display of Nazi symbols is not punishable if it is intended to combat extremism rather than promote belief in their appeal.

The SOVA Center, a Moscow-based NGO that monitors racism and nationalism in Russia, has reported a "steady rise" in what it describes as wrongful extremism convictions for public statements in recent years.

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