

RIA Says It's Turning 7.0, Not 70

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For Svetlana Mironyuk, a 70th birthday is no reason to look back. To be sure, the tender-faced blonde is almost three decades away from that age, but this year RIA-Novosti, the state news agency she heads, is celebrating the 1941 foundation of its earliest predecessor, the Soviet Information Bureau.

Known as Sovinformburo, the organization played a vital role in Stalin's wartime propaganda efforts. When it was transformed into Novosti Press Agency in 1961, it took the role of disseminating "accurate information about the U.S.S.R. abroad and familiarizing the Soviet public with the life of the peoples of foreign countries," according to RIA-Novosti's web site.

But at a breakfast meeting with reporters this week, Mironyuk carefully avoided mentioning the past and instead aptly dubbed the whole anniversary as "RIA-Novosti 7.0."

Like any other media executive, she had a PowerPoint presentation ready to explain how her organization plans to penetrate future markets like cell phones and tablet computers with tailored interactive content.

"We have long stopped being an agency. We are more a media holding now," she said while sipping green tea in a loft-style conference room in RIA-Novosti's sprawling offices on the city's Garden Ring.

According to Mironyuk, RIA-Novosti should be a leading provider of seven media formats, including photo, video and text, distributed on seven platforms, including web sites, public viewing screens and social networks.

The publishing thrust is global, encompassing 14 languages including Chinese, Japanese, German, French, Persian and Arab.

It also includes traditional print products like the Arab-language weekly Anba Mosku, and the Russian-language daily Moskovskiye Novosti, a re-launch of the legendary paper of the perestroika years. The New Moskovskiye Novosti is scheduled to debut on March 28 from RIA-Novosti's premises, produced by the staff of Vremya Novostei, a liberal daily that ceased publication in December.

Sounds like a run-of-the-mill media corporation? There are some fundamental differences to international competitors.

First, there is money. Unlike most of its Western competitors, RIA-Novosti is not required to break even. Not even half even.

For this year, the government has earmarked 3.15 billion rubles (\$109 million) in "subsidies" for the news organization — three times more than for Itar-Tass, the country's oldest state agency, which gets 1.1 billion rubles, according to the federal budget, which can be downloaded from the Finance Ministry's [web site](#).

RIA-Novosti will top up another 25 percent of its state subsidies with its own earnings, Mironyuk said, adding that she plans to increase the earnings share to 33 percent. And the money will mainly come from paid subscriptions to photo, video and infographics, while news stories are largely distributed for free.

Mironyuk said state subsidies grew by just some 10 percent over the previous year.

But in 2007 Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported that the government planned to subsidize RIA-Novosti with 100 million rubles — then worth \$4 million. This would mean a jaw-dropping 30-fold growth over a four-year period.

(To be sure, RIA-Novosti's current budget is dwarfed by that of Russia Today. The English-language satellite channel, which is headquartered in RIA-Novosti's premises without being associated with it, will receive 11.4 billion rubles this year, according to the federal budget.)

While most of the world's news agencies try to appeal to media clients as their source of income, RIA-Novosti is going straight for the masses. Mironyuk called this a trendsetting move. "Let's face it, more and more media outlets are being closed, so we must rethink," she said.

Taken together, the agency's more than 40 web sites have an audience of 16 million unique visitors per month, she said.

Then there is the nagging question over whether RIA-Novosti can escape its past. As recently as 2006, the *raison d'être* of the agency was officially described as "to shape positive image of Russia abroad."

Today, no mention of this can be found on RIA-Novosti's [web site](#). Instead, the agency's main mission is described as combining "promptness, objectiveness, authenticity and its own opinion regardless of the political situation."

Mironyuk, who is credited by many for turning the agency from a sluggish post-Soviet mouthpiece into a professional organization since she joined in 2003, said painting a positive image of the country was absolutely not among its tasks.

"This is a legacy of the APN that still haunts us," she said, referring to the Russian acronym for Novosti Press Agency, which the agency was known as between 1961 and 1990.

But there are indicators that some old ways keep lingering even today.

On Feb. 18, Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin told an economic forum in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk that the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections must be "fair and honest" to ensure broad support for economic reforms.

But with the exception of Interfax, the country's largest privately held news agency, no leading national media outlet seemed to grasp the sensational news of a senior Cabinet member questioning the democratic conduct of elections.

The two reports moved by RIA-Novosti's English-language [service](#) from the forum just touched on industrial output and [inflation](#).

Asked by a Moscow Times reporter why the news was missed, Mironyuk denied that any form of censorship had taken place.

"We sent journalists [to Krasnoyarsk] who deeply and seriously understand their topics. But not only the journalists but also the forum's experts saw nothing revolutionary in Kudrin's words," she said.

Mironyuk was also adamant that any notion of censorship was bound to backfire.

"We can only report news honestly. If you betray [your readers], you will not be read," she said.

But on Feb. 17, just a day before Kudrin's speech, a more troubling thing happened. Instead of news just not being reported, a critical article disappeared from RIA-Novosti's web site.

The scathing Feb. 15 commentary titled "Judicial Revolution" argued that a scandal surrounding court aide Natalya Vasilyeva highlighted the deep-seated ills of the country's judicial system. Vasilyeva, an aide for Judge Viktor Danilkin who sentenced former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky in December, caused a sensation when she claimed that Danilkin's verdict had actually been written by judges in a higher court.

The commentary's Russian-language text was written by Arkady Smolin from the Agency

for Legal and Court Information, or RAPSI, a special interest news service set up by RIA-Novosti together with the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court and the Higher Arbitration Court.

Reached by telephone, Smolin refused to comment on the incident.

But a source familiar with the matter told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity that the text had been removed after "someone very high up" had complained about the article.

RIA-Novosti spokeswoman Alla Nadyoshkina denied this, saying the text was merely unavailable because of a technical glitch and that it would reappear soon.

But as of late Wednesday the [link](#) was not working.

The text remains available on the RAPSI web site — but only by clicking a [link](#) inside a rebuke of it written by Supreme Court spokesman Pavel Odintsov.

Despite these incidents, many at RIA-Novosti say they feel comfortable working there.

"This is the freest state media organization in Russia that I can think of," said Andrei Zolotov, editor of the [Russia Profile](#) online magazine, which was founded together with The Moscow Times and has been published by RIA-Novosti alone since 2007.

Zolotov said today's RIA-Novosti hardly resembles the company he joined eight years ago. "The change has been remarkable," he said in an interview in a makeshift cafeteria in the agency's complex, which currently boasts several ongoing construction works in various parts of the building.

Konstantin von Eggert, a journalist and political pundit who started an English-language column called "Due West" on RIA-Novosti last year, [said](#) while it was evident that the agency has "constraints," his experience was positive.

"My condition was that I will not be edited for content — and so far they have scrupulously complied," he said by telephone.

In one of his columns, von Eggert described Russia as "forever poised on the brink of authoritarianism," and in another he lambasted the Kremlin's reluctance to support democratic movements among allies like Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko as dependence on authoritarian leaders who use Moscow's support without giving anything in return. "This is what the Soviet Union did with its clients in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. And remember how that ended?" he wrote.

Von Eggert, who has previously worked for the BBC's Russian service, suggested that the model of state-funded quality journalism should spread in the country. "I wish there was more of this, especially in the regions," he said.

In fact, Mironyuk said RIA-Novosti was planning to enter regional media markets. The agency will launch a new online portal about Moscow, Inmsk.ru, later this year, and efforts are under way to find local partners in cities like St. Petersburg and Tomsk, she said.

One of the agency's biggest fans is Federation Council Senator Mikhail Margelov, who served as a RIA-Novosti executive in 1998 and 1999. He said in e-mailed comments that privately owned media are no better than state-owned outlets.

"The experience of private TV stations like NTV has shown that this form of ownership does not guarantee impartial information," said Margelov, who heads the Federation Council's International Affairs Committee.

He said NTV's programming in the 1990s had been full of "jeans in the interests of their owners," using a colloquial Russian expression for paid journalism.

A pioneer of private television in the 1990s, NTV was taken over by state-controlled Gazprom-Media in 2001 from its indebted owner, and NTV founder Vladimir Gusinsky fled the country to avoid criminal charges that he called politically motivated.

Under Gazprom-Media, NTV has aired some highly controversial programs, including attacks last summer on Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko and former Mayor Yury Luzhkov

Margelov said while there is no official censorship in state media like RIA-Novosti and Itar-Tass, "journalists of all ranks" publicly acknowledge self-censorship. "Therefore I am convinced that if Russia's two largest news agencies had a private owner, their content would be exactly the same," he said.

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