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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Novaya Gazeta Could Face Closure After Second Government Warning

By Anna Dolgov

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One of Russia's last independent newspapers, the Novaya Gazeta newspaper, plans to appeal in court the second government warning it has received within a year.

If it loses the appeal, Novaya Gazeta could face closure, as Russian authorities are entitled under the law to order the closure of a media outlet that has received two extremism warnings within a 12-month period.

Media watchdog Roskomnadzor issued the latest warning for an expletive that appeared in a novel excerpt the newspaper published, the agency said in a statement Monday evening.

Several letters in the expletive were replaced with asterisks when Novaya Gazeta published the excerpt from a new book by Vasily Avchenko, an author and the paper's correspondent in the Far East, earlier this summer.

But Roskomnadzor spokesman Vadim Ampelonsky insisted that the offensive word "could

clearly be read," the Lenizdat.ru news portal reported.

Following Roskomnadzor's warning, the newspaper replaced the word — which generally means "inattentiveness" — with a similar-sounding synonym in brackets on its website.

A law signed by President Vladimir Putin this spring bans the use of several crude expletives in the media and in arts, including literature.

The ban affected Russia's Oscar-nominated film "Leviathan" — a tale about a provincial man's fight against a corrupt mayor and church officials — which struggled to obtain a screening permit in the country. The Culture Ministry finally rated the film as only acceptable for adult audiences, and ordered that its expletives be bleeped out.

Novaya Gazeta's editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov said his newspaper will contest the latest warning in court, arguing that literary works should be permitted some leeway, Interfax reported.

"We believe that in works of literature — we are not speaking about journalistic creations here — various deviations from the general norm are possible," Muratov was quoted as saying.

"If you read that text you will see that it is absolutely beautiful literature," Muratov said, adding that Roskomnadzor's warning serves as an "advertisement" for Avchenko's novel about the Sea of Japan and Russians living on its shores.

The book, entitled "Crystal in a Clear Setting," has been shortlisted for this year's National Bestseller award.

Roskomnadzor's spokesman maintained, however, that his agency has not decided to start the procedure just yet, Interfax reported.

"Despite the fact that we do indeed have the right to turn to court with the demand that Novaya Gazeta's registration be terminated, we, as a controlling organ, naturally always use our rights sensibly," Ampelonsky was quoted as saying.

"In any event, the decision to turn to court has not been made," he added, Interfax reported.

The previous warning, which Novaya Gazeta received last October, was for an article by columnist and Ekho Moskvy radio host Yulia Latynina titled "If we are not the West, then who are we?" The media watchdog agency deemed her article "extremist."

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