



## TELLING THE UNTOLD

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### **Sputnik and Rossiya Segodnya Under Attack in US and Europe**

Rossiya Segodnya Media Group and its Sputnik News Agency and Radio are subject to unrelenting attacks in the US and a number of European countries on groundless charges of election meddling and spreading fake news.

Our journalists and Russian politicians, including the president, have referred to these developments as a “witch hunt” on numerous occasions, but the pressure keeps increasing, and it is the duty of the OSCE to make sure that this is not left unnoticed.

In February 2018, members of the US Council on Foreign Relations Robert Blackwill and Philip Gordon called for enacting new legislation to “prevent Russia-funded propaganda arms like RT and Sputnik from figuring prominently in news feeds.” As former top security officials, Blackwill and Gordon also proposed devising legislation for identifying foreign sponsors of political advertising, as well as deleting fake accounts and material. In fact, this would be tantamount to denying the unwanted media the freedom of expression guaranteed by the First Amendment.

In November 2017, members of the US House of Representatives Anna Eshoo, Mike Doyle and Frank Pallone, Jr. urged Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Ajit Pai to investigate the alleged “interference” by Radio Sputnik in the US presidential election. These members of Congress singled out 105.5 FM in Washington, ignoring the fact that Sputnik went on the air using this frequency on July 1, 2017, more than six months after the presidential election.

In the same month, Sputnik was forced to register as a foreign agent, threatened by criminal charges from the US Department of Justice. Radio Sputnik is now under obligation to accompany its material with notification that its programming was produced by a foreign agent, making it more difficult for listeners to apprehend information in an unbiased manner. Our partners had also to register as foreign agents, including RIA Global on February 16, 2018 and Reston Translator on November 15, 2017.

In late 2017, Google News said that it would engineer algorithms in order to “de-rank” articles from Sputnik News and RT on the Google News service. In January 2017, a Google representative said that the search engine will mark sources that receive government funding in a bid to make its news service more transparent. Articles by RT and Sputnik were already being labelled accordingly, he said.

YouTube followed suit, announcing that it will label videos released by state-funded broadcasters, including Sputnik. In a message to users who could have been exposed to “Russian propaganda” ahead of the US presidential election, Twitter said that 200 accounts related to Russia had been blocked and advertising from accounts owned by RT and Sputnik off-boarded.

At the same time, Google and Facebook acknowledged that neither of them had any evidence to prove that their platforms were being manipulated by RT or Sputnik. We believe that this amounts to outright censorship by these online giants, since our news articles, videos and



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other material are now artificially de-ranked in and censored by Google search, and the same happens on YouTube, since it is owned by Google. All this is taking place because of a CIA report released in 2017 with groundless accusations against Sputnik and RT alleging that they meddled in the US elections.

As recently as on September 4, think-tanks affiliated with the French foreign and defense ministries released a joint paper on the threat of outside attempts to manipulate the public opinion in the West, proposing to marginalize “foreign bodies of propaganda.” The report says: “First of all they should be named ... After that they should not be accredited and their journalists should not be invited to press conferences,” citing as an example the words by French President Emmanuel Macron who accused Sputnik and RT of “spreading false information and slander” on him and his campaign on numerous occasions.

On July 4, French lawmakers debated and adopted in the first reading a law which, while designed to counter fake news, targets RT and Sputnik. The public opinion and journalists worry that his law could spell out the end for the freedom of expression in France by enabling the government to block media outlets suspected of spreading fake news, while failing to provide a clear definition of what this means.

It was Macron himself who initiated this campaign against Sputnik and RT during his presidential campaign. He accused the Russian media of discrediting him, in particular of reporting three stories. The first dealt with French reporters in Moscow wearing t-shirts with En Marche, the name of Macron’s movement, on them. The second mentioned that he was a closeted homosexual, and the third covered the story of the spending on a trip to Lebanon. The truth however is that all Sputnik and RT did was to retell information from other people or media outlets.

In March 2018, Sputnik was expelled from the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain. In an interview with The Times, a chamber representative said that the expulsion was a response to the Salisbury nerve agent attack and the deteriorating relations between the two countries.

In July 2015, Rossiya Segodnya had its account with Barclay’s Bank blocked in Great Britain, with the bank explaining that the restrictions were attributable to the fact that the agency’s Director General Dmitry Kisilev was designated on a sanctions list by HM Treasury after the European Union imposed personal sanctions against him.

In November 2016, the European Parliament passed a non-binding resolution on countering Russian media outlets, mentioning Sputnik and RT as the most dangerous ones. The resolution calls on EU countries to advance “certain legal initiatives in order to be more effective and accountable in dealing with disinformation and propaganda.” Commenting on this decision by the European Parliament, President of Russia Vladimir Putin said that the adoption of the resolution suggested that the concept of democracy was being depreciated in the European society, while expressing hope that common sense would prevail so as not to see any actual restrictions.

In the Baltics, Sputnik journalists have been detained and interviewed by secret services; Rossiya Segodnya workers were denied accreditation and entry on a number of occasions. Several websites in the .lv domain zone were closed. Sputnik is facing consistent and permanent attempts to restrict its operations in the Baltics. A large-scale denigration campaign is waged in the media, backed by politicians and public figures.



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For example, in July 2018 Sputnik Latvia Editor-In-Chief Valentins Rozencovs was detained in Riga and 12 hours later released by the police. He said that the security police were interested in his work as senior editor of Sputnik Latvia and the work of the outlet itself in Latvia.

Earlier, the Latvian National Council on electronic media opposed the use of Sputnik's material by state-funded media. In March, LETO and BNS agencies simultaneously terminated their contracts with Sputnik in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. It was then that Sputnik Latvia was notified of the closure of its website in .lv.

We strongly believe that calls to boycott media outlets that offer an alternative perspective in the Baltics is at odds with what journalism is all about. Struggling with us, the Baltic authorities are fighting dissenting views instead of countering propaganda. This has nothing to do neither with democracy, nor with freedom of expression.

Finally, we cannot fail to say a few words about Poland. In October 2014, the Polish Foreign Ministry withdrew accreditation from Leonid Sviridov, a Rossiya Segodnya contractor, who had worked in Warsaw since 2003. After that, the Polish authorities stripped Sviridov of his permanent resident status in the EU and banned him from entering the Schengen zone. At the time, Polish Foreign Minister Grzegorz Schetyna referred to his "peculiar business ties and lobbying." According to the official, Sviridov organized media tours to Russia for Polish journalists, funded by a corporation that wanted to take control of a nitric plant. We have every reason to believe that Sviridov's articles were the primary cause of his suffering, and this expulsion was an infringement of the freedom of expression.