

Polluted Chelyabinsk Tries to Trick Google

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A city widely reputed as Russia's dirtiest wants to prevent search queries in Yandex and Google from displaying negative reports about its ecology — and is willing to spend taxpayer money to do so.

Chelyabinsk authorities launched last week a state tender worth 300,000 rubles (\$10,700) to "optimize" Yandex and Google queries using 15 search phrases, including "radiation in Chelyabinsk," "dirtiest city in Russia" and "ecology of the Urals."

The first 150 search results in each of the queries must display predominantly "positive or neutral opinions of the ecology of Chelyabinsk and the Chelyabinsk region," according to the tender's [description](#), available on Zakupki.gov.ru. Only 20 percent of the queries may contain negative reports about the region's environment. The count does not include search hits for Russian Wikipedia, of which no "optimization" is requested.

Chelyabinsk is not Russia's dirtiest city — the spot has been occupied by Norilsk since 1992 — but it ranked in the top 10 last year, the State Statistics Service said in June. The city, which has a population of 1.1 million, hosts many industrial facilities, including a metallurgical plant and a ferroalloys factory.

In 1957, nuclear waste exploded at a facility in the closed town of Ozyorsk in the region, leading to radioactive emissions estimated at one-twentieth of the Chernobyl disaster. The story was hushed up until 1989. Search queries related to the incident are also to be modified, according to the tender's description.

Whistleblower Alexei Navalny, who [reported](#) the story on his blog Thursday, called the tender "disgusting and immoral" and dubbed Chelyabinsk Governor Mikhail Yurevich a "proactive idiot." The governor announced a campaign to change the region's public image last September.

But a spokeswoman for the regional government, Svetlana Doronina, [called](#) reports about the region's pollution "horror stories" spread by "radical environmental activists" in the pay of foreign competitors of the local industry, Chelyabinsk.ru reported. She did not name any names.

Yandex and Google are not amused by the tender.

"Yandex has a negative attitude toward any attempt to mislead users and the search engine," company spokesman Ochir Mandzhikov said by e-mail on Friday.

Google Russia spokeswoman Alla Zabrovskaya said by telephone that impartiality is the main principle of the search engine and the content's relevancy is defined solely by Google users.

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