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Russian News Site Warns of 'Dangerous Precedent' With $200K Libel Fine

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Ura.ru is appealing a court verdict that found it guilty of falsely blaming an official for a fatal car accident. **Yury Kochetkov / EPA / TASS**

A Russian court is creating a "dangerous precedent" for press freedom by fining the Ura.ru news website 15 million rubles ($205,000) for defaming a Chechen official, the outlet said Monday.

The Chechen Supreme Court is scheduled to hear Ura.ru's appeal this Friday against a lower court ruling that found the Yekaterinburg-based outlet guilty of falsely blaming the official for a fatal car accident.

Ura.ru said it picked up the 2017 story from state media and did not directly accuse ex-Chechen prosecutor Murat Zalzayev of provoking the crash. An investigation reportedly established that the late driver of the other vehicle had provoked the deadly crash.

Legal experts cited by the outlet called the 15-million-ruble fine unprecedented in scale.

“It’s a giant sum,” Denis Tokarsky, chief secretary for the Russian Union of Journalists, was quoted as saying.

To date, Russian courts have never fined media outlets more than 30,000 rubles ($400) as moral compensation, said Mass Media Defense Center senior lawyer Svetlana Kuzevanova.

Ura.ru warned that the fine would create a “dangerous precedent” and “determine the fate of all Russian media.”

“A new tool in fighting media — forcing it out of business through bankruptcy — will be established in Russia if the ruling holds,” it wrote.

Ura.ru said it spoke with Zalzayev by phone, who had sought 24 million rubles in compensation.

“Do you understand that you ruined my successful career and blocked my path to other agencies with this publication?” it quoted Zalzayev as saying.

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