

Статья 29

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Repression by Law

Police against journalists, courts against independent media and the Kremlin against the Free World

By Atle Staalesen

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Barents Observer

The Barents Observer is a journalist-owned online newspaper that covers the Barents region and the Arctic with daily news reports about regional developments, including climate change and environment, energy and industry, civil society, politics, national security and indigenous peoples. The newspaper's core values are freedom of speech and support for democracy. It publishes in English and Russian, and operates in line with the Norwegian Code of Ethics of the Press as well as the principles on the Rights and Duties of the Editor.

The Barents Observer takes the pulse on regional media and in 2019 published the report "*Free Media on the Scaffold*", and in 2017 – the "*Journalism in the Borderland*." In 2016 came "*Barents Observer - Prosessen*" (in Norwegian), the story about how Norwegian regional politicians tried to halt the editorial freedom of the only Norwegian online newspaper published in Russian.

The Barents Observer is itself a victim of repressive policy. Since 2017, its editor has been denied entry to Russia and the newspaper is blocked on Russian territory since 2019.

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Front page: Article 29 in the Russian Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and the press. Design: the Barents Observer

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Introduction

*"Dear individuals cooperating with foreign media agents and receiving financing from abroad! Abandon this dark and ungracious pursuit. Things will only get worse. Come over to the side of the good. We are waiting."*¹

Margarita Simonyan,
Editor in chief of RT and Rossiya Segodnya

Putin knew what had to come. For years, walls and layers of security structures and mechanisms had been built to protect the system against future popular discontent. All carefully designed to stave off political opposition, be it in elections or in the streets.

Independent journalists and the free media had increasingly been silenced and curbed, and a powerful state propaganda machine built to streamline public opinion.

Over the years, activists, civil society groups and political opponents had challenged the regime. But their rallies and opposition activities had firmly been held under control by the apparatus.

Then, in 2020, the system was again put to the test, and now to a more serious degree.

The poisoning of Aleksei Navalny, his recovery in Germany and subsequent return to Russia posed a new and fundamental threat. The politician and anti-corruption fighter had proved that Putin and his people had deliberately tried to kill him with nerve agent Novichok, that a squad of security service officers trained in chemical weapons had shadowed him for years and that they had killed several other opposition figures, journalists and civil rights activists.

Pieces of convincing evidence were put one on top of another and formed the picture of a kleptocratic regime willing to eliminate opponents with cold blood. And this image was broadcasted to the Russian population, and the whole world, through information channels not controlled by the authorities.

With investigative journalistic methods, open-source data, and modern information technology Navalny and his team had pulled down the pants of Putin and his system, including the all-mighty FSB. The groundbreaking investigations over Putin's €1 billion palace by the Black Sea was seen by more than 115 million people, and reportedly by as much as 1/4 of all Russians.²

¹ https://twitter.com/M_Simonyan/status/1198932094086451200?s=20

² <https://www.levada.ru/2021/02/08/film-dvoretz-dlya-putina/>



Street rallies across Russia on 31st of January. Here from Petrozavdsk, Republic of Karelia. Photo: 7x7-journal.ru

The response from the regime was unambiguous. Putin and his law enforcers with raw force cracked down on the nation-wide rallies that broke out after the arrest of Navalny, and legal action was instigated against several hundred.

And with the detention of thousands of protesters, many of them journalists, the regime took another step from authoritarianism towards totalitarianism. Independent media turned from a threat to the system to an enemy of the state. And the Internet, social media and its Western providers became the main hunch of Kremlin censors.

At the same time, the regime stepped up its disinformation efforts targeted on western audiences, conveyed by state-controlled media, propagandists and trolls, and championing misperception, deception and outright lie.

Crackdown

Journalist Valery Chernitsyn was one of many thousands that on the 31st of January assembled in the streets of downtown Syktyvkar. Chernitsyn has been working for regional daily Krasnoye Znamya for several years and is considered among the most experienced journalists in the Komi capital city.

Russia's state media regulator Roskomnadzor had earlier the same year issued stricter rules on journalists' behavior in street rallies and Chernitsyn had put on a yellow vest marked "Press" as required by the new regulation.

Nonetheless, the 31st of January became a workday completely out of the ordinary. He was one of many that was forcefully detained and brought to the police station.

The popular protests that broke out in January 2021 were the biggest in the country in several years. In the streets of Moscow and a big number of other Russian cities, more than 11,000 people were on the 23rd and 31st of January arrested. More than 90 criminal cases were initiated.

Among the detainees were about 90 journalists.

The Republic of Komi was the region in the Russian north with most people in the streets. More than 110 were taken in by police.

According to Syndicate-100, a network of more than 30 independent Russian media houses, 180 violations of journalists' rights were registered during the demonstrations of late January 2021, and all its members experienced police brutality.³

Among the prominent media representatives that fell victim was Sergei Smironov, Editor of MediaZona, who was arrested outside his house in Moscow, far away from the rally. He got 14 days in custody.

The message from the regime was that it would not tolerate political dissent, and that it was prepared to execute brute force at any time. But the crackdown also revealed a growing sense of despair in the country's establishment.

This despair was reflected both in the relationship to domestic media and opposition voices, as well as in relations with the outside world.

According to the Kremlin, the protests and opposition to the system was all supported and initiated from abroad. Likewise, the very poisoning of Navalny was fake and fabricated, and the accusations that Russia had used illegal chemical weapons a vicious theory construed by western intelligence services.

National security

Anti-western rhetoric from Moscow is nothing new. In well-established manners leaning on Soviet practices, the Putin regime has long used the West as scapegoat for a wide range of ills, both domestically and internationally. But that message was now communicated in a more aggressive way.

In the course of 2020, repeated outcries against the west and western media were performed by leading members of key state institutions.

In her weekly press conferences, top press spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova unleashed waves of increasingly undiplomatic descriptions of western policy, society and media. A lion's share of the verbal attacks were directed against the EU and NATO countries, and regular outbursts were made against the Baltic states, as well as Norway.

³ <https://7x7-journal.ru/news/2021/02/02/obedinenie-nezavisimyh-media-sindikata-100-potrebovalo-prekratit-presledovaniya-zhurnalistov>

Zakharova is a mouthpiece not only of her boss Sergei Lavrov, but also of a host of other prominent national security representatives

Among them is Putin's close friend and ally Nikolai Patrushev, the former head of the FSB, now Secretary of the Russian Security Council. On a number of occasions, Patrushev has returned to the situation in the west and its relationship with Russia.

According to Patrushev, the popular protests against the regime are part of a deliberate western plan to weaken Russia, and in metaphysical-like manners he seeks to justify the state crackdown of Aleksei Navalny and other opposition forces.

In an interview with newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta in August 2020, the security boss argues that the overarching objective of the West is to "destroy the multi-national family of the Russian [rossiiskie] peoples, suppress its traditional spiritual and moral orientations" and ultimately "undermine state sovereignty."⁴

And he leaves little doubt that western media is instrumental in this encroachment on his country and its so-called traditional value system.

According Patrushev, ideas of multiculturalism and "common human values" propagated by liberal western democracies are inconsistent with Russian culture.



Nikolai Patrushev is Secretary of the Russian Security Council. Photo: Kremlin

⁴ <https://rg.ru/2020/06/17/nuzhny-li-rossii-universalnye-cennosti.html>

With philosophical-like phrases often applied by Russian Orthodox Church clergy representatives like Patriarch Kirill, Patrushev underlines that "any attempt to standardize Russian values, or any other values, under the aegis of "universalism" must be seen as acts of socio-cultural aggression."

He underlines that "Western Neo-Liberalism propagates individualism, egoism, a pleasure cult, unrestrained consumerism and absolutizes freedom of expression."

"Russia, on the other hand, proposes the strengthening of national sovereignty," Patrushev underlines, "including in the field of culture, spirituality and ethics, and seeks to make this the greatest of all values and a basis for the subsequent human civilization,"

In Nikolai Patrushev's world view, there is little place for free speech and independent journalism. As a matter of fact, the free media is perceived as a main threat to the traditional values desired by the regime and ultimately to the regime itself.

The positions outlined by the Security Council are reflected across the Russian state apparatus, including the Ministry of Defense. According to Minister Sergei Shoigu, pro-western activists posing as journalists are seeking to infiltrate Russia's Armed Forces. They are "hiding behind" the country's mass media law and aim at infiltrating military facilities, Shoigu said early 2020.⁵

In March 2021, Russian law enforcers arrested a journalist in the Crimea on suspicion of operating for Ukrainian special services. The man turned out to be working for Radio Free Europe on a journalistic project. According to the FSB, the arrested journalist had explosives in his car and was in the process of doing photo and video mapping of sites of military importance, TASS reported.⁶

Spiritual defense

The Orthodox Church is actively providing ideological backing for the anti-western crusade. On the eve of the major street rallies of 31st of January, Patriarch Kirill addressed the situation in his evening mass. According to Kirill, the protests come in the wake of a crisis in Russia's young generation triggered by the mass media and influence from abroad.

With Navalny and his supporters in mind, Kirill pointed a warning finger against his country's youth.

"When we now suddenly grasp that there is something dangerous going on among young people we have to ask ourselves the question: where does this come from? What forms the consciousness of a young person?" Kirill said in his sermon, and hinted at the role of the internet and the West.

"If we really want a bright future for our people, for our Motherland, then we have something to reflect on in these peculiar days. We must think about how the minds of our

⁵ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/25/pro-western-activists-posing-as-journalists-are-infiltrating-russias-military-defense-minister-claims-a69747>

⁶ https://tass.ru/proisshestviya/10916983?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=smm_social_share

youth is formed, what forces that influence their hearts and souls, how the information flows that embrace the modern person is constructed and which ideas are incorporated in this flow and what forces - bright and good, or dark, that a can distort a human mind," the patriarch said.⁷

With a concealed warning against western influence, he added a reminder that "before the end of the world, dark forces and the power of anti-Christ, the power of Satan, will appear, and his rule can arise at any moment."

On the subsequent day, the 1st of February, Kirill paid a visit to the Kremlin.⁸

It later turned out that not only Putin, but also the patriarch himself, has a flush compound in Gelendzhiki on the Black Sea coast. According to media reports, the patriarchal facility has an estimated value of 22 billion rubles, and Kirill regularly comes to site to relax.⁹



Patriarch Kirill meets President Putin the day after massive street rallies. Photo: Kremlin

Traditional values

In their public appearances, both Patriarch Kirill and Security boss Patrushev justify the crackdown on independent media and political opponents like Aleksei Navalny with a need to protect national culture and "traditional values."

⁷ <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5763399.html>

⁸ <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/445/events/64953>

⁹ <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/patriarh-lyubit--anonimnost/31131182.html>

However, behind their messages presented as indisputable cultural and moral principles lies a very concrete and clear perception of the actual threats posed against the regime and its elite.

Hence, in an article published in June 2020, the Security Council Secretary openly warns against the independent media training offered to Russian journalists by the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence in Latvia. And in Lithuania, the Forum Free Russia includes discussions on "new forms of public protest and scenarios for enhanced pressure on the leadership of Russia," Patrushev explains.¹⁰

And paradoxically, Patrushev on the one day warns against Western liberalism, and on the other against what he calls a growing Neo-Nazism and Neo-Fascism in Europe. In his interview with RG, he argues that "the technology of current Western propaganda, aimed against others on Russia, at times duplicates the positions of [Joseph] Goebbles."¹¹

Also Dmitry Medvedev, Patrushev' superior in the Security Council, in late 2020 engaged in the discourse. According to the former President, Prime Minister and now Deputy Chairman of the Security Council, the troublesome relationship with the West has forced Russia to adopt a law on the establishment of a fully Russian "sovereign internet" under national control. "Technologically everything is ready" for its implementation, Medvedev underlined.¹²

The "Russian internet" would allow the country's authorities to fully control the web and effectively shuffle off bothersome information, both from domestic and foreign sources. The authorities are believed to have tested the system on the 10th of March 2021, which resulted in a massive blackout of government websites, including kremlin.ru, government.ru, as well as the website of media inspection authority Roskomnadzor itself.

Leader of the Security Council is Putin himself, and the President has left little doubt about what he sees as looming threats coming from the internet. In a meeting with leaders of the Interior Ministry in early March 2021, Putin especially voiced concern about young people's online activities and anti-government information. With tacit reference to Navalny's information campaigns, he underlined that the internet is used to engage under-aged youth in illegal street rallies, and made clear that the people who stand behind will be punished.

"Unfortunately, we all know what the internet is and how it is being used to promote absolutely unacceptable contents: for spread of child pornography, prostitution, for bringing of under-aged to suicide."¹³

¹⁰ <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2799/>

¹¹ <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2818/>

¹² <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/activity/2925/>

¹³ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65090>

Foreign agents

On the 10th of December 2020, more than 40 representatives of Russian civil society organizations logged into a digital meeting organized by the Kremlin. It was one of the rare direct encounters between the Head of state and representatives of the civilian sector. The invitees were carefully selected, and most of them represented state-funded organizations loyal to the Kremlin, including state media like RT and Rossiya Segodniya. But around the table were also people in clear opposition to Putin and his regime. Among them was Nataliya Yevdokimova, Secretary of the Human Rights Council in St. Petersburg.

Yevdokimova directly confronted the President with his hostile policy on NGOs, and especially in connection with the so-called foreign agent laws.

According to Yevdokimova, the foreign agent laws are "unreasoned and ill-considered", and allow the authorities to arbitrarily take action against journalists, civil society representatives and other "undesired" individuals.¹⁴

"This is the way it works: I do not like you, therefore you are an agent, while I am okay with someone else, because she has such beautiful eyes, and therefore she is not an agent," Yevdokimova told Putin in the meeting.

According to the Foreign Agent laws, anyone who receives money from abroad and engages in "political activities" can be branded an agent, which implies serious economic difficulties.

Even the President's own adviser on civil society Valeri Fadeev expresses opposition to the new laws. In the meeting, Fadeev called for "further elaboration" of the legislation and warned that even state officials could ultimately themselves end up as "agents." He also said that researchers and representatives of culture that cooperate with the abroad, including financially, could be hit by the laws.

The warnings from the civil society representatives did not affect the ongoing legal process and several extensions of the foreign agent laws were made late 2020 and early 2021.

Putin underlines that the foreign agent laws are necessary to stave off hostile forces from abroad. In the meeting with the civil society organizations, he said that the Russians working in NGOs as a rule are "very decent and honest people who seek to solve certain questions and tasks that stand fore our country."

However, the same can not be said about the foreigners that offer financing. Those people and organizations are seeking "not the strengthening of Russia, but its containment," he said.

"Media agents"

Sergei Markelov had been away from work for some time when he in late December 2020 got to know that he had been put on a federal list of so-called "foreign media agents." The respected journalist from Karelia hardly knew what the dubious title implied, and even less why he had been put on the list.

¹⁴ <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64638>

"There were no preconditions, and nobody beforehand told me anything," the journalist said to Russian media.¹⁵ Over the years, Markelov had worked for several independent media houses, and first of all for the Komi-based 7x7-journal. He had also made stories for Sever.realii, a project under Radio Free Europe, and done filming for a project supported by a EU grant.

On the 28th of December 2020, Markelov became the first individual journalist to be included in the Kremlin's new list of Foreign Media Agents. On the list were also Ludmila Savitskaya from Sever.realii and Denis Kamalyagin, the Chief Editor of newspaper Pskovskaya Guberniya.¹⁶



*Sergei Markelov was the first individual journalist to be put on the foreign agent list.
Photo: 7x7-journal*

The Russian government had already in 2012 adopted a law on foreign agents, which initially was aimed at bothersome non-governmental organizations that got financing from abroad. Since then, the foreign agent law had been gradually expanded, and in 2017 nine media organizations were put on a list of "foreign agent media." In December 2020, the law was again amended, and now opened up not only for legal entities, but also for regular individuals.

¹⁵ <https://zona.media/article/2020/12/28/five>

¹⁶ <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7755/>

According to member of the State Duma Vasilii Piskarev, the Foreign Agent legislation is aimed at "strengthening security and protect national sovereignty."

"By proposing the package of amendments, we say: if you get money from abroad for your political activities, then please register as foreign agent and inform state authorities and Russian citizens about the country of your engagement and the political initiatives and actions planned, as well as the purposes on which the money will be spent," Piskarev says.¹⁷ He is chairing the Duma Committee on Security and Combat against Corruption.

The law is making it increasingly hard for journalists. According to Galina Arapova, Director of the Center for protection of media rights, there is now a mounting administrative pressure aimed at journalists on what they are allowed, and not allowed, to write about.

"It is clearly a kind of censorship: the number of "undesired" topics are growing like mushroom after the rain and the editors are forced to synchronize their work with the growing powers of Roskomnadzor," Arapova told *sever.realii*.¹⁸

Furthermore, she argues, the authorities are completely arbitrarily deciding who will end up on the list and not.

"One thing is very clear: whether or not a person will end up on the list of foreign agents first of all depends on to what extent his activities are irritating the state authorities," Arapova underlines.

However, not only journalists could get the discrediting agent title. In addition to journalists Markelov, Savitskaya and Kamalyagin, the famous human rights defender Lev Ponomarev and artists and activist Darya Apakhonchich were also listed as agents on the 28th of December.

And more could soon follow. A legal expert confirms to newspaper *Kommersant* that practically "any citizen that gets foreign financing and interacts on the level of information with a media that is a foreign agent risks ending up on the list."¹⁹

Ultimately, the foreign agent list could include tens of thousands of people, and not only from the field of journalism, but also from research and several other professions.²⁰

That includes also teachers. One of the formal reasons why Darya Apakhonchich was included in the agent list is her work as teacher in a French college and her re-posting of a social media story by Radio Free Europe.²¹

¹⁷ <http://duma.gov.ru/news/50387/>

¹⁸ <https://www.severreal.org/a/30372626.html>

¹⁹ https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4636998?from=main_3

²⁰ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2020/12/kremlin-moves-against-independent-journalists-thousands-could-end-foreign-agents-0>

²¹ https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4761798?from=four_strana

Individuals, organizations and media that end up on the agent list will have to report extensively to the authorities, and label all their publications and information "foreign agent".

Radio Free Europe is one of the media companies that was put on the foreign agent list in 2017. The company has refused to include the label in its information materials and has consequently been fined more than 70 million rubles by Roskomnadzor.²² The company has refused to pay the fines and in early 2021 started to plan its gradual pull-out of staff from Russia.²³

The media house Radio Free Europe publishes also the Sever.realii, a newspaper that covers northern Russia and cross-border relations with the Nordic countries. In November 2019, also this newspaper was put on the agent list.

Roskomnadzor

It is the governmental media regulator Roskomnadzor that is the Kremlin's main tool in crackdown on the press, and Andrei Lipov has since March 2020 been its director. The 51-year old man who is considered one of the architects of the so-called "sovereign internet", has seen his agency get a major boost in powers.

The number of employees at Roskomnadzor has grown from 12 in 2012 to more than 2,700 in 2020.²⁴

More than 800 of the employees are now round-the-clock monitoring the activities of 9,500 regular news companies, 500 radio and television companies and a vast number of social media sites.

"Since the first law on removal of illegal contents on the internet came into force in 2012, we have removed more than 1,5 million materials," Lipov told Vladimir Putin in August 2020.²⁵

Only in 2019, more than 530 thousand online materials were removed, much of it child pornography and information "propagating suicide", as well as use of illegal drugs.

"But in the first place with 208,000 of the 531,000 pieces are materials from extremist and terrorist organizations," Lipov said.²⁶

In its fight against independent media, the inspectors at Roskomnadzor is heavily supported by the Kremlin's loyal state media. Among the unrelenting combatants in the state propaganda machine is Margarita Simonyan, the Chief Editor of RT and Rossiya Segodnya.

²² <https://zona.media/news/2021/04/07/radio>

²³ <https://mmdc.ru/news-div/radio-svoboda-i-nastoyashhee-vremya-predlozhili-chasti-sotrudnikov-uehat-iz-rossii/>

²⁴ <https://rsf.org/en/news/ferghana-news-agency-files-complaint-against-site-blocking-russia>

²⁵ <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63874>

²⁶ <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63874>



In May 2019, Vladimir Putin awarded Margarita Simonyan the Order of Aleksandr Nevsky. The medal is given to people that have made extraordinary personal contributions to the Motherland within state building and strengthening of Russia's position in the world, including in the field of military capabilities. Photo: Kremlin.ru

In a comment on the new amendments to the foreign agent law, Simonyan called on fellow journalists to join the ranks.

"Dear individuals cooperating with foreign media agents and receiving financing from abroad! Abandon this dark and ungracious pursuit. Things will only get worse. Come over to the side of the good. We are waiting," she said in a tweet.²⁷

"Extremism"

Russia has indeed cracked down on a big number of organizations that it characterizes as extremist or terrorist. However, far from all of them are engaged in un-peaceful activity. Some are simply Kremlin-critical organizations in opposition to the government.

In April 2021, the Russian General Prosecutor made clear that Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation would be branded "extremist".

In a comment, the organization said that it has "always, every minute, run its activities exclusively in a peaceful and legal way with peaceful meetings, participation in elections, anti-corruption investigations, monitoring and public activism."²⁸

²⁷ https://twitter.com/M_Simonyan/status/1198932094086451200?s=20

²⁸ <https://navalny.com/p/6481/>

According to the Anti-Corruption Foundation, the label as "extremist organization" will make it extraordinarily hard for its members and supporters.

"It will open the way for hundreds of criminal cases, all or our colleagues will be under pressure [...] and in the worst case, even volunteers, the supporters and the ones who hand out leaflets and participate in our activities will be charged," the organization says.

"The darkest of times for free thinking people and civil society in Russia is coming. Actually, the Kremlin has just demanded that everyone that does not consent are to be declared extremist."

Paradoxically, it was the FSB's Department for Fight against Extremism that poisoned Aleksei Navalny, as well as several more opposition "extremists".

On 30th of April 2021, the "extremist fighters" of the law enforcement authorities took another unprecedented step when they detained Ivan Pavlov, the lawyer of the Anti-Corruption Foundation. Pavlov, who represents independent judicial group Team29, is accused of having disclosed classified information about ongoing investigations in another case, the one against journalist Ivan Safronov.

"Undesired"

In the same basket of "agents" and "extremists" are put several "undesired" foreign organizations, among them movements working for freedom of speech and civil society development. In early 2020, the European Endowment for Democracy was included in the list.²⁹

The organization that was established in 2013 in cooperation with the European Parliament is a major contributor to press freedom across North Africa, the Middle East and East Europe and offers project grants to people and organizations that speak up for democracy. It became Russia's 20th "undesired" foreign organization.

The decision triggered a harsh reaction from Brussels. In a statement, the European External Action Service (EEAS) underlined that EED "represents tenets and principles shared by the EU, its Member States, and by many other countries around the world," and that Russian authorities must reconsider their decision.³⁰

According to MEPs David McAllister and Maria Arena, "this is yet another step aimed at restricting human rights and suppressing civil society in Russia by using oppressive legislation. It is hard to understand why Russian authorities are continuously punishing their own people. Russian civil society deserves to enjoy European donors support."³¹

The "undesired" organizations are banned from operating in Russia.

²⁹ <https://genproc.gov.ru/smi/news/genproc/news-1805344/>

³⁰ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76144/russia-statement-spokesperson-listing-european-endowment-democracy-%E2%80%9Cundesirable-organisation%E2%80%9D_en

³¹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200320IPR75404/meps-call-on-russia-to-stop-suppressing-civil-society-organisations>

Blocking

According to Russian authorities, there is a global fight over censorship going on. And the Kremlin insists that Russia is not to blame. On the contrary, the blocking of information resources by Russia is exclusively conducted as defensive and retaliating measures against foreign action, Putin explained in the meeting with civil society and media representatives in December 2020.³²

The statements from the President came after Google over the past years had blocked more than 200 Russian YouTube channels.³³ Also Facebook and Twitter has closed a number of Russia-affiliated accounts. In late February 2021, Twitter announced that it had blocked another 100 accounts, of which 69 were connected with Russian state institutions "seeking to undermine faith in NATO and the alliance stability," and 31 accounts apparently linked with the Agency of Internet Research, the so-called "troll factory".³⁴ Among the latter were the accounts of Yevgeni Prigozhin and his company Concord.³⁵

About a year earlier, Twitter had blocked also the accounts of Aleksandr Malkevich, the leader of the Russian Commission on the Information Society, Media and Communications under the Public Chamber.³⁶ Malkevich is believed to be closely associated with Yevgeni Prigozhin, and both men are on the sanction list of the USA.

According to Vladimir Putin, Russia is actually a victim of foreign censorship.

"There you see what they are doing, our so-called partners: they are doing censorship," Putin said with reference to the blocking by Twitter and YouTube and added that "I pay your attention to the fact that it is not we who are doing it."³⁷

"But we are forced to somehow react, somehow respond," he stressed and made clear that Russia now will develop its own information resources that can replace the Western-made ones.

Few days after Putin's comments followed a law that is aimed at fighting so-called censorship from foreign internet platforms in relationship to Russian media. The new legislation gives Roskomnadzor expanded powers to fully or partly block internet resources that "restrict significant information on Russian territory", and can act in response to "discrimination of Russian media."³⁸

³² <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64638>

³³ According to Presidential Adviser Valeri Fadeev, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64638>

³⁴ <https://www.dw.com/ru/twitter-zablokiroval-100-svjazannyh-s-rossiej-akkauntov/a-56667731>

³⁵ <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/10557017>

³⁶ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4196707?from=hotnews>

³⁷ <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64638>

³⁸ <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/743586>

The law paves the way for Russian blocking of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. LinkedIn was blocked already in 2016.

Putin's comments were followed up by a statement from the Russian Federation Council, the upper chamber of Parliament, where the blocking of Russian information resources was referred to as an illegal and politically motivated move by American internet companies.

"The World Wide Web must remain a space for freedom of speech and information regulated by Law, and not a political instrument of one country and closely connected with its media monopolies," the parliament body underlined.³⁹

The issue was subsequently followed up also by the Russian Foreign Ministry and its press spokeswoman Maria Zakharova. According to the ministry official, the international community is now confronted with the challenge of "complete uncontrollability of the information space and lack of protection of personal data accumulated by social media."

Furthermore, Zakharova underlined, the American information platforms are engaged in a "massive distribution of fakes about Russia."⁴⁰ Among those "fakes" are the poisoning of Aleksei Navalny, the Skripal case, as well as stories such as the one about Putin's Palace on the Black Sea coast.

Zakharova in early April also announced that the Foreign Ministry from now on will broadcast its weekly press conferences on RuTube, the Russian analogue to YouTube.⁴¹

Legal action

The outcries from Moscow about the need to protect freedom of speech across the world can hardly be seen as anything but mockery and an effort to mislead domestic audiences. After all, Putin's Russia has over many years systematically cracked down on independent media and made life extraordinarily hard for journalists and free voices.

Similarly, Moscow has itself over the past years blocked a big number of media resources. That includes also foreign media, among them the Barents Observer.

In the course of 2020, the number of government threats against foreign media companies represented in Russia significantly increased.

At the forefront of the attacks has been the State Duma and its Commission on Investigations of Foreign Interference in Internal Affairs.

³⁹ <http://council.gov.ru/media/files/5fwHD0RAnKAJk1zKuCLvX8DLVScAaK3D.pdf>

⁴⁰ https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/-/asset_publisher/t2GCdmD8RNlr/content/id/4543778

⁴¹ https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/4675227#6

In February, the State Duma commission accused media companies like the BBC, Meduza and Radio Free Europe of "propagating use of illegal drugs in Russia."⁴²

In April, the Commission approached the Russian General Prosecutor with a request to investigate several of the same media over their alleged "spreading of fake news about the Russian coronavirus situation."⁴³

And in June, Commission Chairman Vasily Piskarev sent another request to the General Prosecutor, this time about foreign media's alleged meddling in the referendum on new Constitution. According to Piskarev, behind the "tendencious propagandist materials" were media like Voice of America, Deutsche Welle, Current Time, and others.⁴⁴

In September, the same State Duma Commission accused Deutsche Welle of "extremism" after it had published an article about the arrested Russian blogger Vladislav Sinitsu and commented on unsanctioned street protests in Moscow. According to Piskarev, the German media house should be added to the list of "foreign agents."⁴⁵

In late April 2021, Meduza was added to that list.

Russian government pressure has also mounted on internet and social media companies.

For a long time, YouTube has been a main headache for the Russian regulators, much because of its extensive use by Aleksei Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation. According to Roskomnadzor, "a major part of fake news are distributed through YouTube."⁴⁶

The federal media authority already in 2019 requested Google to crack down on the use of YouTube for information sharing about illegal public rallies.⁴⁷

In March 2021, the Russian regulators took action also against TikTok. In a meeting with representatives of the company, legislator Piskarev underlined that "TikTok and other foreign internet resources has over rather long time distributed illegal information in our country, and called on under-aged youth to participate in unsanctioned rallies."⁴⁸

Moscow openly threatens the companies with blockage unless they comply.

Among the companies in danger is Twitter. According to Roskomnadzor, Twitter is "maliciously violating Russian legislation." The social networking service has reportedly since 2017 refused to remove a total of 2,862 materials as requested by the regulator. In

⁴² <http://duma.gov.ru/news/47790/>

⁴³ <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48564/>

⁴⁴ <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48906/>

⁴⁵ <https://tass.ru/politika/6937181>

⁴⁶ <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/10319097>

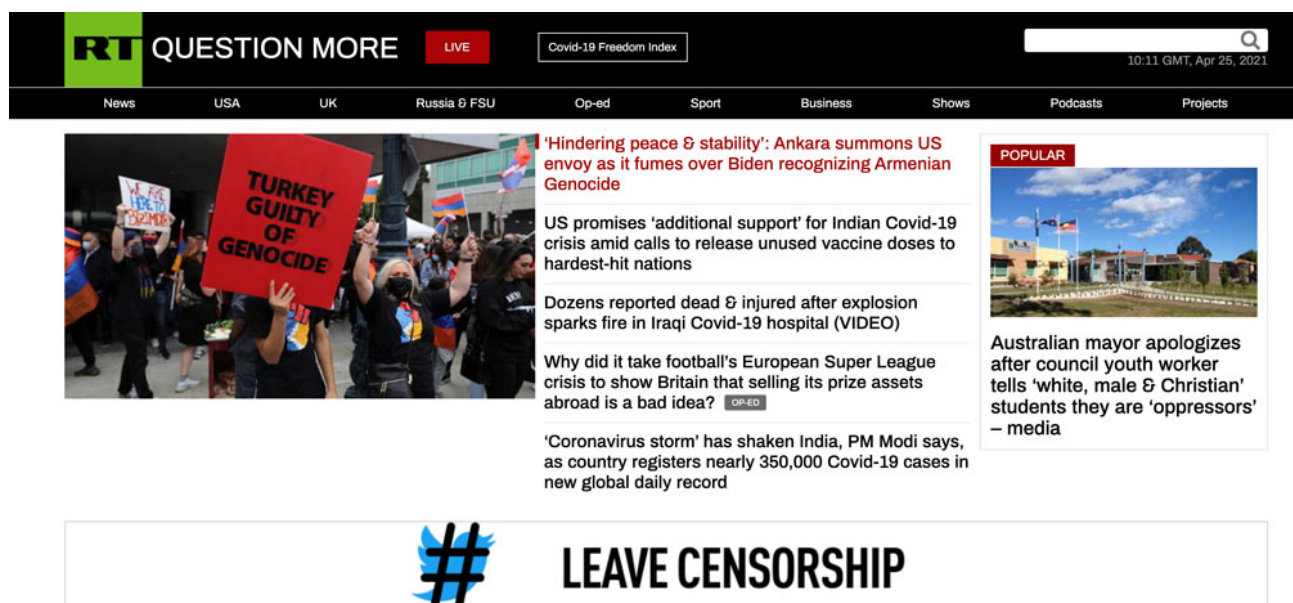
⁴⁷ <http://rkn.gov.ru/news/rsoc/news68982.htm>

⁴⁸ <http://duma.gov.ru/news/51211/>

the period, more than 28,000 requests for material removal was sent by Roskomnadzor to Twitter.⁴⁹

On March 10th, Roskomnadzor started to slow down the speed of Twitter in Russia, and the social network was told that a full ban would happen shortly later unless the materials were removed.⁵⁰

The media regulators' fight against Twitter is firmly backed up by state media. On the front-page of RT anti-Twitter commercials were flashing towards readers all through April 2021. With the hashtag #LeaveTwitterJoinTelegram, they called on readers to abandon Twitter and instead turn to Telegram.



In April 2021, state news broadcaster RT ran a major add campaign that called on readers to abandon Twitter. Screenshot from 25th April 2021

At the same time, the State Duma expanded the list of "illegal information" on social media and requested the operators to step up monitoring users. From 1st of February 2021, social media platforms are obliged to block and remove information that expresses "open disrespect" to society, the state, official state symbols, the Russian Constitution and state authorities. Also information that "call for mass disorder, extremism and participation in unsanctioned public events" must be blocked.⁵¹

The legal actions are followed by crackdown of people with sympathies towards Aleksei Navalny. Even within state media companies. Reportedly, state media company VGTRK in

⁴⁹ <https://rkn.gov.ru/news/rsoc/news73436.htm>

⁵⁰ <https://rkn.gov.ru/news/rsoc/news73464.htm>

⁵¹ <http://duma.gov.ru/news/50660/>

course of April 2021 fired a significant number of its employees after they had expressed anti-government sympathy on their personal social media pages.⁵²

Feeding trolls

There were jubilant celebrations in Longyearbyen on the 9th of January 2020 as local authorities marked the 100 year anniversary of the Svalbard Treaty, the document that laid the basis for Norway's sovereignty over the Arctic archipelago.

The century of undisputed Norwegian rule was celebrated also in Oslo, and Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Søreide in a newspaper column written together with Minister of Justice Monica Meland highlighted the importance of the far northern islands.⁵³

But in Moscow, the anniversary of the treaty was not followed by cheers. In a letter to Eriksen Søreide, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made clear that Russia requests "bilateral consultations on the removal of limitations for Russian activity and structures on the archipelago."⁵⁴

That request was quickly rejected by the Norwegian side. The negative response from Oslo was followed by a wave of repulsive Russian media coverage.

In what appeared as an organized and coordinated campaign, a number of Russian newspapers and media companies the following months published series of stories that expressed a highly negative, partly aggressive, attitude towards the authorities in Oslo. The message was that Norway must comply with Russian demands in Svalbard and that continued opposition could have serious consequences.



"It is getting hotter in the Arctic: Russia prepares to fight for Spitsbergen," reads the headline in an article from Novye Izvestia, 12th February 2020.

⁵² <https://twitter.com/bazabazon/status/1385501244547112960?s=20>

⁵³ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2020/02/amid-jubilant-celebration-svalbard-norway-sends-strong-signal-it-will-not-accept>

⁵⁴ https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/no/-/asset_publisher/f4MKo6byouc4/content/id/4019093

Several of the media that took part in the campaign against Norway belong to a group of news agencies that mushroomed after 2014. Some of them are inter-connected and have dubious owner relations.

One of the people behind the new media is Yevgeny Prigozhin, the businessman that over the past two decades has been closely connected with President Putin. He is believed to be a key person behind the Internet Research Agency, also called the “Troll Factory”.

Among his many outlets is the Federal News Agency. Interestingly, this news company was also instrumental in attacks against the Barents Observer in 2019 following Roskomnadzor's announcement that it would block the Norwegian media.⁵⁵

Prigozhin's "troll factory" and media companies are today seen as key players in the Kremlin's information war efforts with the West. The same way they tried to whip up tensions around Svalbard, they are actively used as propaganda tools in various other conflict issues.

Prigozhin and his company Concord has for years been in conflict with Aleksei Navalny.

Prigozhin is suspected by Navalny and his team of being behind an attack on Sergei Mokhov, the husband of Navalny's close colleague Lyubov Sobol,⁵⁶ and in 2018 Prigozhin's people are believed to have put a funeral wreath with the inscription of a journalist's name in front of the offices of newspaper Novaya Gazeta.

The same people are believed to be behind the basket with a cut off sheep's head placed in front of the same office with an address to the whole editorial staff.⁵⁷

In 2021, Prigozhin offered Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov legal assistance in his conflict with Novaya Gazeta following the newspaper's revelations of severe human rights violations in the North Caucasian region.⁵⁸

According to newspaper The Insider, Yevgeny Prigozhin is closely surveilling journalists both in Russia and abroad, and has also placed his people in several media houses with the purpose to report to him about developments. Among the journalists that reportedly was surveilled by Prigozhin's people is Yulia Latynina, who was repeatedly attacked before she in 2017 decided to flee Russia.⁵⁹

Prigozhin is now on a U.S sanction list, and in early 2021 Facebook and Twitter blocked his accounts.⁶⁰ He is also on a Most Wanted-list of the FBI and a reward of up to \$250,000 is offered for information that leads to his arrest.

⁵⁵ Free Media on the Scaffold. https://thebarentsobserver.com/sites/default/files/publication.freemediaonthescaffold-kopi_1.pdf

⁵⁶ <https://www.rbc.ru/society/06/04/2020/5e8b175c9a794770b23861ec>

⁵⁷ <https://theins.ru/politika/234105>

⁵⁸ <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/03/20/oni-nashli-drug-druga>

⁵⁹ <https://theins.ru/politika/234105>

⁶⁰ <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/10557017>

WANTED BY THE FBI

YEVGENIY VIKTOROVICH PRIGOZHIN
Conspiracy to Defraud the United States



DESCRIPTION

Alias: "Yevgeniy"	
Date(s) of Birth Used: June 1, 1961	Place of Birth: Russia
Hair: Bald	Eyes: Brown
Sex: Male	Race: White
Nationality: Russian	NCIC: W713167242

REWARD
The FBI is offering a reward of up to \$250,000 for information leading to the arrest of Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin.

REMARKS
Prigozhin speaks Russian and has ties to Russia, Indonesia, Qatar, and Estonia.

CAUTION
Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin is wanted by the FBI for his alleged involvement in a conspiracy to defraud the United States by impairing, obstructing, and defeating the lawful functions of the Federal Election Commission, the United States Department of Justice, and the United States Department of State. This occurred in Washington, D.C., from early 2014 to February 16, 2018. Prigozhin was the primary funder of the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA). He allegedly oversaw and approved their political and electoral interference operations in the United States which included the purchase of American computer server space, the creation of hundreds of fictitious online personas, and the use of stolen identities of persons from the United States. These actions were allegedly taken to reach significant numbers of Americans for the purposes of interfering with the United States political system, including the 2016 Presidential Election.

On February 16, 2018, a federal arrest warrant was issued for Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia after he was charged with conspiracy to defraud the United States.

SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AN INTERNATIONAL FLIGHT RISK
If you have any information concerning this individual and you are outside the United States, please contact the nearest American Embassy or Consulate. If inside the United States, please contact your local FBI office or the FBI's toll free tip line at 1-800-CALL-FBI (1-800-225-5324). You may also submit a tip online at tips.fbi.gov.

Field Office: Washington D.C.
www.fbi.gov

The dubious media companies controlled by Prigozhin are actively covering also Arctic issues. And they are granted both direct and indirect support from Russian authorities. In the daily newsletters dispatched by the Russian governmental Arctic Commission newspapers such as the Federal News Agency are offered broad coverage.

Among the favorite Arctic issues for Prigozhin's "troll media" are international issues and military affairs, often with a distorted picture of the USA, EU and other countries in the region.

Sechin and the media

The Kremlin has several more partners that directly and indirectly help it keep up pressure on the media. Among them is Igor Sechin and his Rosneft oil company.

Over several years, Rosneft has threatened to drown a number of media houses in huge fines following critical articles about the company.

An absolute historical height came in May 2020 when Rosneft sued newspaper RBC for 43 billion rubles (€466 million) after a critical article about the company's operations in Venezuela that reportedly resulted in major reputation damage.⁶¹ It was not Rosneft's first law suit against RBC. In 2016, the media house owned by business tycoon Mikhail Prokhorov was sued for 3.1 billion rubles after a story shed a critical light on a major business deal with BP.⁶²

In early 2021, Rosneft filed law suits against Bloomberg, Novaya Gazeta, Dozhd, and Vazhnye Istorii. Also Forbes, Reuters and Energy News Today were contacted by the company's lawyers.

In the latter case, the story in question was about Vostok Oil, the huge oil project to be developed on Russia's far northern Taymyr Peninsula.

Igor Sechin is also believed to be a stakeholder in the conflict surrounding business daily Vedomosti. Amid big opposition from the editorial staff, the new owners of the respected newspaper in March 2020 appointed Andrei Shmarov new editor. Shmarov quickly encroached on the traditional editorial line of the daily

⁶¹ <https://www.rbc.ru/business/21/05/2020/5ec68bea9a7947c7d7d5dc76?from=center>

⁶² <http://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2016/10/07/660103-kak-rosneft-naschitala>



Igor Sechin (right) together with Aleksei Miller, CEO of Gazprom. Also the latter is a big player in the Russian media landscape with owner control over TV channel NTV, radio broadcaster Echo of Moscow and several publications.

and few days after his appointment single-handedly changed the headline in a story about Rosneft, and removed another story about the same company.⁶³

New owner Ivan Yeremin is a businessman known for his links with the authorities and the leaders of Russia's biggest state companies. According to a joint investigation by Meduza, The Bell, Forbes and Vedomosti, a huge debt of nearly €30 million incurred by Vedomosti's former owner, Demyan Kudryavtsev, was taken over by Rosneft's bank in 2017.⁶⁴

Norway

"Russian-Norwegian relations are not experiencing the best of times," Press Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said shortly after she had taken the podium in her weekly press conference in late November 2020.

It was only few months since Sergei Lavrov's letter about the Svalbard Treaty had created a spat in bilateral relations. Now, the Foreign Ministry representative directed her verbal cannon against another favorite target; the Nordic country's membership in NATO.

⁶³ <https://www.vedomosti.ru/media/articles/2020/06/11/832463-redaktsiya-vedomostei-glavnogo-redaktora>

⁶⁴ <https://thebell.io/kak-rosneft-spryatlas-za-vladeltsami-gazety-vedomosti>



Maria Zakharova is press spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry. Photo: Atle Staalesen

According to Zakharova, Norway is increasingly becoming a foothold for NATO in the Arctic, which is "incompatible with its expressed interest in upholding a good cooperation with Russia."

Furthermore, she argued, the Norwegian public is misled about the true intentions of Russia and its cooperate initiatives. And it is the Norwegian government and Norwegian media that is to blame.

"It seems to me that all possible efforts are made to present the situation in an incorrect way, [...] so that people get a distorted picture of our initiatives," Zakharova said.⁶⁵

"What they [the Norwegians] are reading in the press, I believe, is far from the truth," she underlined.

According to the ministry spokesperson, one must distinguish between the Norwegian state and the Norwegian people.

"When we say Norway, we must correct ourselves and rather say: the leadership of the country and not the population, because one must understand that ordinary people are not being asked," she underlined.

⁶⁵ https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/4443750#30

The comments from Maria Zakharova not only aimed at discrediting Norwegian media, but also drive a wedge between people and authorities in Norway. That principle of 'divide and rule' is well familiar for the Russian ministry, and has been actively applied in recent relations with the Nordic country.

Repeatedly, Russian diplomatic representatives in Norway have sought to influence Norwegian public opinion by bashing Oslo over its deteriorating relationship to Moscow. The situation has been particularly evident in the north of the country and first of all in Finnmark, the region that borders on Russia. On a number of occasions, official representatives of Russia have communicated to locals and regional leaders that they are the ones (and only) that understand the true state of affairs.

The message has stuck in the consciousness of several leading regional politicians. The former Finnmark Council leader Ragnhild Vassvik openly argued that authorities in Oslo and "people in the south" simply do not understand the North, nor the true character of Russia.

«People from other places do not know our region, our history, the near relationship across the border and the historical perception of each other,» she said in an interview with the Barents Observer.⁶⁶ In that same interview she made clear that she opposes the Norwegian sanctions against Russia.

Cross-border media

The statements from Maria Zakharova interlock with several Russian government-supported initiatives aimed at Northern Norway and the Finnmark region. Including in the field of the media.

Among them is the attempt to establish a new organization for cross-border media cooperation. The so-called Community for Independent Ecologists and Journalists in the Barents Region (BRIES) was officially announced by founders in December 2020.

Behind the initiative stands Timofey Surovtsev and his Pomor Environmental Center. Surovtsev also runs the Barents News agency and in 2018 together with the Russian Union of Journalists established the so-called Eco Press Association.⁶⁷

In connection with the establishment of the latter, Surovtsev told the Barents Observer that «Russia needs to create popular and credible media resources abroad, primarily in the Barents region, where foreign media are already successfully operating in Russia.»

Surovtsev says he is especially concerned about the lack of objective environmental journalism, and wants to counter Norwegian media's "negative reporting" on environmental problems in Russia.

⁶⁶ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/ru/node/4517>

⁶⁷ http://ruj.ru/news/monitoring-media/soyuz-zhurnadistov-rossii-stal-odnim-iz-initsiatorov-sozdaniya-obedineniya-eko-press/?sphrase_id=23280

«I think it is not objective. We must listen to the opinions of each other,» he stressed when commenting on Norwegian reporting.⁶⁸



Timofey Surovtsev during a meeting in Kirkenes, Norway. Photo: Thomas Nilsen

The mission of Surovtsev and his new initiatives appears clear; to build a new propaganda tool that can influence the media situation in the North.

With his initiatives, Surovtsev and partners apparently also seek to challenge existing media cooperation structures in the region like the International Barents Press, as well as media companies doing cross-border reporting like the Barents Observer.

However, the new initiatives have gained little support both on the Russian and Nordic sides of the border. Among the few Nordic participants listed in Surovtsev's annual Forum for Eco Media Barents were no established regional media, but rather controversial names like Tord Björk from Sweden and Johan Bäckman from Finland.⁶⁹ From the Norwegian side, leader of the Association of Environmental Protection Kurt Oddekalv was main partner.

⁶⁸ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2018/11/powerful-propaganda-resources-needed-balance-barents-journalism>

⁶⁹ <http://barents-news.com/novosti/266-anons-forum-eco-media-barents-2020>

Kremlin strategy

Over the past decade, the Kremlin has built a powerful international media company that propagates its official views to foreign audiences. In his greeting to RT, delivered in connection with the company's 15 year anniversary in late 2020, Putin underlined that the broadcaster has "cardinally changed, enriched and diversified the global information agenda."

"You are the voice that people trust and respect, and lets be honest, also the voice that tells the truth and that many fear and want to silence," Putin said.⁷⁰



Putin pays visit to RT in 2013. Photo: Kremlin.ru

RT and other state media got a significant upswing after Putin's re-election to the presidency in 2012. At the same time as Putin hammered through his Foreign Agent Law, as well as a number of other repressive bills, state support to loyal journalists spiked. In 2015, total federal budget allocations to the state media reached almost 110 billion rubles (€1.57 billion).⁷¹

Alone in 2016, a total of 19 billion rubles (€272 million) of federal funding was invested in TV network RT, and another 6,75 billion rubles (€96 million) in Rossiya Segodnya, the

⁷⁰ <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64627>

⁷¹ https://thebarentsobserver.com/sites/default/files/barentsmediafreedom.2017_1.pdf

state company that includes news agencies RIA Novosti, Sputnik News and InoSMI.⁷² State funding of the media companies has since remained high.

But the Kremlin has not only boosted the powers of its state media. It also wants its loyal propagandists to build relationships with journalist and media companies abroad.

During his meeting with civil society representatives and the media in December 2020, Putin encouraged Russian media houses to establish cooperation with foreign partners.

"We need public organizations, including the journalistic community, to directly work with colleagues from abroad, in order to show them that only by uniting forces with the world's journalistic community, at least the free thinking part of the journalistic community, we can reach the goal that people in your profession have set themselves - namely to objectively inform citizens of ones' countries about happening events," Putin underlined.

The president underlined the urgency of the issue and called on journalists to "shed light on developments in this important, sensitive and highly professional sphere," because, as he explained, "regular people sometimes find it hard to comprehend what is going on."

The projects of Timofei Surovtsev aimed at partners in Norway and the other Nordic countries are only few of many initiatives that follow up the ambitions of the president.

Several publications in Norway regularly express receptiveness with Kremlin policies and appear ready to cooperate with Russian state media. The Russian embassy in the country has openly recommended Norwegians to read publications like Resett, the Herland Report, as well as Pål Steigan's Steigan.no.

"However, if you are interested in getting the real first-hand information you should use the RT and Sputnik News," the embassy underlined in 2018.⁷³

Russian state media regularly refer to the mentioned Norwegian publications in their stories. Sputnik News, the agency that is operated by Rossiya Segodnya, has since 2019 about 20 times referred to Resett.⁷⁴ And InoSMI, the portal operated by that same Rossiya Segodnya, has in the same period about 40 times used Steigan⁷⁵ and Resett⁷⁶ as sources of information. Many of the stories are related to COVID-19, Ukraine and western countries' relationship with Russia.

Steigan and Resett are also referred to by Russian online newspapers like the Federal News Agency (RIA FAN), the paper controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin. Only in March and April 2021, RIA FAN seven times referred to the two Norwegian publications.

⁷² <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5100>

⁷³ <https://m.facebook.com/notes/russian-embassy-in-norway/russland-i-norske-media/1578728845581803/>

⁷⁴ <https://sputniknews.com/search/?query=resett>

⁷⁵ https://inosmi.ru/steigan_no/

⁷⁶ https://inosmi.ru/resett_no/

A search at Yandex News shows that Resett was referred to by Russian media more than 120 times only in March 2021.

North Russian media

Just across the border from the Norwegian region of Finnmark lies the world's biggest city north of the Arctic Circle. Murmansk today plays an increasingly central role in Russian Arctic strategy and several major industrial projects are under development in the region.

Since he was instated as governor of the region in September 2019, Andrei Chibis has sought to develop ties with the powerful Northern Fleet, ally with regional mining and metallurgy companies, and buddy up with new regional players such as natural gas company Novatek.

However, there are few independent voices to report about the actual state of developments. Regional newspapers do little more than republish information and press releases from the increasingly active press offices of the governor and regional companies.

And the few independent-minded journalists that still try to dig into the materials tend to end up in trouble.

In March 2020, Vyacheslav Gorodetsky announced that he was leaving the company that he had headed for almost 15 years. According to the long-serving director and editor-in-chief of the B-Port, more censorship and a growing outside pressure on his media made it impossible for him to continue.

"The opinions and posts that are published on our site suddenly have become unwanted and a source of irritation," he said in a Facebook post. According to Gorodetsky, his news agency is now increasingly often contacted "from above" and told to remove or change contents.⁷⁷

He argues that there have appeared «absurd prohibitions and strange limitations» and that it now is considered "undesired" to express personal opinions that diverge from settled truths.

Gorodetsky later 2020 established a new regional media, the Arktichesky Obozrevatel (Arctic Observer).

The comments from Gorodetsky mirror the ones made Dmitry Vysotsky, the former media owner and editor of SeverPost. In 2018, Vysotsky said that the last pieces of remaining media freedom in Murmansk were about to vanish.

⁷⁷ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2020/03/champion-murmansk-media-quits-because-censorship>



Vyacheslav Gorodetsky (in back) has headed the B-Port for almost 15 years. Photo: Thomas Nilsen

"What is now happening in the region with the independent press will clearly become a black spot in the history of Murmansk journalism," Vysotsky wrote. According to the editor, Murmansk had until recently been a leading star in regional liberties, but is now haunted by a drive against alternative thinking.⁷⁸

Vysotsky believes the situation is leading to fear and self-censorship among journalists. "What frightens me more than anything is the silent consent with the this lawlessness among local journalists and even the Murmansk unit of the Union of Russian Journalists," he said. "The ombudsmen, members of parliament, civil society - everyone is frightened or to such a level that they even are afraid to express their opinions."

Paradoxically, Vysotsky in 2020 joined the team of Governor Andrey Chibis as Adviser on Media Development.⁷⁹ He is also believed to have sold a significant share of his SeverPost to businessman Andranika Mutasyan.⁸⁰

Both Murmansk and neighboring Arkhangelsk are regions with a high military presence, and regional authorities actively support government-loyal initiatives on patriotic upbringing and "traditional values". Nonetheless, there are several examples that

⁷⁸ <http://severpost.ru/read/70922/>

⁷⁹ <https://gov-murman.ru/info/news/360897/>

⁸⁰ <https://mmk.news/2020/05/mnogostanochnik-musatyan/>

significant parts of the public still treasure free speech, open public debate and independent information.

Severodvinsk, the naval city that builds Russia's nuclear submarines, in 2021 saw locals stand up for the protection of their local cable network STV. Protesters in January gathered at a central square and accused state telecommunications company Rostelecom of closing the STV "because of its trustworthy picture of events and opinions in contrast to the picture broadcasted by official authorities and media."⁸¹

And in Pechenga, the municipality located along the border to Norway and Finland, there was in summer and fall 2020 a hike in public discourse in connection with local elections. A group that called itself the Team for Renewal with opposition leaders Andrei Buyakin and Ruslan Belashov at the front openly challenged the position of the powerful United Russia. They established an information channel on social network VK where they posted open-minded discussion about the state of local affairs, and shared videos and photos about key issues. The VK page soon gathered several thousand followers and the Team for Renewal in local pre-election polls had an overwhelming lead.



The Pechenga Team for Renewal and its leaders Andrei Buyakin and Ruslan Belashov opened a channel at VK where they actively promoted public debate and opposition to the ruling United Russia party and company Nor Nickel. Screenshot from [VK.com/zapnovosti51](https://vk.com/zapnovosti51)

“No more! For 20 years they have shown us their attitude to the people, they have robbed us, knitted knots around our necks and weaved a web out of which we must finally get disentangled,” the election campaigners said about their opponents.⁸²

⁸¹ <https://29.ru/text/politics/66455557/>

⁸² <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/democracy-and-media/2020/09/local-revolt-might-be-rise-russian-regions-go-polls>

The Renewal Team's election campaign was not only aimed against the United Russia, but also against the region's most powerful company, Nornickel.

The success of Buyakin and Belashov raised the alarm in the United Russia party and powerful people in local and regional authorities soon took action.

A "spin doctor" closely associated with Nornickel was hired to secure an election win for the party. Reportedly, Andrey Zhukov was brought to Pechenga from the Siberian region of Krasnoyarsk, and Nornickel paid more than 50 million rubles for his services. During his half-year stay in the area, Zhukov established several news websites and information resources that actively propagated the positions of United Russia and discredited the Renewal Team.

The election was ultimately won by United Russia with a large margin. According to Buyakin and Belashov, the vote was massively corrupted by fraud and intimidation.⁸³

Afterword. The Barents Observer

The situation for independent media in Russia has over a long time worsened. But a significant turn towards the worse came in the years 2020-2021.

Media in Russia are today experiencing outright repression and censorship, and journalists that pursue an independent line risk harsh reactions from government authorities.

Meanwhile, the state increasingly propagate distorted pictures of the reality and state-supported actors and companies are busy attacking the remaining free voices in the country.

The appendages of the repressive machinery stretch not only across the vast lands of Russia, but also into foreign countries.

The Barents Observer is itself victim of this policy.

In 2015, the newspaper and its staff abandoned the organization that for 13 years had hosted its activities. The journalists were deprived the right to work under the principles on the Rights and Duties of the Editor, and Editor Thomas Nilsen was fired from his job.

The Norwegian Barents Secretariat and its owners, the county governors in northern Norway, insisted that the newspaper should be only an "information website" and not a fully-fledged media.⁸⁴

⁸³ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/democracy-and-media/2020/09/local-revolt-might-be-rise-russian-regions-go-polls>

⁸⁴ https://thebarentsobserver.com/sites/default/files/barents_observer_-_prosessen_pdf_format_1.pdf

Shortly later, it became clear that representatives of the Russian Security Service had tried to persuade Norwegian authorities to close the newspaper.⁸⁵

In October 2015, the staff of the Barents Observer established the newspaper as an independent non-profit company owned by the journalists themselves.

The freedom from suppressive regional politicians only temporary halted outside pressure on the newspaper.

In 2017, Barents Observer Editor Nilsen was declared unwanted in Russia,⁸⁶ and in early 2019 the Barents Observer was blocked on Russian territory.⁸⁷

Both cases are still handled in court. Nilsen's case against the FSB was taken to the Russian Supreme Court, where he lost in May 2018,⁸⁸ and it is now handled by the European Court of Human Rights. The editor is supported by Ivan Pavlov and his Team29.

The case against Russia's blocking of the Barents Observer has lost two lower-court cases, and is now approved for handling in the Supreme Court. The case is supported by Anti-Discrimination Center Memorial.

"The blocking of our newspaper in Russia is a repressive crackdown on independent journalism," the Barents Observer team said in a statement after it was blocked by Roskomnadzor.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ <https://www.nrk.no/norge/kilde-til-nrk--russisk-etterretning-ba-norge-om-a-bringe-barentsobserver-til-taushet-1.12583998>

⁸⁶ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2017/03/barents-observer-editor-thomas-nilsen-declared-unwanted-russia>

⁸⁷ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2019/02/barents-observer-now-blocked-russia>

⁸⁸ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2018/05/supreme-court-sides-fsb-says-barents-observer-editor-poses-threat-russias-national-security>

⁸⁹ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2020/08/barents-observer-ready-take-russian-media-authority-roskomnadzor-supreme-court>

This publication is part of the Barents Media Freedom, a series of reports on the media situation in the Barents region. Previous publications:

Free Media on the Scaffold. 2019. By Atle Staalesen

Journalism in the Borderland. 2017. By Atle Staalesen

Barents Observer - Prosessen. 2016. By Thomas Nilsen