

Free media on the scaffold

Barents Media Freedom 2019



By Atle Staalesen

The **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, Russian and Chinese, 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 mass media and in 2017 published the report "*Journalism in the Borderland. Barents Media Freedom 2017*". In 2016, it published the report "*Barents Observer - Prosesen*" (in Norwegian), the story about how Norwegian regional politicians tried to halt the editorial freedom of the only Norwegian online newspaper published in Russian.

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Preface. Journalism in region of change

Wide stretches of land along Arctic coasts, sparse populations in the remotest parts of the continent. The Barents region and the Arctic are among the most quiet edges of the world. But behind the beauty and innocence of the landscapes is an area of troubling change.

This is a «Territory of Dialogue», the Russian Government highlights in its bi-annual Arctic conferences attended by President Putin and the top brass of the country's political and economic elite. But the actual situation shows that the Arctic is today not a region with smooth and easy talking between nations. There is less dialogue across the borders.

Divides in the fundamental construction of societies are growing. Russian state-building is increasingly at odds with the value systems of European neighbors. Proponents of human rights, freedom of speech and press freedom are under pressure and advanced state-sponsored disinformation efforts are seeping into the consciousness of people not only in Russia, but also across the borders to neighboring Scandinavia.

The Barents Observer is itself an example of repressive policies supported by Russian authorities. As we show in this report, the actions aimed against the small newspaper based in Kirkenes, Norway, is illustrative for current developments in Russia and cross-border relations in the Barents region.

It is a time of growing pressure against free and independent media. It has come to the North, and regional journalists are increasingly feeling the chill.

Time for execution

«We have to limit the freedom of speech in Russia,» says Dmitry Kiselyov as he distinctively articulates in front of the cameras in his weekly TV show on state channel Rossiya1.¹

It is Sunday evening in October, and the prime target in this week's program is Aleksey Krasovsky, the film director that has made headlines with his comedy about life in Leningrad during the second world war. The film «Prazdnik» (The Party) tells the story about a wealthy family celebrating New Year's eve in 1942 with plenty of foods and drinks in the midst of a city with a starving and dying population.

It touches on Russia's dramatic 20th century war history and the 900 day long siege of the country's second biggest city. It is definitely not a topic for a comedy, Kiselyov makes clear and spends almost 20 minutes of the program on his attack on the film maker.

However, Kiselyov's message this evening goes far beyond Aleksey Krasovsky. According to the TV host, who is also General Director of the powerful state media company Rossiya Segodnya, the Krasovsky film illustrates the need to narrow down the freedom of speech and freedom of expression in Russia.

We are not talking about censorship, but about restrictions, Kiselyov explains. And it should not be arranged administratively, but rather as a cultural process based on a set of «internal moral bans.»

After all, Kiselyov argues, there is today too much freedom of speech in Russia. «Actually, here in Russia, we truly have a wider scope of freedom of speech than in any other country in the world.»

As the program draws towards an end, he cryptically wraps up his message with the words of Dostoyevsky. «Endlessness above

and endlessness below. [...] The Russian mind is so wide-reaching. I would narrow it down.»

«Agree with me,» Kiselyov self-confidently says to his viewers, «this still applies today.»

«Renounce your freedom»

The film by Aleksey Krasovsky is far from the only film in today's Russia that has come under attack by the authorities and state media. A government blacklist includes a number of movies, several of them banned because of their lack of coherence with ruling state interpretation of history or contradictions with the the country's system of so-called «traditional values».

The freedom of the filmmakers, as well as other representatives of culture, arts and the media must be «narrowed down», Kiselyov argues. And he does not hesitate to use his prime time TV show as a scaffold for verbal lynching of opponents.

The quotes by Dostoyevsky used in the Sunday evening show on Rossiya Segodnya are taken from the book about the Karamazov Brothers. And Kiselyov, by using them, appears to take the role as the Grand Inquisitor from that same book.

In Dostoyevsky's story, the Grand Inquisitor challenges Christ who has return to the world, to 16th century Spain. The old inquisitor has over the years put hundreds of wrong believers and «heretics» — the dissidents of that time — on fire on the central square of Sevilla, and now detains Christ and confronts him with a long speech about the Church and its battle against people's «rebellious» strive for freedom of conscious.

For the inquisitor, Christ's message of about human dignity, equality and free will are key threats to the church and its power over the people.

¹ <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=3074178#>

«With us, all will be happy and will no more rebel nor destroy one another as under Your freedom. Oh, we shall persuade them that they will only become free when they renounce their freedom to us and submit to us.»

Of course, most people will dispute the description of Dmitry Kiselyov as a 'grand inquisitor' of today's Russia. But, still - surely - Kiselyov will hardly himself dispute his mission of trying to lambast the world views of Russian opposition groups and foreign liberals.

Bolstering state media

Since he was appointed to the post as general director of Rossiya Segodniya in late 2013 Dmitry Kiselyov has repeatedly attacked alternative views and liberal opponents with rude force. Among the groups that has felt his displeasure are gays, who he suggests should be banned from donating blood, sperm and organs because they are «unsuitable for continuation of life», and also the liberal-minded and independent media houses Novaya Gazeta and Echo Moscow.²

Pressure is growing on representatives of Russian contemporary culture, and state media with Dmitry Kiselyov in the forefront is leading the attacks. A variety of representatives of contemporary Russian culture has felt the wrath of the TV host.

Following the arrest and subsequent house arrest of theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov in 2017, TV host Kiselyov made clear that the performances of Serebrennikov «offers nothing but forgery, substitution and vulgarity.» According to Kiselyov, the experimental theatre shows of Serebrennikov do not really include anything new and experimental, but rather represents «another system of values».³

Media house Rossiya Segodniya was established as part the Kremlin's bid to beef up

the role of its state media, and the main mission of the new company was to propagate information about Russian state policy to audiences abroad. News agency RIA Novosti, and later also new multi-language service Sputnik, were incorporated.

Billions of government rubles poured into the company, and Kiselyov became one the key mouthpieces of Vladimir Putin and his regime.

The powerful Russian media leader is a man of big knowledge about the Nordic countries.

He graduated at the Leningrad State University with a degree in Scandinavian languages in the late 1970s and subsequently gained his first media experiences in the Norwegian-language department of state Soviet broadcaster Gosteleradio (State Television and Radio) from where the young Kiselyov weekly propagated Soviet messages to listeners in Norway. He also shortly worked as correspondent in Oslo.

By 2014 he had come in charge of the most powerful media organisation in the country since that very Rosteleradio.

Narrowing the rights

The «narrowing down» of civil liberties, as proposed by Kiselyov, has been going on gradually in Russia for the past two decades, and the state media companies are today at the forefront of developments. In well orchestrated moves, the Kremlin works with legislators and state media to streamline developments

In their focus are not only film makers, but also artists, journalists, and the population as such.

Several federal laws have prepared the ground for more censorship and surveillance. A growing number of undesired internet sites and regime-critical contents are branded as «extremist» and unlawful and have been

² https://youtu.be/97Ev_DWNBg

³ <https://youtu.be/a43rBFpRfgl>

blocked and made unavailable to Russian audiences.

A spearhead in the development is the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor), a unit under the Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communication, that is now cracking down on both domestic and foreign media. Both in the big cities and in the regions, Roskomnadzor officials take aim at the few remaining independent news companies and overwhelm them with fines and law suits.

In Murmansk, one of the latest targets of the local Roskomnadzor office is Dmitry Vysotsky, the chief editor of SeverPost. Vysotsky is confident that local Roskomnadzor officials are determined to close down his news agency after he in September 2018 got as many as seven warnings from the government body. Another two warnings followed in the first two weeks of October.

As noted by Vysotsky, it is the private and independent newspapers and agencies that are fined by Roskomnadzor, not the ones owned by regional authorities.

«What is now happening in the region with the independent press will clearly become a black spot in the history of Murmansk journalism,» Vysotsky writes. According to the editor, Murmansk has until now been a leading star in regional liberties, but is now haunted by a drive against alternative thinking.⁴

It is increasingly resembling North Korea, Vysotsky argues. «Over all these years, people have liked us and disliked us, but repress us only for our opinions - that is totalitarianism and dictatorship of opinion.»

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 says. «The ombudsmen, members of parliament, civil society - everyone is frightened or to such a level controlled that they even are afraid to express their opinions.»

The increasingly repressive situation for the media was the reason why Yulia Latynina and several other prominent journalists in 2017 decided to leave Russia. Latynina works for the Novaya Gazeta and is considered among the most experienced and outspoken journalists in the country. The renown reporter has covered numerous crisis and herself been exposed to critical situations. But today, things are different, she argues.

«Now, the situation has changed drastically. A tidal wave of violence has been unleashed, with the attacks around the film «Mathilda» being just one example,» she told newspaper the Moscow Times.

According to Latynina, «it's not that Putin or the Kremlin are directly instigating these kinds of attacks. They are winking at those who want to organize them. They're empowering "local talent," and those people are given a free pass. Some of them are crazy.»

«What's left is violence. When a regime starts failing, it will resort to violence for the simple reason that it is the only effective means of staying in power.»⁵

Fining media companies, blocking sites

Among the media companies that regularly has felt the repressive force of Roskomnadzor is independent regional news journal 7x7-journal. The company has over the last years repeatedly been fined by Roskomnadzor for reported irregularities. Most of the fines have been

⁴ <http://severpost.ru/read/70922/>

⁵ <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/why-i-fled-russia-yulia-latynina-59010>

minor and the company capable of bearing the costs.

However, in August 2018, the level of punishment reached a new proportion, when the company was given a 840,000 ruble (€11.200) fine for the publishing of a blog post that included an interview with Mikhail Svetov, a leading member of the Russian Libertarian Party. According to the state media watchdog, the news journal «propagated illegal drug use» when it published the video interview with Svetov.

Company director Pavel Andreev and the 7x7 said the decision was «an act of censorship» and sent an appeal to the local city court of Syktyvkar, Komi Republic. According to the publisher, the Roskomnadzor was «trying to close a news outlet that provides an arena of speech for people with different opinions».⁶

The loss in court forced the small media company to pay the fine, one of the biggest ever issued by Roskomnadzor.

Not many weeks afterwards followed another record-beating fine, when newspaper Novoye Vremya (New Times) was given a 22 million rubles (€294.000) fine. Roskomnadzor said the newspaper had failed to accurately submit its financial results.⁷

The positive part of the story is that both companies quickly managed to pay their fines with help of crowd funding.

The media and internet sites that refuse to obey with the requests of Roskomnadzor face blocking. By January 2018, the number of websites and web pages blocked by Roskomnadzor totalled more than 330 thousand.⁸

In December 2018, the media regulators blocked one of the websites of Aleksey Navalny and earlier the same year the MBK Today, a news site supported by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was also blocked.⁹ The latter reopened in late 2018.

According to human rights group Agora, there were recorded as many as 662,842 cases of internet censorship faced by Russian users in 2018. That is almost a six-fold increase from 2017. Censorship expanded from 26 to 41 Russian regions last year, the NGO said.¹⁰

It is the independent media that are repeatedly cracked down on by Roskomnadzor. The Russian state media goes free despite serious violations of basic ethical journalistic principles. Symptomatically, online publication InoSmi, a media run by Rossiya Segodnya, got no reaction from Roskomnadzor when a reader in a comment suggested that Russian agents hunt down Barents Observer Editor Thomas Nilsen and give him a «cup of tea with polonium».¹¹

Lately, media control agency has caught growing interest also in foreign media. On 10th of January 2019, Roskomnadzor issued an announcement to the BBC that it was launching an inspection into the British broadcaster's activities in Russia.

⁶ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2018/08/will-only-make-us-stronger-say-publisher-after-clampdown-independent>

⁷ <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/10/27/78373-likvidatsionnye-shtrafy>

⁸ <https://reestr.rublacklist.net/>

⁹ <https://mbk.news/news/zablokiroval/>

¹⁰ <https://agora.legal/news/2019.02.05/Doklad-Agory-662-842-fakta-ogranicheniya-svobody-interneta-zafiksirovaniy/883>

¹¹ <https://inosmi.ru/social/20170618/239612156.html#comments>

According to the state agency, the BBC Russian services might have violated Russian law with its coverage of the war in Syria. The media company has broadcasted «the ideological positions of international terrorist organisations», the statement reads.¹²

Roskomnadzor has also engaged in a fight with Google. In November 2018, the agency fined Google after it had refused to comply with a legal requirement to remove certain entries from its search results.

Similar pressure was launched against Facebook and Twitter. In early 2019, Google reportedly started to remove certain entries from its search results in Russia, and by February had deleted around 70 percent of the websites blacklisted by the authorities.¹³

Roskomnadzor against the Barents Observer

On the 28th January 2019, the turn came to the Barents Observer. The small independent newspaper based in Kirkenes, Norway, had earlier that same month published an interview with Dan Eriksson, a Sámi man from northern Sweden.

Eriksson had for years struggled to overcome taboo and prejudice connected with his homosexuality. He was deeply depressed and twice tried to take his own life. According to Roskomnadzor, the story included «prescriptions how to commit suicide».

The state agency argued that the story propagates suicide and that it is in conflict with Russian Federal Law «On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection».

The article had originally been published by Swedish newspaper Arjeplognytt. It was translated to both English and Russian and re-published by the Barents Observer as part of Eyes On Barents, a media cooperation project supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The Barents Observer was given 24 hours to un-publish the story, but refused to comply.

Editor Thomas Nilsen made clear that it was out of question to un-publish. «This is an important story to tell. It is the media's role to tell stories about people whose voices are suppressed or not recognized. This is a story about a brave man. We are proud to republish the interview by Arjeplognytt,» he underlined

On 19th February the newspaper became blocked on Russian territory.¹⁴

Mobilising the trolls

«Block this newspaper to hell,» says Vitaly Milonov. He is Member of the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, and known for his hardline stance on liberals and independent-minded groups.

In an interview with the Federal News Agency, Milonov lashed out against the small English- and Russian-language newspaper, saying that it represents «degeneration and decay» and that

¹² <https://rkn.gov.ru/news/rsoc/news64684.htm>

¹³ https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5c5befcc9a794796feed9aa7?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop

¹⁴ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2019/02/barents-observer-now-blocked-russia>

«its ideology and its clients is based on people with queer psyche.»¹⁵

According to Milonov, who is also a member of the parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, the Barents Observer must not only be blocked in Russia. In addition, also diplomatic measures should be taken.

«We must send them a note of protest, call in the ambassador of Norway and say: what you are doing can affect our relations, if you continue to produce this kind of materials for Russians in the Russian language.»

The attack against the Barents Observer by Milonov and his associates came just few days after Roskonnadzor had issued a warning against the small Norwegian newspaper.

The attack against the Barents Observer made headlines all over Scandinavia and leading Russian newspapers, among them Vedomosti, Novaya Gazeta, Interfax, Dozhd and MediaZona, reported on the case.

On the other end, several hardline Russian media resources soon engaged in a campaign aimed at undermining the Norwegian media company. In the frontline of that campaign was the Federal News Agency, a news resource associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin, the controversial Russian businessman believed to be a friend of President Vladimir Putin.

The Federal News Agency owns several more news resources, among them the Politika Segodnya, Ekonomia Segodnya and Narodnye

Novosti, and also these resources published defaming stories about the Barents Observer.¹⁶

In an interview with Politika Segodnya on 12 February, Aleksandr Malkevich, leader of Russia's Public Chamber on information, media and mass communications, said that «it is time to set an example» against the Barents Observer.¹⁷

«We need one striking show of corporate punishment,» he underlined. «And if that will not be enough, then we will need to whip them two or three times,» he continued.

«We have to do it as tough as possible within the frames of our legislation, with the maximum level of demonstration and publicity.»

Interestingly, Malkevich is not only a representative of the Public Chamber, but also editor of news site USA Really, an initiative reportedly associated with that same Federal News Agency. In late December 2018, Malkevich was put on the US sanction list for attempts to interfere in elections. According to RBC, the Federal News Agency and its subsidiaries all started up on the same address as the so-called Troll Factory in St.Petersburg. «From the Troll Factory has grown a Media Factory,» the RBC reported in 2017.¹⁸

In a major investigative story, the RBC reveals how a comprehensive network of dubious news media has been built up around the «troll factory» in St.Petersburg. The holding includes as many as 16 online information resources,

¹⁵ https://riafan.ru/1150406-tut-ne-nado-stesnyatsya-milonov-posovetoval-rkn-kak-reagirovat-na-gei-propagandu-norvezhskogo-izdaniya?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop

¹⁶ https://nation-news.ru/431367-zablokirovat-k-chertyam-sobachim-milonov-o-situacii-so-skandalnoi-statei-russkoyazychnogo-norvezhskogo-resursa-k-kotoroi-est-voprosy-u-rkn?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop

¹⁷ https://polit.info/442267-malkevich-posovetoval-vyporot-norvezhskoe-smi-napisavshee-o-geya-samoubiice?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop

¹⁸ <https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2017/04/58d106b09a794710fa8934ac>

nine of them registered as news media, and they all have common leadership structures, and probable also the same investor, RBC reports.¹⁹

The holding is reported to have as many as 36 million readers per month.

The owner of the news resource, Mr Prigozhin, is also believed to be associated with the so-called Wagner Group, the quasi-independent military group that has engaged in a series of dubious operations in international conflict areas.²⁰

«Scandinavia is next»

The blocking of the Barents Observer in Russia, as well as the slandering in media outlets, can be seen as a concerted effort by Roskomnadzor and the media resources of the Federal News Agency.

Part of that picture is Vitaly Milonov and other powerful representatives of the Russian establishment. In his interview with the Federal News Agency, Milonov makes clear that Scandinavia should be a priority for upcoming Russian media initiatives abroad.

«Russia must respond to the expansion of immorality and promote its ideology in the West,» the State Duma representative says.

«Here is no reason for hesitation, yes - we are present in certain countries, but this presence is insignificant. For us, it is important not only with the USA and the UK, but also other countries, among them Scandinavia where alternative voices are hard to hear.»

According to Milonov, state news agency Sputnik should now be given a stronger role in the Nordic region.

«Let them [Sputnik] unfold an information campaign and we must help them the best way we can.»

Concerted attack

It is not the first time that the Barents Observer is under attack from Russian authorities. Already in 2014, Mikhail Noskov, then Russia's General Consul in Kirkenes, Norway, unleashed a harsh tirade against the newspaper after it had published an article that warned against possible consequences for international cooperation in the North following Russia's annexation of the Crimea.²¹

Only a year later, the newspaper ended up in bitter conflict with the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, the newspaper's host organisation, as the latter refused to grant it free editorial rights. «We must make sure that they do not write anything that can harm cross-border cooperation,» owner representative, now Member of Parliament, Runar Sjøstad said.²²

The editorial staff subsequently took the newspaper out of the Secretariat and rebranded it as the Independent Barents Observer.

Then, in 2016, Barents Observer Editor Thomas Nilsen was put on Russia's so-called stop list of undesired Norwegian individuals in Russia. According to the FSB, Nilsen is considered a «threat to Russian national security».

¹⁹ <https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2017/04/58d106b09a794710fa8934ac>

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/amp/world-europe-43167697>

²¹ https://thebarentsobserver.com/sites/default/files/barents_observer_-_proessen_pdf_format_1.pdf

²² Ibid.

The FSB refused to give Nilsen any further explanation, and the editor subsequently took the security service to court. After four rounds in Russian courts he took his case to the Russian Supreme Court.

Following his loss in the highest Russian court in May 2018, Nilsen made clear that we would take the case to the European Court of Human Rights.²³

Nilsen demands that his expulsion from Russia by the FSB is declared illegal and the decision reversed.

«Journalism is no threat to any country's national security, on the contrary - it is a means that makes sure that the right questions are asked to people in powerful positions, and that they must face responsibility for their actions,» Nilsen said in a comment.

The FSB is afraid of free journalist investigations about its own dark sides, the editor argues.

«Over the years, I have written many stories about the way Russian citizens have been harassed and suppressed by the FSB, and this is a job of the media.»

«Of course, the FSB wants to stop the work of the Barents Observer,» he underlines.

The Norwegian newspaper has over the last years significantly enhanced its visibility in Russia. Several of Russia's leading newspaper have increasingly used the Norwegian news maker as source of information for stories about Arctic developments and a Yandex News search gives more than 1,300 references to the Norwegian publication.

Negative stories are part of the picture. An article in Vecherny Murmansk, a newspaper owned by Murmansk city authorities, accused the Barents Observer for being «a pro-Nato publication»²⁴, and SM-News, a new media with resemblance to the media factory of Prigozhin, said it is «a propaganda machine», whose stories periodically are quoted by «the so-called free Russian press» that is «dependent of opposition movements and foreign grants.»²⁵

Information war

For the Kremlin, the state media are instruments of top strategic importance, both in domestic and foreign policy, and big resources are invested in their development.

Margarita Simonyan is Chief Editor of Russia Today, the government-funded international television network that since 2005 has delivered official Russian positions to global audiences.

The state media are no less important than the Ministry of Defence, Simonyan argues. And like the Defence Ministry, the state media are ready for war, she told newspaper Kommersant in 2012.²⁶

«Now we are not fighting with anyone, but in 2008 we were fighting. The Ministry of Defence was fighting with Georgia and we were the ones that fought the information war, we were fighting with the whole Western world,» she underlined.

In addition to her editorial responsibilities for RT (Russia Today), Simonyan is also Chief Editor of Rossiya Segodnya, the media house

²³ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2018/05/supreme-court-sides-fsb-says-barents-observer-editor-poses-threat-russias-national-security>

²⁴ <https://vmnews.ru/gorod/2018/04/13/gnezdo-internet-utok>

²⁵

<https://sm-news.ru/news/analitika/norvezhskaya-propagandistskaya-mashina-v-deystvii/>

²⁶ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1911336>

managed by Dmitry Kiselyov. That includes also Sputnik, the state news agency and radio broadcaster that delivers news services in more than 40 languages.

According to Simonyan, the RT is popular among people that are «tired of mainstream.» The channel has had major success among young people, as well as among wealthy people, she underlined in 2012.

At the same time, the chief editor admits that her channel has zero objectivity. There is no divide between state objectives and journalistic objectivity, she told Kommersant.

«Well, what kind of objectivity - where is it? When Russia is fighting we are of course fighting on the side of Russia.»

An issue of national security

It is the West, and first of all the USA, that is the main target of RT, Sputnik and the other state-sponsored international media initiatives. And they have the full backing of the Kremlin.

When RT in 2017 came under pressure from U.S authorities to register at the U.S Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA), it soon became a top issue in a meeting in the Russian Security Council, the country's top national security body.²⁷

Over the last years, the media has increasingly stood in the frontline of the aggravating diplomatic disputes between Russia and the U.S.

²⁷ <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55732>

²⁸ http://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/2856885#31

²⁹

http://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/2979640#27

³⁰ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2018/01/moscow-makes-new-punch-against-west-and-its-media>

³¹ <http://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/345523-7>

Maria Zakharova, the top press spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2017 and 2018 used practically all her weekly press conferences to hit against the western media and its journalists.

«We are taking about a deliberate policy of pressure against Russian mass media», she said in September 2017. «Journalists are not getting accreditation, they are expelled and detained and the main reason reported is accusations of propaganda and even threats against national security.»²⁸

Zakharova also accused US secret services of trying to recruit Russian journalists.²⁹

Following the foreign agent registration of RT and Sputnik in the USA, Russia with unprecedented speed adopted new legislation that aimed at U.S media channels like the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. Few weeks later, the legislators adopted another bill that placed additional pressure on Russian media companies and individuals who receive money from abroad. That includes also bloggers and freelancers.³⁰

According to the bill that was overwhelmingly approved by the MPs in a first reading, both private persons and media organizations that distribute foreign media contents and get money from abroad can be stamped «foreign agents».³¹

The new laws are another blow to international cross-border journalism cooperation.

Moscow says the new laws are responses to action taken by Washington. But the fear for the free and independent media appears to be the underlying motivation.

In a report on Protection of State Sovereignty and Prevention of Interference in Internal Affairs, published in 2018 by the Russian Federation Council, the western media and NGOs are presented as key threats to Russian national security.

The committee states that «anti-Russian pro-western forces and their propagandists and agitators have from the late 1980s intruded the domestic information-cultural space» and that media from the U.S. and also other Nato countries have played key roles.

Western media contents delivered in the Russian language are a key part of the problem, the reports concludes. According to the parliament committee, western countries actively engage in production of «direct and targeted propaganda in Russian and the other languages used in the Russian Federation.»

Furthermore, the West also assert direct and indirect influence on Russian media, journalists, bloggers «by means of propagandist campaigns.»³²

More positive news, please

In November 2018, Timofey Surovtsev traveled from Moscow to Murmansk and from there further to Kirkenes, the Norwegian town located only few kilometers from the Russian border.

Surovtsev is leader of the newly established Eco-Press, a Russian association for ecological

journalists. Among his travel companions were representatives from partner media Komsomolskaya Pravda, Moskovsky Komsomolets and news agency Regnum.³³

The mission of Surovtsev and his new association was clear; there is a need for the building of new and more powerful propaganda tools that can influence the media situation in the North. And that includes both the Russian and Nordic sides of the border.

The situation is most serious in the field of environmental journalism and the Barents region is an area of special concern, he made clear in his address delivered in Kirkenes.

«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 underlined.

«We urgently need powerful propaganda resources that will aggregate information of the regional mass-media, Russian environmentalists and transfer this information on the international level,» he added.³⁴

In the room was a sparse number of people, most of them representatives of the association's partner media in Moscow.

According to the Eco-Press leader, the Norwegian press is not sufficiently objective. «We talk about Norway as if it does not have any problems and I know it is not true. When I read your [Norwegian] newspapers I can't find information about Norway's problems. But about our [Russian] problems you write regularly.»

³² <http://council.gov.ru/media/files/G6hNGZ3VbQNiMdZki1BKbrsvuRxPwim.pdf>

³³ <http://www.eco-prensa.ru/index.php/partnery>

³⁴ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2018/11/powerful-propaganda-resources-needed-balance-barents-journalism>

Among the initiators of the Eco-Press is the Russian Union of Journalists.³⁵ Leader of the Union, Vladimir Solovyov, is himself passionate about the need for more good news about the Arctic.

There is too much negative news about Russia and developments in the North, Solovyov made clear as he in late December 2018 spoke about the Arctic to a hall packed with Russian and international journalists.

The event was the Arctic Media World, a journalist congress, and the site was Salekhard, the capital of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug. In cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Union of Journalists and natural gas company Novatek, regional Yamal-Nenets authorities had invited more than 200 journalists to discuss the Arctic and regional media developments.

No expense was spared as the media representatives were first flown to new Arctic port of Sabetta and subsequently taken to the regional capital of Salekhard. It was a carefully planned event, staged with classy standards by a professional team of organizers to show off Russia's biggest Arctic showcase projects, the oil and gas development in and around Yamal.

According to Solovyov, it is time for more positive stories about the Russian Arctic. Journalists are used to living with a kind of «break» inside, they are afraid of reporting about positive developments, he made clear.

«But we have to write also about the positive thing, Solovyov underlined. «There is a huge number of new industrial plants being built in the country, we have got the Sabetta, and we

have to tell about this as much as we can and in the most interesting way possible.»³⁶

In 2018, the Union of Journalists established a so-called Arctic Club that is to help bring out more good news from the region.

The Russian regional media initiatives in the North are well supported by the country's authorities, including the diplomatic offices.

In a statement from the Russian Embassy in Oslo in February 2018, the diplomats in Norway not only promoted their own state media. They also highlighted the importance of several new Norwegian media, among them the Resett, the Herland Report, as well as the websites and blogs of Pål Steigan and Bjørn Nistad and the Facebook page of Norwegian People's Diplomacy.³⁷

Among the established Norwegian media, the mentioned new information resources are viewed with great skepticism.

According to Anders Giæver, political commentator in Norway's biggest newspaper VG, «the Herland Report, Steigan and Bjørn Nistad all have different standpoints and fight different battles, but can agree about this one thing: the [established] media are lying.»³⁸

The Russian embassy says Norwegians are regularly approaching the diplomatic station with dissatisfaction over the «anti-Russian tone in publications about Russia.»

«We are grateful for these addresses,» the embassy says and adds that «society is tired of the black-and-white picture that is imposed by the established media.»

³⁵ http://ruj.ru/news/monitoring-media/soyuz-zhurnadistov-rossii-stal-odnim-iz-initsiatorov-soz-daniya-obedineniya-eko-press/?sphrase_id=23280

³⁶ Quote recorded by author of this report

³⁷ <https://m.facebook.com/notes/russian-embassy-in-norway/rusland-i-norske-media/1578728845581803/>

³⁸ <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/gP7IXa/den-sinnssyke-fasen>

If you are interested in getting the real first-hand information you should use the RT and Sputnik News, the embassy underlines.

...

Russia's official picture about itself and the world is painted by the state media.

If you are trying to turn the picture you might soon find yourself in a brawl not only with the Russian diplomatic service, but also with Dmitry Kiselyov and his Rossiya Segodnya. And the Roskomnadzor.