

Journalism in the borderland

Barents Media Freedom 2017

The Independent
Barents Observer



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Kirkenes, 2017

The Independent Barents Observer

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Introduction

«You will not write about politics, will you?» The question comes from one of the border guards checking my passport at the Russian checkpoint of Borisoglebsk. I am on my way across the Norwegian-Russian border heading for Murmansk, the Russian Arctic city, on a work assignment.

It is not uncommon that Russian border guards ask journalists about the purpose of their visit. However, this time the question is more intriguing than normal. And the timing is extraordinary. Only few weeks earlier had Thomas Nilsen, my colleague and Editor of the Barents Observer, been stopped on the very same spot and taken aside by the border guards. In a back room he was told that he was no longer wanted in Russia and that he would be rejected entry for the next five years. For «reasons of national security», they said.¹

«I will write about the Arctic», I told the border guard. That seemed to be accepted and I proceeded without further questioning. After all, the Arctic is a peaceful place and a "territory of dialogue" as Russian government officials tend to underline.

Working as a journalist in the borderland to Russia has always been refreshingly thrilling. But never easy. And over the last years, it has become outright difficult. The Barents Observer has itself, with agony, experienced that negative trend. In 2015, the whole editorial team left the newspaper's host organisation, the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, and reestablished the paper as a fully independent and journalist-owned media organisation. We had been rejected editorial rights and Thomas Nilsen had been dismissed. As Runar Sjøstad, the regional county council leader and one of the owners of the Barents Secretariat had put it: «We must make sure that the Barents Observer does not write stories which can harm the Barents Cooperation».²

The free journalism of the Barents Observer had become a kind of «threat to the good neighbourly cross-border cooperation».

Later, as revealed by Norwegian broadcasting company NRK, representatives of the Russian security service FSB had exerted pressure on Norwegian state officials to «get the newspaper shut down».³

In a rare case of Norwegian government clampdown on the media, the Barents Observer was sought weakened and put to rest. But that had not happened. We had continued with Barents news making, now with our own journalist-owned Independent Barents Observer.

¹ «Barents Observer Editor Thomas Nilsen is declared unwanted in Russia by FSB», <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2017/03/barents-observer-editor-thomas-nilsen-declared-unwanted-russia>

² «Barents Observer - Prosessen. Historien om hvordan fylkespolitikkerne i Nord-Norge forsøkte å stanse den redaksjonelle friheten til den eneste norske nettavisen som publiseres på russisk.» *The Barents Observer*. 2016

³ «Kilde til NRK: – Russisk etterretning ba Norge om å bringe BarentsObserver til taushet», https://www.nrk.no/norge/kilde-til-nrk_-_russisk-etterretning-ba-norge-om-a-bringe-barentsobserver-til-taushet-1.12583998

Few days after we broke out from the Norwegian Barents Secretariat we were online with the new newspaper. A few months later, we re-established also our Russian-language pages.

However, pressure had not seized. In November 2015 the Norwegian Barents Secretariat warned it was taking us to court over a name dispute. Later we became victim to fake news in a story published by state news agency RIA Novosti.⁴ On 9th March 2017, Thomas Nilsen had been expelled from Russia. Few weeks later, we were subjected to a potentially devastating DDos attack from hackers.

It all happened at a time when Russian diplomatic representatives in Norway stepped up their rhetorics against Norway and especially Norwegian media which was accused of hampering relations between the countries.

«The media is suffering from Russophobia», Ambassador Ramishvilli underlined in an interview with newspaper Dagbladet.⁵

At the very same time, the country's Consul General in Kirkenes, the Norwegian Arctic border town located few kilometres from Russia, in public statements repeatedly stressed that «relations between northern Norway and Russia are good, while they are bad between the rest of Norway and Russia». Norwegian northerners understand Russia, he stressed in an appearance during the Barents Spektakel winter festival. Meanwhile, Mr Sergey Shatunovskiy-Byurno lashed out against what he described as blatant Norwegian media.⁶

However, the general consul was content with local Kirkenes daily Sør-Varanger Avis, which he courted and cherished for its friendly approach to Russia.

If you display the same kind of friendly attitude and write a series of positive stories about Russia we might be able to reconsider the case against you, he made clear to Thomas Nilsen in a conversation following the latter's expulsion from Russia.⁷

The Barents Observer case had become a tricky issue in diplomatic relations between the neighbouring countries. That has had its effects also on local cross-border relations. In the Barents Observer host town of Kirkenes, several noted local voices tacitly signalled to the author of this report displeasure with the online newspaper's frank and independent coverage of nearby Russia.

⁴ «Russian state news agency misuses Barents Observer in fake news story», <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2017/03/russian-state-news-agency-misuses-barents-observer-fake-news-story>

⁵ «Russlands ambassadør til Norge advarer: - Det vil komme et svar fra oss, ikke bare til Norge, men til hele NATO.» <https://www.dagbladet.no/magasinet/russlands-ambassador-til-norge-advarer---det-vil-komme-et-svar-fra-oss-ikke-bare-til-norge-men-til-hele-nato/67497623>

⁶ Statements made during the «Transborder Cafe: National Security – Labour Security – Data Security», 9th February 2017

⁷ Comments made in meeting between Sergey Shatunovskiy-Byurno and Thomas Nilsen 9th March 2017

For some locals, the controversial statement by Finnmark county leader Sjøstad appeared true enough; the free and independent journalism is a challenge to good neighbourly relations with Russia.

For two decades, Kirkenes had branded itself as "little Murmansk" and as a laboratory for development of good cross-border relations. In this mini-universe of shiny Norwegian-Russian harmony now seemed to open a dark crack which revealed a vicious face with uncertain intents.

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The intriguing story about the Barents Observer is remarkable in contemporary Norwegian media. It has affected the atmosphere among journalists and media in Barents borderlands. However, on the Russian side of the border there are other and far more remarkable and dramatic stories. Independent and brave Russian journalists and editors are under mounting pressure and regularly experience obstacles with serious implications for themselves and their media organisations.

This report gives an overview of some of the trends which are dominating contemporary media developments in the Barents region. Our prime focus is on the Russian parts of the region, the area stretching from Murmansk in the west to the Komi and Nenets Autonomous Okrug in the east. But we also look at certain trends in Norway and cross-border media relations.

War on independent journalism

The 2017 Press Freedom Index from Reporters Without Borders describes the media climate in Russia as an «oppressive». Pressure against independent media has grown steadily, and the negative trend «spreads from Moscow to the provinces», the report reads.⁸

The index ranks Russia as number 148 of 180 countries, while neighbouring Norway, Sweden and Finland rank respectively number one, two and three.

Other media monitoring organisations bear witness of the same trend. According to the latest annual ranking from Freedom House, an institute which monitors Internet freedom in 65 countries, Russia was in 2016 for the first time ranked "not free," the lowest of three possible rankings.⁹

The Russian human rights organisation Agora in its latest report on Internet freedom notes a fivefold increase in the number of "Internet freedom limitations" in 2015, as well as a nine-fold increase in the number of blocked websites. In addition comes a year-on-year doubling of the number of regions where internet users are subjected to «major pressure».

⁸ 2017 World Press Freedom Index <https://rsf.org/en/russia>

⁹ Freedom in the World 2017. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/russia>

Paradoxically, the report from Agora came as the organisation itself was subject to closure by the Russian Justice Ministry, and the publication on internet freedom was consequently made available for the public by another organisation — online newspaper Meduza.¹⁰ According to Russian justice authorities, Agora - from before listed as so-called «foreign agent», had violated required reporting procedures and was to undergo forced liquidation.

Government pressure and crackdown on independent media and civil society hiked after Vladimir Putin started his third presidential term in 2012.

However, the oppressive character of Russian state media relations is not always direct and outright, but often rather overt and indirect. And responsibility for the negative trend can not always easily be traced back to the authorities.

Consequently, the Russian president likes to present himself as a man on the right track in relations with the media. For example, during a visit to Russian state media house Rossiya Segodnya in 2016 he quite symptomatically highlighted the importance objectivity and free press.

«In the contemporary world, as information technology is developing at raging speed, the key issue still remains information trustworthiness and truth and information objectivity».¹¹

The visit took place in connection with a media forum titled «The new era of journalism: farewell to mainstream», an event organised by Rossiya Segodnya.

«The information must be objective from all points of view, and not be subjected to any kind of repressive action with the aim of its correction», the president elaborated.

During the visit, Putin was shown around in the grand facilities of the media house by its General Director Dmitry Kiselyov and Chief Editor Maria Simonyan, the controversial big chiefs of Russian state media.

Rossiya Segodnya has since its establishment by presidential order in late 2013 spearheaded the Kremlin's information strategy. The media house, which includes both RIA Novosti and Sputnik News, was established with an overall objective to «provide information on Russian state policy and Russian life and society for audiences abroad».

The approach to free and independent media was a very different when Vladimir Putin few weeks after his visit to Rossiya Segodnya met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. In a joint statement following the top meeting, the two leaders announced that they had found common ground in regulating information flows.

¹⁰ «Svoboda interneta 2015: torzhestvo tsenzury». https://meduza.io/static/internet_freedom/%D0%90%D0%93%D0%9E%D0%A0%D0%90.-%D0%A1%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B0-2015.pdf

¹¹ Poseshchenie MIA «Rossiya segodniya». <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52120>

A statement released after the meeting reads that the two sides steadfast support the principle of «state sovereignty over the area of information» and that they pursue «equal rights for all states in the management of the Internet». ¹²

Plenty of funding for loyal media

At the same time as Putin after 2012 launched a string of oppressive measures against independent media, he has boosted allocations to his loyal state journalists. In 2015, total federal budget allocations to the media reached almost 110 billion rubles (€1.57 billion).

In 2016, a total of 6,75 billion rubles (€96 million) of federal funding was injected in Rossiya Segodnya. In addition, as much as 24.99 billion rubles (€357 million) was allocated to VGTRK, the country's leading radio and TV network. Meanwhile, nineteen billion rubles (€272 million) was invested in TV network Russia Today and 7,8 billion rubles (€111 million) in radio and television network RTRS. ¹³

In comparison, Norwegian state broadcaster NRK in 2016 had a budget on 5.7 billion kroner (€617 million) while Finnish broadcaster Yle's turnover in 2017 is estimated to €470.9 million.

Also in the Russian regions there are strong alliances between the authorities and government-loyal media. In Murmansk, regional Governor Marina Kovtun late 2015 allocated several million rubles to regional media companies for positive publicity. The biggest recipient was the regional branch of federal media company VGTRK, which got 16 million rubles. Among the other regional recipients of funding from Governor Kovtun was news agency B-Port and others. ¹⁴

More allocations were made in 2016. In return, as part of the contracts signed between the parts, the media outlets are expected to publish a certain number of stories about the activities of the government.

Overt oppression

Crackdown on independent media is frequently implemented by Kremlin-loyal stakeholders outside the state apparatus. A key mechanism applied against government-critical media is clampdown through court verdicts.

Over the last years, a big number of major law suits against the media have been initiated by people and companies with close relations to the authorities. A historical height came in 2016 as state oil company Rosneft sued RBC, the media house owned by business tycoon

¹² «Sovmestnoye zayavlenie Rossiiskoy Federatsii i Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki», <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5100>

¹³ «Minfin rekomendoval sokratit finansirovanie gosudarstvennykh SMI», <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5100>

¹⁴ «Media-kostyli dlya gubernatora», <http://blogger51.com/2016/01/59439>

Mikhail Prokhorov, for 3.1 billion rubles (€44 million). The suit came after the media house had published a story which shed a critical light on a major business deal with BP.¹⁵

The law suit followed a search by the FSB of the offices of Prokhorov's company Onexim.

Shortly later, RBC conducted a major reshuffle of its editorial staff, apparently after pressure from powerful interests in the Kremlin. A source close to Mikhail Prokhorov told Meduza that Russian authorities are exerting major pressure against the businessman to either sell the media company or change its leadership.¹⁶

Rosneft stands behind several more controversial court cases. In August 2016, company President Igor Sechin filed a suit against newspaper Novaya Gazeta after it had published a story about the 85 meter long luxury yacht «*St. Princess Olga*», allegedly owned by the Sechin family.¹⁷

The many law suits are regularly threatening to bring media companies on their knees and ultimately force them to loyalty, alternatively closure.

In the case against RBC, the level of fines were ultimately significantly reduced. However, that and the many other cases send a signal to the media and tacitly heighten the level of self-censorship.

The same trend is evident in the Russian North.

Among the regional media companies regularly subjected to court proceedings is SeverPost, the news agency in Murmansk. City authorities in both Murmansk and neighbouring Severomorsk have filed suits against the company, which subsequently have been forced to pay fines. In 2016, the news agency was even sued by the regional Election Commission, which argued that the newspaper had violated media regulations in connection with the regional Duma vote.

SeverPost Director Dmitry Vysotsky told the Barents Observer that the Election Committee had made it clear to the newspaper that it would be fined unless it stopped writing critical stories about the work of the Committee itself and also about the candidates from government-ruling United Russia party.

«Personally I regard the administrative article concerning SeverPost and the fine as revenge for our disobedience», Vysotsky said.¹⁸

One of the most remarkable law suits in the Russian north came in the Komi Republic where media company 7x7-journal was sued by the regional Information and

¹⁵ «Kak «Rosneft» naschitala 3 milord rubles ushcherba ot stati v RBK», <http://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2016/10/07/660103-kak-rosneft-naschitala>

¹⁶ «Iz RBK ushli shef redaktory saita i gazety», <http://www.vedomosti.ru/technology/articles/2016/05/13/640942-rbk-ushli>

¹⁷ «Sechin pedal ink k «Novoy Gazete» is-za stati o yacht St Princess Olga», <https://www.vedomosti.ru/technology/articles/2016/08/18/653623-sechin>

¹⁸ «News agency in Murmansk fined by Election Commission», <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2016/10/newspaper-murmansk-fined-election-commission>

Communication Service (Roskomnadzor). According to the government body, 7x7-journal had violated the law when it described a WWII memorial by a slang name commonly used by locals. The memorial includes an «eternal flame» and statues of three women carrying a big broom. Locals call it «the village women who fry a crocodile». The independent media company lost the case a local court, and later also in the Syktyvkar City Court.¹⁹

Troubled local editors

There are also a number of cases of open and direct oppression, as well as outright censorship.

In Karelia, problems mounted for Editor Nadezhda Gongoleva after her newspaper Prizyv published a critical story about the business activities of a local member of the municipal council in Lahdenpohja, a municipality located along the border to Finland. Soon after, the local town mayor announced that Gongoleva had been fired from her post. Gongoleva sued the local authorities, but ultimately lost the case. In a comment, local town Mayor Vladislav Vokhmin said that «one should have a very balanced view on what is happening [...] Such conduct is categorically unacceptable for a municipal newspaper».²⁰

In that same region, three journalists broke out from municipal newspaper Novosti Kalevala and established new daily Severnye Berega («Northern Coasts») following mounting pressure against their journalism. Both local and regional authorities subsequently started to put hurdles in their way. According to the journalists, they «live in a constant war with the local authorities». In late February 2016, the regional Supreme Court ordered the newspaper to publish a retraction following an article about law violations conducted by a local policeman. The disputed part of the article was the headline, where the newspaper had applied a well-known Russian proverb about unfaithful law enforcement.²¹

In Pechenga, the municipality bordering on Norway and Finland, newspaper editor of Pechenga Gazeta Irina Iskorneva was early 2016 dismissed by the municipal government, the newspaper owner. According to Iskorneva, the dismissal was connected with her «independent position on key issues». She later sued the local government and won the case.²²

In that same municipality, the Gazeta Pechenga in 2015 published a story about emission figures from the local nickel smelter in the towns of Nikel and Zapolyarny. The story created an outcry from plant owner Norilsk Nickel and its subsidiary Kola MMC. The

¹⁹ «Newspaper gets fine for «desecration of war memorial», <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/society/2016/03/newspaper-gets-fine-desecration-war-memorial>

²⁰ «Newspaper editor criticized local legislator, got fired» <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2016/08/newspaper-editor-criticized-local-legislator-got-fired-0>

²¹ In midst of a Karelian forest, a lighthouse of free press <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/society/2016/03/midst-karelian-forest-lighthouse-free-press>

²² «Sacked Pechenga newspaper editor wins in court» <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2016/03/sacked-pechenga-newspaper-editor-wins-court>

newspaper subsequently withdrew and eliminated all copies of the paper and re-issued a new edition with a updated and polished story.²³

Media war with EU

A key motivation for Russia's major buildup of state media is rooted in the increasingly complicated relationship with the abroad, and first of all with the USA and EU.

New and more powerful media companies are used as information tools aimed at western audiences, made to tell the stories from the point of view of the Kremlin. They have become crucial for Putin and his friends' bid to divert attention away from negative domestic trends and weaken foreign unity against the country.

The situation was seriously aggravated with the annexation of the Crimea and incursions in Donbas.

A climax in information warfare between Brussels and Moscow was reached as the European Parliament in November 2016 adopted a resolution which warns against anti-EU propaganda from Russia.

«Hostile propaganda against the EU and its member states seeks to distort the truth, provoke doubt, divide the EU and its North American partners, paralyse the decision-making process, discredit the EU institutions and incite fear and uncertainty among EU citizens», the resolution reads.²⁴

According to the parliament members, news media organisations like Sputnik and Russia Today are key tools used by the Russians against EU audiences.

A harsh reaction followed from the Russian side.

«What can I say? These attempts continue, they keep trying to teach us democracy», Vladimir Putin said in a comment, and cryptically added:

«As for our journalists who promoted this influential European body to take such decisions, judging by the situation, we can congratulate them on working so actively and with such talent and results.»²⁵

Few days later, the EU resolution was a top issue of discussion in the Russian national Security Council. Presidential press spokesman Dmitry Peskov after the Council meeting said that adversary «steps and measures are under planning».

²³ Copies of both withdrawn and re-published copies of the paper is at hand at the Barents Observer

²⁴ «MEPs sound alarm on anti-EU propaganda from Russia and Islamist terrorist groups», <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/20161118IPR51718/meps-sound-alarm-on-anti-eu-propaganda-from-russia-and-islamist-terrorist-groups>

²⁵ «Answers to journalists' questions», <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53317>

«The tendency of attacks on the media, limitation of the essence of press freedom and freedom of speech is of grave concern», he told RBC.²⁶

The situation was subsequently taken over by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In a press conference, MFA spokeswoman Maria Sakharova made clear that something resembling a war against undesired journalists and correspondents was in the making. Sakharova confirmed that the Russian side had declared a Polish journalist persona non grata, reportedly after the Polish side had expelled a Russian journalist.

A similar situation unfolded in relations with the Czech Republic. «When they were starting to create various obstacles for our correspondents and cancelled their accreditations, we declared that would take counter-measures», Sakharova said in a comment.²⁷

Czech journalists were subsequently rejected accreditations in Russia.

Kick against Norway and Arctic journalism

Meanwhile, also in the high north did Russia wage war on foreign journalists.

When Editor of the Independent Barents Observer Thomas Nilsen in early March 2017 arrived in Borisoglebsk, the border-crossing point between Russia and Norway, he was told he was unwanted in Russia. It soon turned out that the editor had been included in Russia's latest so-called Stop List, an alleged response to Norway's adjoining of the EU sanctions against Russia.

In an official comment on the expulsion of Nilsen, the Russian Embassy in Oslo confirmed that the stop lists are made as a response to Norway's entry ban on Russian citizens. The embassy especially refers to the so-called «discriminative entry order of Russian citizens to Spitsbergen».

Thomas Nilsen and the Barents Observer had been the media organisation which first reported about the visit of First Deputy Premier Dmitry Rogozin to Norwegian Arctic archipelago of Svalbard in 2015. The visit triggered an outcry in Norway, as Rogozin is on EU and Norway's sanction list of individuals not allowed entry because of his direct involvement in Russia's annexation of Crimea.

The visit of Rogozin to Svalbard triggered the introduction of stricter travel regulations to the Arctic islands by the Norwegian authorities. That was seriously perceived by the powerful deputy premier and Russia as blow to bilateral relations in the area. After all, the Arctic was one of Russia's top priority areas and Rogozin is the Head of the country's Arctic Commission.

The FSB's entry denial of Editor Thomas Nilsen remains unprecedented in Norway and is one of utmost few international cases of the kind. By many, it is considered not only an

²⁶ «Kreml obyasnil obsuzhdenie na Sovbeze raboty rossiiskikh SMI za rubezhom», <http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/583d4fe19a79479f4e64e9f8?from=newsfeed>

²⁷ «Brifing of ofitsialnogo predstavatelya MID Rossii M.V.Zakharovoy, Moskva, 24 noyabrya 2016 goda», http://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/2536692#6

attack against independent media, but also a serious blow to cross-border cooperation in the Barents region.

Nilsen was one of the first journalists who took part in formal cross-border media cooperation when he in 1991 together with colleagues initiated joint programs between Radio Pasvik and Radio Murmansk. A year later, in 1992, he published the first printed magazine in both Norwegian and Russian language, the EcoNord magazine.

“This is a very troublesome development. In a period with increasing East-West tensions, Russia has said the Arctic is a territory of dialogue. If journalists can’t be a part of that dialogue, and FSB can kick out reporters of whom they disapprove, that is a cause of great concern,” said Thomas Nilsen.²⁸

The travel ban on the editor will get a continuation as Nilsen in June 2017 announced that he was taking the FSB to court.

Thomas Nilsen underlines that the FSB has not right to meddle in journalism.

«The Russian constitution gives me the right to enter the country, as well as to do my job as a journalist. All my papers, visa and press-accreditation, were valid and I had not violated any laws. Any decision by FSB to stop me must be based in law. Consequently, FSB has not presented any legal grounds to deny me from doing my job in Russia,» he says.²⁹

«It is obviously wrong when FSB starts to interfere with journalism. A country’s security service should focus on protecting the rights of reporters, not violating such fundamental freedoms.»

Nilsen is supported by Team 29, a group of Russian lawyers and journalists, which this spring took on the case of Nilsen.

«The FSB border guards violated Thomas Nilsen’s right to enter Russia, did not provide him with information about the grounds of the ban and ultimately deprived him of his legitimate right to freedom of expression and his professional activities as journalist», says Ivan Pavlov, leader of Team29.³⁰

The regional leaders and the media

On paper, journalism in Russia is well protected by law. The country’s Constitution includes well-acknowledged principles of freedom of speech and press freedom. In addition, the Russian regions all have their own basic code of laws which lay down rules of conduct.

²⁸ «Barents Observer Editor Thomas Nilsen is declared unwanted in Russia by FSB» <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2017/03/barents-observer-editor-thomas-nilsen-declared-unwanted-russia>

²⁹ «Barents Observer editor takes FSB to court», <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2017/06/barents-observer-editor-takes-fsb-court-over-travel-ban>

³⁰ Ibid

The Murmansk regional statutes (Ustav), a document adopted in 1997, states that «everyone has the right to freely search, receive, communicate, create and distribute information about the activities of the regional government» and that the regional authorities are obliged to «provide everyone with the possibility to familiarise themselves with documents and materials which directly touch on their rights and freedoms».³¹

However, like in Russia general, the media freedom principles in regions like Murmansk have gradually been watered out by both legislative amendments, inconsistent practice and overt and direct suppression.

Murmansk has today hardly any fully-fledged independent news organisations. And critical-minded stories, let alone investigative articles, about regional authorities and powerful business are rare.

An overwhelming part of the media organisations in Murmansk Oblast are either owned and controlled by the authorities or by industrial companies like the Norilsk Nickel.

The few lone swallows which still bravely proceed with independent journalism are under growing pressure and tend to operate either as part of federal media companies like the Novaya Gazeta or in the field of blogging.

The Murmansk regional government and its leader Governor Marina Kovtun carefully nurses relations with the media, but first of all with the government-loyal organisations and news agencies, most of which are controlled or owned by the authorities themselves. In a speech delivered in connection with the Day of Russian Press, Kovtun highlighted that the current «limitless freedom of speech has created a dangerous imbalance».

«It has become increasingly hard to separate the truth from fiction, facts from rumours and sincerity from propaganda and commercials, the governor said and expressed gratitude that «the majority of media workers in the region stay true to traditions of journalism ethics and unwritten laws of the profession».³²

«Dignity, competence, patriotism, intense attention to life in the region and the aspirations of ordinary people, such are the exclusive characters of the local Arctic press», Kovtun underlined.

At the same time, regional media representatives say that the journalism environment is getting tougher. Dmitry Vysotsky, Founder and General Director of Murmansk-based news agency SeverPost, has over the last years repeatedly fallen victim to court cases from local city authorities.

Vysotsky brands his news agency as independent, and might be on good terms of cooperation with Marina Kovtun and her regional government. But he has repeatedly ended up in conflict with local city authorities. In a latest twist, the SeverPost was sued by Vecherny Murmansk, the local newspaper owned by the city government.

³¹ Ustav Murmanskoy oblasti (utv Murmanskoy oblastnoy Dumoy 26 noyabrya 1997g), http://constitution.garant.ru/region/ustav_murman/chapter/4/

³² 13 yanvarya - Den rossiiskoy pechati, <https://gov-murman.ru/info/speech/2525/>

The newspaper argues that SeverPost «hampered its business reputation» when it published a story about how local politicians pay for articles which discredit their opponents. Meanwhile, Vecherny Murmansk is headed by Viktor Khabarov, himself a member of the Murmansk City Council for ruling party United Russia.

According to Dmitry Vysotsky, the suits are initiated by the city representatives because of critical stories published by the news agency.

«We regularly criticise them for unfounded spending and failed decisions, now they have once again got tired of us and decided to drag us into a court case on unsubstantiated grounds», he told the Barents Observer.³³

«It is another attempt to distract us from our journalistic work, it forces us to spend efforts and financial resources — for an independent outlet of critical importance, on court battles.»

According to Vysotsky, the climate for journalists in Murmansk is getting worse.

Barents Press International at crossroads

As the euphoria of cross-border contacts, traveling and cooperation unfolded in the wake of the changed political climate in the early 1990s, journalists in the Nordic countries and Northwest Russia found together across former divides and established a joint platform for cooperation. The Barents Press International has since 1995, despite its ups and downs, served as cross-border contact point for regional journalists. The informal and un-institutionalised character of the network, along with generous money flows from the Norwegian government, has been considered of key importance for its success.

The Barents Press International today describes itself as «the most successful form of journalistic cross-border co-operation that can be found in Europe», and «perhaps the best success story so far in the history of Barents co-operation».

However, the journalist network has not managed to stay aloof of the recent negative trends, and appears increasingly subject to pressure from state authorities.

Consequently, with great agony, and only after the insistence from attending journalists, the network board during the Barents Press Annual Meeting 2017 managed to agree on a statement on the expulsion from Russia of Thomas Nilsen.

The statement reads that Barents Press «deeply regrets that governments in the Barents region prevent journalists to freely travel and report from any country in the region».³⁴

It does not however condemn the expulsion of long-time network associate Nilsen.

³³ «In Murmansk, a burgeoning fight between city government and free press», <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2017/07/murmansk-burgeoning-fight-between-city-government-and-free-press>

³⁴ «Statement from Barents Press International», <http://www.barentspress.org/uncategorized/statement-from-barents-press-international/>

Furthermore, it puts the Barents Observer editor on the same line as controversial General Director of Rossiya Segodnya Dmitry Kiselyov, the man who in 2014 had been put on the EU's sanction list following his role as propagator in the Crimea crisis.

One attending journalist in the plenary part of the Annual Meeting raised a critical voice against the statement, arguing that it was unreasonable to compare Editor Nilsen with Dmitry Kiselyov.

«Should we really protect a person who openly incites war and violence, should we not have some kind of filter as to who can call themselves journalist?» she said in a comment about Kiselyov

To a great extent, the network failed to reach out to the Barents Observer and its editor. Instead it, perhaps unmindfully, indirectly put itself on the side of the FSB which few weeks earlier had put one of the most experienced Barents journalists on its blacklist.

Interestingly, several Barents Press board members have confirmed to the author of this report that it was the Norwegian board representatives who had opposed a clearer stance and stronger wording in the statement.

Furthermore, as if echoing the message of diplomats from the Russian Embassy in Oslo, leader of Barents Press Norway used his keynote speech in the Annual Meeting to lash out against Norwegian media. More than addressing the many serious cases of media oppression in the region, he attacked his fellow Norwegian journalists

«We must be honest and admit that the Norwegian media coverage of Russia tends to be biased, ommissive and full of stereotypes», he underlined.³⁵

Paradoxically, the statement came just few days after Norway had been declared the 2017 top country on media freedom by Reporters Without Borders.

The Annual Meeting also marked the start of a gradual institutionalisation of the formerly loose network. New Swedish chairman of the Barents Press International announced that a new network document meant to «regulate key principles and values on which the network is to follow» will be drafted.

At the same time, the Norwegian branch of the network announced that it would no longer be an informal network, but instead become a legally registered member organisation.

The Meeting, the 21st in a row, took place in regional government premises in Arkhangelsk. Regional Governor Igor Orlov opened the three-day program with assurances that «There is no government pressure against mass media in Arkhangelsk» and that «he could not remember that a single media outlet has closed over the last many years».

The statements were left undisputed by the many local journalists from Arkhangelsk.

³⁵ «Journalist network Barents Press at a crossroads»

<https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2017/05/journalist-network-barents-press-crossroads>

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