

Blocked BBC Interview Highlights Authorities' Insecurities

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Novosibirsk activist Artyom Loskutov

In a move that showcased Russia's strained rapport with press freedom and its fear of any challenge to the country's current composition, the state media watchdog briefly blocked access to a BBC Russian-language service interview about an upcoming piece of unsanctioned performance art that was set to encourage greater autonomy for Siberia. The next step may be to shut the website down entirely, according to local media reports.

The Interview

The BBC's Russian-language service published an interview last week with Novosibirsk activist Artyom Loskutov.

During the interview, Loskutov spoke of plans for an Aug. 17 street performance, which he referred to as "a march for the federalization of Siberia."

The farcical performance's handful of organizers planned to call for the creation of a Siberian republic, or alternatively for its regions to acquire the same rights as a republic. According to Luskatov, the planned performance aimed primarily at provoking a public discourse about perceived inequalities between Russia's regions.

But to the Russian authorities, the performance has been no laughing matter.

Of the Russian news websites that reported the upcoming performance, 14 pulled down their articles following demands from state media watchdog Roskomnadzor, Izvestia reported Tuesday. On Friday, Roskomnadzor blocked a page announcing the march on V Kontakte, Russia's largest social network.

Roskomnadzor asked the BBC's Russian-language service to remove the interview from its site, owing to the prohibition on inciting "mass disorder, extremist activities or participation in public activities violating the legal order," Izvestia reported.

Acting head of the BBC's Russian-language service, Artyom Liss, wrote on his blog Sunday that Roskomnadzor announced it had restricted access to the webpage featuring the interview in accordance with Russia's anti-extremism legislation.

To appease the agency's concerns, Liss announced that background information on Loskutov — who is known for his controversial performance-art activism — had been added as an introduction to the interview, along with a note on the not-entirely-serious nature of the event.

Izvestia quoted an unidentified source close to Roskomnadzor as saying that the agency was contemplating blocking the BBC Russian-language service's website in the country altogether. The website — and the interview with Loskutov — are both accessible in Russia as of the time of publication.

Russia's restriction on Internet content seen as subversive is not unprecedented. In March, the Prosecutor General's Office ordered restrictions on access to such opposition-friendly websites as Grani.ru, Kasparov.ru, and the blog of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, saying they called for "illegal activity and participation in mass events held in violation of the established order."

Constitutional Issue

What has offended Russian authorities about the initiative — beyond the proliferation of information about an unsanctioned public event — is the unconstitutional nature of the idea of creating a Siberian republic or changing the status of its regions, according to Dmitry Zhuravlyov, director of the Moscow-based Institute for Regional Problems.

"I can understand the position of these people [organizers of the march] on a psychological level," Zhuravlyov said. "They want to have more control over the riches of Siberia, and that is understandable. But what is unacceptable to Russia is that this whole idea goes against the Constitution. You cannot change the status of your region just like that."

Lately, Russian authorities have been particularly wary of talk of separatism and of

modifications to the country's federal structure. President Vladimir Putin signed legislation last month introducing prison sentences for violations of Russia's territorial integrity.

But Loskutov's initiative, at least as it was described in the BBC interview, was not meant to advocate for Siberia's separation from Russia. Rather, Siberia's standing within the Russian Federation is what lies at the heart of the matter for Loskutov and a small number of Siberians.

"Historically, Siberia is everything that lies beyond the Ural Mountains," Loskutov told The Moscow Times on Tuesday. "But it is not important which Siberia we are talking about — the historical territory or the smaller federal district. What is important to us is the message that there are inequalities between regions in this country. This is what we want to draw attention to."

Siberia, in the broadest geographical interpretation, contains nearly all different types of federal subjects found in the country: republics, territories, regions, autonomous regions and areas.

Regions vs. Republics

The Russian Constitution endows republics, which were historically defined along ethno-cultural lines, with more rights than regions. Republics, for example, have the right to proclaim their own state languages, to be used alongside Russian in local and regional state institutions. Republics also have their own constitutions and legislatures, and more latitude in the management of resources. Article 5 of the Constitution even refers to republics as "states," although they are not considered sovereign.

But revamping the constitution to change the status of Siberia's regions — a legal procedure both the regions and central government would have to agree to — would not be an ideal solution to inequalities between Russia's regions, Zhuravlyov said.

"The regions of Siberia are not divided along ethnic lines [a mere 6,000 Russian citizens identified themselves as "Siberian" in the 2010 census] and there is almost no support for this project," he said. "They do not need a republic. What really needs to happen is tax earnings need to be redistributed in order to better cater to regional needs. This needs to be done for the sake of all regions, not only for Siberia."

In the 2000's, Russia's tax system underwent drastic changes that channeled tax revenues from regional budgets into the federal coffers. Because of these reforms, the federal government decides which regions get financial help from Moscow.

A History of Siberian Regionalism

The first movements in favor of Siberia's autonomy, known as Siberian regionalism, emerged in the 19th century. Despite calls for greater self-governance, only marginal factions of the Siberian regionalist movement advocated separation from Russia.

For a brief period in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution, Siberia actually became independent from Russia. During that time, regional assemblies and councils were

established.

Failing to garner popular support, these formations were absorbed by Soviet authorities in 1921, which tamed Siberia's former aspirations of self-governance.

During Boris Yeltsin's presidency in the 1990s, tensions between Siberian regions and the central government emerged, with advocacy groups sprouting up to lobby for the regions' cause.

Territorial-administrative regions such as Sakha-Yakutia declared their status as republics while coalitions like the Association of Siberian Towns and the Siberian Agreement, whose signatories vowed to cooperate in agricultural and industrial production, materialized.

These groups did not advocate for Siberia's separation from Russia but rather for increased autonomy from Moscow.

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