

Safronov's Arrest Is a New Low for Freedom of Speech in Russia

Putin has now entrusted the “journalist question” to his security services. We should be very worried.

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Ivan Safronov **Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

When the Federal Security Service (FSB) requested in September 2012 that the State Duma stiffen the article on high treason in the Russian Criminal Code, everyone understood what the agency was after.

Many in the Kremlin had accused the FSB of falling asleep on its watch and failing to predict the 2011 street protests. Then, with the ruling regime just recovering from that jolt, the FSB did what intelligence agencies usually do in such situations — it requested broader authority.

The FSB wanted greater powers for its counterintelligence activities, a request that was right

in line with the paranoid belief held by many in the Kremlin that Moscow's mass protests could only have arisen at the bidding of foreign states.

The FSB got what it wanted. The revised version of Article 275 of the Criminal Code expanded the range of the usual suspects for high treason from military personnel, scientists and researchers to include experts and journalists.

For many years before that, it had been almost impossible to accuse journalists of treason or revealing state secrets because, by definition, they had no access to such information.

Prior to 2012, the FSB had to contrive all sorts of things in order to charge journalists under this article of the Criminal Code.

The agency resorted to either charging journalists who had previously held access to classified materials — [Grigory Pasko](#) being one such example — or dreaming up a truly Kafkaesque scheme — as happened to me.

In 2002, FSB investigators claimed I had organized a criminal group that included an unknown person with access to state secrets, and that a journalist had encouraged this person to reveal said secrets. However, the hardliners were unable to attach a name to this mystery person and the FSB had to drop all charges. I was lucky: back then, the FSB actually had to prove a person's guilt.

In those days, it was also necessary to back up espionage charges with evidence that the suspect had passed classified information posing a threat to national security to a foreign intelligence agency.

Life became much easier for investigators in 2012.

Related article: [Russian Journalist Found Guilty of 'Justifying Terrorism' Avoids Jail Time](#)

From that time onward, the FSB could target anyone who had transmitted information that the intelligence agency itself considered harmful to national security, even if it contained no state secrets.

The new version of the law does not require the FSB to catch someone spying for a foreign government and identify the intelligence service with which the suspect was allegedly collaborating. Now, it is enough simply to show that the person had been in communication with an “international or foreign organization” to be suspected of high treason.

Back in 2012, many thought that the FSB's new concept of espionage would victimize a wide range of experts. Pavel Chikov, who was then head of the Agora human rights organization, told Kommersant newspaper that under the new version of the law, “even conveying information about elections violations in Russia could qualify as high treason.” The expert community took note and Russia became even more closed than before.

However, yesterday's shock arrest of former journalist Ivan Safranov shows that the rules have changed again. The FSB is applying its paranoid definition of espionage to journalists — and is going out of its way to make sure everyone knows. What's more, senior leaders have

apparently sanctioned the action.

Today's Kremlin leaders live and operate in a worldview of threats, a way of life that epitomizes the notorious "secret service mentality." They have simply added journalists to their lists of threats, capping a trend that began with Vladimir Putin's rise to power.

At the Helsinki airport in 1999, during his second visit abroad as prime minister, Vladimir Putin stopped to answer a question about the situation in Chechnya posed by a local journalist who spoke slowly, in Russian, while reading from a slip of paper.

"First, you and I are on an uneven playing field," Putin snapped angrily. "You read your pre-prepared question from a piece of paper, but I am supposed to give you an immediate answer." For Putin, a product of the Soviet secret services, reading a question from a piece of paper indicated that someone else had written the question and "fed it" to the journalist. In fact, the Finnish journalist just wanted to be as accurate as possible in asking a difficult question.

Putin has not changed his opinion of journalists since.

For the first 20 years of his rule, however, he charged his political assistants — presidential administration officials, loyal oligarchs or sycophantic media managers — with controlling what he viewed as the journalist threat.

Now, Putin has entrusted the "journalist question" to his counterintelligence agencies, giving them the resources necessary to explain quickly and clearly which additional subjects are now off-limits for everyone but a select few.

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