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YouTube takes down anti-gay ad after outrage in Russia

Russian clip on constitutional referendum that attacked LGBT+ adoptions removed from YouTube after outcry.

By Umberto Bacchi

Thomson Reuters Foundation (03.06.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3cCQLJ6> – An online video suggesting Russians back constitutional reform or see gay couples win adoption rights was taken down by YouTube on Wednesday after LGBT+ groups said it incited hatred.

The clip, posted online this week, shows a boy going from joy to heartbreak as he discovers his new parents are men.

The ad had created an online furore that experts said could help garner support for the reform vote, which could let President Vladimir Putin extend his long rule.

It plays on deep-seated anti-gay sentiment in the country, where activists say violence against gay people has been on the rise since the adoption of a 2013 law that banned the dissemination of “gay propaganda” among young Russians.

Only heterosexual couples can adopt children in Russia.

“Here’s your new mum. Don’t be upset,” one of the new adopting parents tells the child as he introduces his partner, who promptly offers the boy a dress. A woman working at the orphanage watches on, then spits on the floor in disgust.

“Will you choose such a Russia? Decide the future of the country – vote for amendments to the constitution,” a voiceover says, suggesting a vote for Putin protects traditional values.

Russia is to hold a nationwide vote on constitutional reforms that include resetting Putin’s presidential term tally to zero, which could extend his rule until 2036.

Another proposed amendment spells out that marriage means a union between a man and a woman – and nothing else.

During two decades in power, Putin has closely aligned himself with the Orthodox Church and sought to distance Russia from liberal Western values, including attitudes toward homosexuality and gender fluidity.

The video drew a torrent of criticism.

Opposition politician Alexei Navalny wrote on Twitter that Putin officials had gone “completely crazy” over homosexuality.

Russian LGBT+ group Stimul said it had filed a complaint with law enforcement agencies, asking for the clip to be removed and an investigation opened.

“This video incites hatred and hostility towards a group of people on the basis of belonging to the LGBT community, it degrades the dignity of a person (and) is frankly discriminatory in nature,” the group said in a statement on Tuesday.

Patriot Media Group, the firm that produced the clip, said the video was not “campaigning against homosexuals” but aimed to explain the content of the July vote.

“The main point is ... the defence of the family institution as a union of a man and a woman,” the group’s head, Nikolai Stolyarchuk, said in a statement, adding the company produced the footage with its own money.

On Wednesday, the video was taken down from YouTube, where it had racked up tens of thousands of views, and replaced with a message saying it violated the company’s policy on hate speech.

The clip is still available on Russian social media VKontakte, where it has more than a million views.

Russia’s investigative committee and the general prosecutor’s office did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

On its website, Patriot lists Evgeny Prigozhin, a businessman dubbed “Putin’s cook” for his close ties to the president, as the head of its board of trustees.

Ben Noble, a Russian politics professor at University College London, said the video seemed designed to stir controversy – possibly to draw attention to the vote.

“It strikes me as being deeply homophobic,” he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone. “It’s really important for the Kremlin that the turnout is as high as possible.”

Critics have dismissed the vote as a constitutional coup which they fear will be rigged and urged voters to stay away or to reject the proposed changes.

The Kremlin has said authorities will take all necessary measures to ensure voters' safety.

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