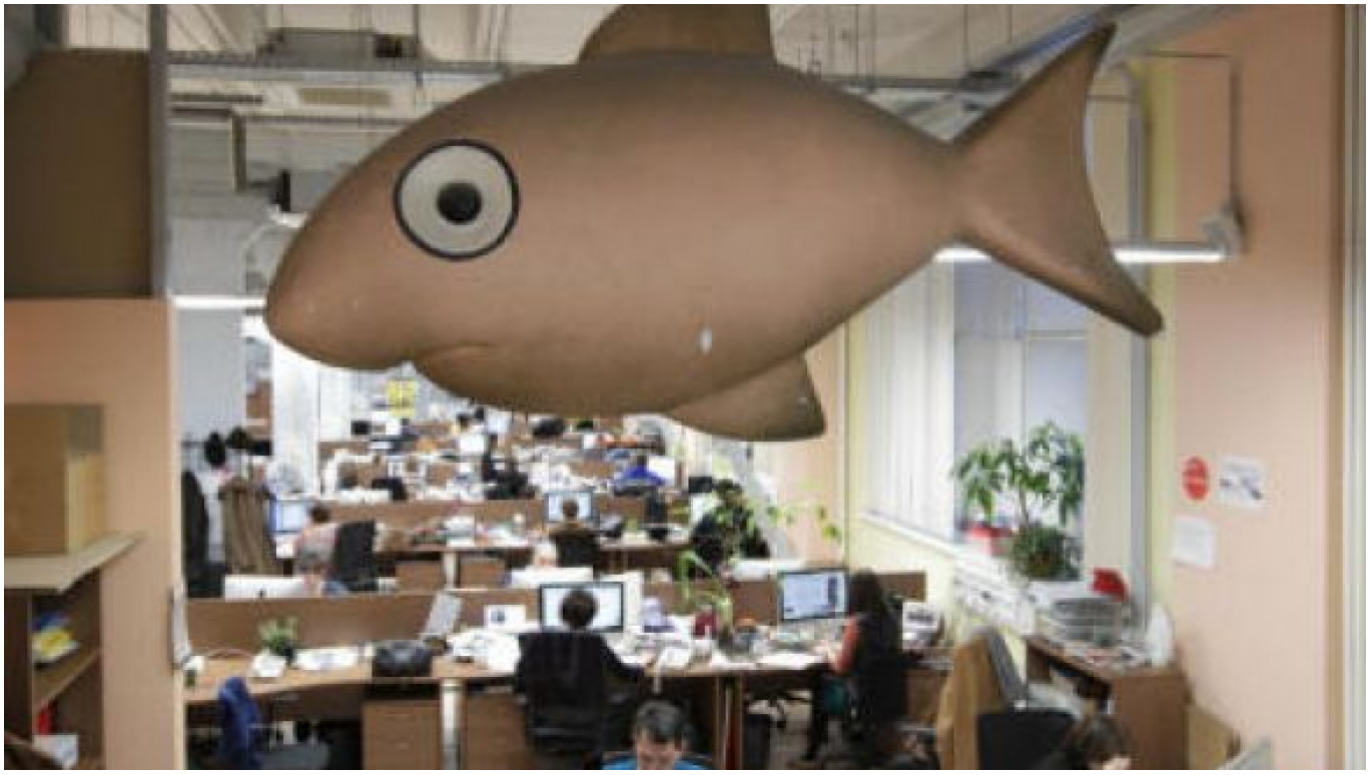
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Critics Slam Ban on Working in Journalism as Gag Tool

By Oleg Sukhov

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The newsroom at Moscow-based newspaper Vedomosti. **M. Stulov / Vedomosti**

Russian authorities have been accused of using many tools to silence independent reporters, but a wholesale ban on working in the media recently imposed on a prominent Yekaterinburg journalist has been lambasted by critics as a new weapon in their arsenal.

The measure was included in the sentence handed down last week to Aksana Panova, former editor-in-chief of the Yekaterinburg-based Ura.ru news portal, on extortion charges. Some observers argue that the prohibition clause is vague and incomprehensible and sets a dangerous precedent, while others question its legality.

The sentence deprives Panova of "the right to work for mass media: periodicals, web portals, television and radio channels, television shows and other forms of media outlets with a permanent name for two years." The court also sentenced her to two years probation and a 300,000 ruble ($9,090) fine.

Panova was accused of extorting a bribe from businessman Konstantin Kremko and Anton Stulikov, chief executive of regional television channel OTV, in exchange for not spreading compromising information about them.

Panova and recently elected Yekaterinburg Mayor Yevgeny Roizman, reportedly her lover, have called the allegation fabricated and said it was initiated in 2012 after Sverdlovsk region Governor Yevgeny Kuivashyov made romantic advances on Panova but was rejected. Roizman has said he decided to run for mayor in the September 2013 election partly in order to defend her.

Some analysts have also attributed the case to Ura.ru's criticism of the authorities and the opposition activities of Roizman, a key member of the Civil Platform party and head of the Drug-Free City foundation.

Dunja Mijatovic, media freedom representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, said the sentence given to Panova was an attack on free speech.

"I am appalled by today's court decision to ban Panova from working as a journalist. It marks a worrying trend for free media in Russia and can stifle critical speech in the country," Mijatovic said in a statement last week.

Such bans are implemented if the crime is connected with the convict's professional activities, Svetlana Yudina, a lawyer at Khrenov and Partners, said by e-mail. Similar bans exist abroad, including in Germany and Turkey, she added.

For instance, professional bans can be imposed on government officials convicted of abuse of authority, retail workers charged with theft or similar crimes, and doctors accused of mistreating patients, Yudina said.

She also said that while bans on participation in specific professional activities are a widespread form of punishment in Russia, such a ban in the sphere of journalism is very rare.

Vladimir Novitsky, a lawyer and head of the International Society for Human Rights' Russia division, questioned the legality of the ban imposed on Panova in an interview with Ekho Moskvy radio last week, saying it was unjustified and should be overturned. He said that bans on taking certain management positions were often implemented but that prohibiting a person from working in a whole sector was uncommon.

Yudina disagreed, saying that the ban was legitimate under article 47 of the Criminal Code.

She said, however, that it was unclear how the measure would be enforced in this case due to the specific nature of journalism.

Other commentators have said it is unknown whether the prohibition will apply to activities such as writing on social networks or freelance journalism.

Pavel Gutiontov, a top official at the Russian Union of Journalists, echoed Yudina's assessment, saying by phone that the ban was vague and difficult to enforce, calling it "nonsensical and foolish."

Moreover, it is very hard to control the enforcement of such a ban, since a journalist can easily escape it, for instance by using a pseudonym, Gutiontov said.

"This is the first time I have seen such a decision," he said. "I do not understand what it means and what they want to ban."

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